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The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

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The Western

McCabe & Mrs. Miller (1971)

Altman's approach to the classic Western film was to strip away the romanticism and common plots in order to present real people in gritty and challenging circumstances. Here, in one of his most revered films, Altman shows a complex world of deals and business, a world built on enterprise, gambling, and money from McCabe's saloon and Mrs. Miller's brothel. Instead of heroes in white hats, the film's leads were a cowardly man and a businesswoman addicted to opium. This film has been selected for inclusion in the National Film Registry.



"I didn't want Warren for the part."



A few miles outside of Vancouver, the movie crew built the town of Presbyterian Church, the locale of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*. Between takes Warren and Julie stand by for action.



Robert Altman and Julie Christie on location.



Warren Beatty as McCabe, a gambler who doesn't expect to win, lures some victims into a poker game.

and in *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* he has tackled the most revered of Hollywood genres, the Western. "I just wanted," he said, "to take a very standard Western story with a classic line and do it real or what I felt was real, and destroy all the myths of heroism. All the characters and some of the situations are totally recognizable from other Westerns. There's the clever gambler, the whore with the heart of gold and the big shoot-out sequence. They're just handled differently. But it got much, much better than I had anticipated. We started stripping away a lot of the plotly things in it, and it really became kind of a story about — well, if there's any back theme to it — about whores in that society at that time, 1902. And they're marvelous. We got really carried away—it got away from the miners and the townspeople and it got down to what the whores were in the structure of society at that particular time. And Julie Christie is fantastic—well, so is Warren, they both are. They've really done something they've never done before."

Stripping away the plot is Altman's

20 SHOW

Photos by Steve Schapiro

Jacob Atlas and Ann Guerin, "Robert Altman, Julie Christie and Warren Beatty Make the Western Real," *Show*, August 1972.

"I just wanted to take a very standard Western story with a classic line and do it real or what I felt was real, and destroy all the myths of heroism."

- Robert Altman

Top row: Contact sheet of photographs from the set of *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*. The film goes out of its way to highlight the business procedures of a brothel.

Above: John McCabe (Warren Beatty) riding a horse through the cold winter of the American Northwest toward town, wearing a fur coat that is far removed from the cowboy garb of typical western films.