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The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

Daub, Peggy; Gomis, Melissa; Hallman, Phil

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Robert and Kathryn Altman made lasting friendships among the University of Michigan faculty during their stay here in 1982. One of these was with the Pulitzer-Prize winning composer William Bolcom, who had been so impressed by Altman’s work on The Rake’s Progress that he invited the director to work with him on two operas: the drama McTeague, commissioned by the Lyric Opera of Chicago and premiered in 1992, and the comedy adapted from Altman’s film A Wedding (1978) again for Chicago in 2004. In both cases Altman directed and was co-librettist with Arnold Weinstein.

Almost as much as M*A*S*H, Nashville, and ShortCuts, it’s one of the great Altman ensemble pieces— one of those movies in which he keeps dozens of balls and characters juggling with keen eyes, fast hands and bemused relish.”

“The prospects that a failed movie would succeed as an opera 26 years later did not appear good. But composer Bolcom recognized the material’s potential as the basis for a modern “Marriage of Figaro,” a grand comedy of manners that could capitalize on the resources of a major opera company.”

“Robert Altman’s 1978 ensemble comedy-drama had weak reviews and weaker box office, but it was—in retrospect—groundbreaking.”