

## Document Citation

Title	<b>For better or for worse</b>
Author(s)	Diane Jacobs
Source	<i>Soho Weekly News</i>
Date	1978 Sep 28
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	43-44
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	
Film Subjects	A wedding, Altman, Robert, 1978

# SOHO ARTS



Dina Merrill (R) as the groom's aunt in Altman's *A Wedding*

## For Better or for Worse

Diane Jacobs

*A Wedding*  
The Green Room  
New York Film Festival  
Lincoln Center

I enjoyed Robert Altman's *A Wedding* so thoroughly that I wish I could applaud its merits with less ambivalence. I've seen it three times and each time laughed out loud at the often predictable gags and felt cheated at the end. Altman has made thirteen films in less than a decade (beginning with the 1969 *That Cold Day In The Park*) and has earned the honor of being our most abrasive and among the two or three best American directors in Hollywood today. His films are often admirable in different ways—McCabe and Mrs. Miller is elegiac and wistful, for instance, while *Nashville* is directive and pungent. And some of his films—*Buffalo Bill and The Indians* comes first to mind—are not admirable at all. Yet, whatever the film, I am almost always astounded by this filmmaker's stylistic virtuosity and by the sheer breadth of his observations. On the other hand, there lurks at the core of even his most sublime work a certain hollowiness, a coldness toward the human condition that is off-putting. All these qualities are evident in *A Wedding*, a brilliantly conceived and edited satire that wants to be much more than clever and dexterous and isn't.

*A Wedding* follows a day—a wedding day—in the life of forty-seven lively, one-dimensional characters who, like the characters in *Nashville*, are little more than paper doll

figures on their own but gain aggregate dimension as the ploy builds. Again like *Nashville*, and like most of Altman's other films since *M\*A\*S\*H\**, it is a barbed and occasionally friendly attack on American Provincialism, on the weaknesses/strengths that have helped us to survive and that preclude change. Paramount among those strengths and weaknesses is an unromantic family loyalty, which is pretty much the subject here. Altman has said that with the exception of funerals, weddings are our last American ritual; and those of you have witnessed his debunking of most of the American movie genres (the caper in *Brewster McCloud*, the western in *McCabe And Mrs. Miller*, the musical in *Nashville*, etc.) might suspect that he takes less than a reverential approach to the sacred vows of marriage.

You are right. The particular wedding in *A Wedding* takes place somewhere in the Midwest and involves a mating of Italian and Irish, old and nouveau rich blood, with perhaps a touch of Mafia thrown in. Not surprisingly, this is less than a touching love story, and nobody likes anybody—particularly his or her spouse—very much. Shortly after the groom (Dino Corelli played by Desi Arnaz, Jr.) vows to take the young bride with braces (Muffin Brenner played by Amy Stryker) for richer and poorer, we learn that he has already "taken" her sister (Mia Farrow), and that she is presently four months pregnant. The God-fearing mother-of-bride, marvelously evoked by Carol Burnett, has obviously had more than enough life with her gruff Irish husband Snooks (Paul Dooley) and is more flattered than scandalized when the groom's uncle adores her at first sight.

All the characters have their own peculiar foibles. The

dottering old bishop (John Cromwell) forgets his lines; the idea that her cake may be overcooked upsets the wedding coordinator (Geraldine Chaplin) far more profoundly than does the death of her employer; and the groom's Aunt Toni (Dina Merrill) insists that she be the one to announce the news of her mother's passing to the other relatives, most of whom have upstaged her by finding out first. Minorities are also well-represented. There's a black (who refuses to marry the family's white, wealthy daughter), a homosexual, a drug addict, a lesbian, a communist, an epileptic. There's also an ex-sinner who became a minister because God spoke to him via a TV screen in a Holiday Inn, and a security guard who confesses to the Bishop that he too took a vow of celibacy—even though it wasn't required—when he entered his profession.

There are some marvelous gags and some that fall flat. The way Carol Burnett protests that she has to *mix* is unforgettable, and there's a superb (clearly a drinker's) description of what the day is like for anyone who eschews liquor. Almost everyone in the cast is very good, but I particularly liked Carol Burnett as Tulip (the m.o.b., i.e. mother-of-the-bride, in wedding language), Pat McCormick as her ardent suitor, and Howard Duff as the equable family doctor who missed several crucial classes in medical school but nevertheless, with the help of a drink or two, manages to hold the family together. I have never liked Geraldine Chaplin, and her role here as wedding coordinator is among the least interesting. She's pretty much summed herself up by the time she's warned her crew never to give anybody more than two jiggers of liquor, or else . . .

For me, the best and most resonant performance is given by Lillian Gish, the matriarch of the "old" rich family, who dies five minutes into the film and whose spirit tenaciously survives and dominates all the proceedings of the day. *A Wedding* is Miss Gish's one hundredth film. D.W. Griffith's most expressive silent film star is now seventy-eight and still as fragile, indomitable, and beautiful in the way of a slim grand dame as she ever was as ingenue in films like *Broken Blossoms* and *Orphans of the Storm*. The first shot of Lillian Gish feeding the birds with her back to us and her flowing, wheat-colored hair reaching nearly to her waist, is breath-taking. She is the solitary character in the film who is never ridiculed and, indeed, is one of the few characters in the entire Altman "oeuvre" who seems to possess control over her life and even—it is intimated—over when she will die. She is splendid, and Altman's ungrudging respect for her as a personality and as an actress is admirable.

[For interview with Lillian Gish, see page 69.]

What is less admirable in *A Wedding* is the way the film goes about observing the darker aspects of provincial America. Like Oscar Wilde, like Moliere, Altman is a cultural court jester. To his credit, he is a critic who would like to do more than lampoon, who would like to point out what is poignant as well as vapid, what is elliptical as well as translucent about our culture. In *A Wedding*, he fails to do this.

The best example of this attempt and this failure is a

*Continued on next page*



The wedding party arrives



Carol Burnett



Paul Dooley



Nina van Pallandt



Vittorio Gassman



Geraldine Chaplin



Desi Arnaz, Jr.



Pat McCormick



Viveca Lindfors



Howard Duff



Mia Farrow



John Cromwell



Peggy Ann Garner

beautiful sequence where the groom's Italian father (Vittorio Gassman) drives full-speed out of his driveway and away from the constrictions of home, family and America. He is leaving not just for a ride, but forever. It is dusk, and a stoned young woman plays a harp and sings the Leonard Cohen lyrics "Like a bird on a wire, like a drunk in a midnight choir, I have tried in my way to be free" as the Italian disappears. The image and the sounds are haunting and exhilarating on a visceral level, but not much more. The trouble with this scene, and the trouble with the film, is that we know so little about any of the characters—except that they are absurd, myopic, selfish—that we don't care what becomes of them. While a director like Paul Mazursky (*An Unmarried Woman*, *Bob And Carol And Ted And Alice*) can love the very characters he ridicules, Altman can't or won't.

A *Wedding* is thus a very funny and brittle film, alluding to dimensions it doesn't prepare us to appreciate. The message is clever, but familiar: America is a bizarre nation of survivors. I'm still waiting for Altman to make a film about people I know and care about, to shock us from our shared complacency not with flesh-and-blood metaphors, but with real and complicated human beings.

\*\*\*

With *The Green Room*, Francois Truffaut, among the warmest of directors, has also brought us a cool, if far from brittle, work. As with *Adele H.*, Truffaut has here set for himself the prodigiously difficult task of describing reactions to a great passion that we, the audience, never witness. (In *Adele H.*, it was a love affair; here it is the love between a husband and a wife who dies.) When *The Green Room* opens, Julien's wife is dead and most of his friends have been slaughtered in the First World War. The story of *The Green Room* is the story of a man who refuses to stop grieving, who is true to his love for the dead at the expense of love for the living. The film is intelligent, but bleak and without tension/or humor. Where *Adele H.* succeeded because of the wild, almost tangible romantic passion of its heroine (beautifully conveyed by Isabelle Adjani), *The Green Room* fails because Julien is



Lauren Hutton (R) poses Amy Stryker for the filming of her wedding ceremony

so dour and uninteresting.

Shot by cinematographer Nestor Almendros (*Days Of Heaven*), *The Green Room* is often beautiful to look at. There's one particularly lovely sequence where we watch the delirious Julien lying drenched in his sweat while images of candles are superimposed over his face and the sound of battle comes over the soundtrack.

Emily Dickenson wrote, "After great pain a formal

feeling comes . . ." This "formal feeling", Julien's feeling, is a feeling few mortals are lucky enough to escape; so we understand both Julien's loss and his initial sorrow. But because our feelings are so personal, because they arise from love for a particular human being, it is hard to identify with Julien's grief for a wife and for friends we never meet. It would require a quirkier talent and a more vital actor than the loveable Truffaut to bring this off. ●

# Opening Night

The 16th annual New York Film Festival opened with a screening at Avery Fisher Hall of Robert Altman's *A Wedding*. As usual, the festival was just about sold out long before the opening. As usual, it opened with a film which was to be released into first run houses immediately after the opening. Nevertheless, and as usual, the glamour of the film festival is such that people were scalping opening night tickets for ten dollars just to see a film that anyone could see the next day for four.

Before the film, Richard Roud, the director of the festival, introduced Robert Altman, who then introduced about twenty stars and supporting actors from his film. Afterwards, there was a black tie party at the New York State Theatre attended by patrons of the Festival and of Lincoln Center, press, distributors, a few filmmakers and some stars. Francois Truffaut whose film, *The Green Room*, had

been press screened that morning, sat on a bench along the side with a small group of friends. Lauren Hutton sat on another bench. In general, the benches on the periphery are occupied by the festival stars and everyone else mills around drunkenly in the middle. Actually the music and everything else was pretty sedate this year. Again, as usual, it was a good party.

For the press and for part of the audience at the regular screenings, the film festival offers an excuse to take two weeks out of one's life in which one does little but go to movies with friends and colleagues, complain about the choices which, with almost no exception, seem this year more conservative than ever, and catch glimpses of and occasionally interviews with famous living directors. The season-opening ritual has begun.

—Amy Taubin



Francois Truffaut, with Nathalie Baye (L) and Marie de Poncheville