The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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Before (And After) Film: Other Creative Expressions

When World War II ended in 1945, Robert Altman was fresh out of the army and headed to Hollywood. He was an enterprising young man with lots of ideas about how he might make a living, but he thought he wanted to do something in the entertainment business. For several years he wrote story ideas for radio and television shows as well as lyrics for songs, and he also had several small acting jobs. He returned to Kansas City for a few years in the early 1950’s, where he learned the craft of making films by working for a leading industrial-film company, and was able to come back to Hollywood with a resume that soon led him into television and film directing and producing. Later in his career he became involved in staging and writing operas, thanks to a timely invitation from the University of Michigan.

The Writer

One of the ways in which Robert Altman tried to break into the entertainment world was as a lyricist, and a number of his songs that composer Bob Ecton set to music survive in the Altman archive. Eventually, Altman, Ecton, and writer James Rickard (brother-in-law to actor/dancer Ray Bolger) wrote a Broadway musical, but were unsuccessful in finding backing to have it produced.

Altman worked with the more experienced writer George W. George (the son of Rube Goldberg) on several scripts, including a proposed radio series called Illusions in which each story had a surprising twist at the end. One of their movie scripts was purchased and became the noir film Bodyguard (1947). Several other stories or script proposals also exist in the archive, mainly in the film noir vein but showing Altman’s characteristic wry humor. Even after Altman returned to Hollywood after gaining more film experience in Kansas City, he still did some work as a writer.

The agent’s job involves haggling with producers about prices for stories, writers, and actors. His office is on the second story of one of Hollywood’s most famous night clubs. He enjoys being able to bring women he flirts with at the club up to his office after everyone has left. The agent has a secretary who he finds attractive, but he doesn’t want to upset the balance of the professional work environment. The secretary thinks the agent is a very wonderful and important man, “as all secretaries think of the men for whom they work.” One night when the secretary stays after hours to do some extra work, she catches the agent and a woman “in a very silly looking position.”