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**FILM
REVIEW**
**ROBERT
ALTMAN'S
STUDIO
SEND-UP**



**L.A. IS A
CAMERA
'THE PLAYER'
TURNS
ITS LENS ON
HOLLYWOOD**

It's difficult to overpraise *The Player*, Robert Altman's bracing take on Hollywood today. Certainly Altman's most cohesive and sheerly entertaining film since *Nashville*, it may be the best movie ever made about making movies. The industry has never been shy about turning the cameras on itself, but it usually falls victim to its own sentimental clichés (the first two versions of *A Star is Born*) or overreaching metaphors about illusion and reality (*The Stunt Man*, *The Big Picture*). In recent years, Altman himself has often been guilty of cerebral murkiness, but here he hits his marks with invigorating clarity. *The Player* works so seam-

lessly on so many different levels that it's impossible to disentangle them. Most obviously, this story of a young, power-hungry studio executive is a dead-on send-up of the corrupting shallowness of corporate filmmaking. But the movie version (the script was adapted by Michael Tolkin from his novel) leaves no aftertaste of

cheap cynicism. A perfectly crafted product of the very system it disdains—intricately framed and compellingly paced—it celebrates even as it skewers.

The movie begins with one spectacularly long, fluid take that tracks the varied activities in a studio compound. The air is dense with the sound of writers and producers pitching ideas, which ring absurdly true: there's the Goldie Hawn in Africa project, which is "kind of like *The Gods Must Be Crazy* except the Coke bottle is now Goldie Hawn," and Buck Henry (as Buck Henry) proposing the sequel to his own script of *The Graduate* (Mrs. Robinson has a stroke and moves in with the kids). The name Julia Roberts is invoked like a Hail Mary. This is all delivered with deadly, desperate seriousness, striking the film's dual tone of sharp parody and cancerous tension.

At the center of the activity is Griffin Mill (played with just the right aura of disintegrating smoothness by Tim Robbins), an executive touted as a "writer's producer," whose position at the studio is jeopardized by the fast-rising Larry Levy (Peter Gallagher). Mill's anxiety is exacerbated by the sinister, anonymous postcards he's receiving, presumably from a scriptwriter he has spurned. He tracks down the man he thinks is responsible for them, David Kahane, a hapless intellectual (Vincent D'Onofrio), and, in an instinctive release of all the tensions that have been building, accidentally kills him. What follows is a brisk cat-and-mouse game between Mill, who has become involved with Kahane's girlfriend (Greta Scacchi), and the blunt-spoken Detective Avery (Whoopi Goldberg), who brings an anchoring tone of bemused disgust to the proceedings. The road to the film's blistering happy ending is filled with many surprising variations on traditional film noir standards, including a breathless coital confession and a terrifically sweaty police interrogation scene.

Like Rob Reiner's cheerier spoof on the music business, *This Is Spinal Tap*, *The Player* tackles the mores of a bizarrely superficial world with a satiric slant that's just a fraction away from the real thing, weaving factual references and characters with their fictional counterparts. Anjelica Huston, Bruce Willis, Andie MacDowell, Nick Nolte, and, yes, Julia Roberts are some of the many stars who show up in inspired cameo turns. The details of the movie sub-culture are endless and choice, and the brutally jocular industry-speak is the best of its kind since *Sweet Smell of Success*. ("Burt, I hope you don't remember me," says Levy, as he passes Burt Reynolds' restaurant table. "And if you do, there are no hard feelings.")

The movie also creates, in its very form, the mind-set of people conditioned to see the world in frames. Most obviously, there are the movies within the movie: the screening room rushes of a murder movie (with Lily Tomlin and Scott Glenn), with the scene itself shot through a window; and the mistaken identity thriller-in-the-making that cues *The Player's* own denouement. More interesting is how Mill's key moments of perception are also framed, as if on a screen: he falls in love with the artist while he watches her through her studio window, talking to her on a cellular phone; a gangly man who appears to be stalking him is seen through Mill's office window, catching a bug in his hands. This sensibility is underscored by the framed film noir movie posters in the studio foyers, by the references to classic movies that discreetly echo the plot—and even, on occasion, the technique—of *The Player*.

Robert Altman has long been on Hollywood's out list as a difficult, "arty" director, and no major studio wanted to touch this project. The director now has every reason to gloat. Both the ultimate insider's satire and a crackerjack entertainment, *The Player* triumphantly has it both ways. □

BEN BRANTLEY



Playing it as it lays: a deadly seriousness creates the double-edged tone of sharp parody and cancerous tension that permeates "The Player," an over-the-top, neo-noir view of life in movieland. Above, the director, Robert Altman; left, Tim Robbins puts the moves on Greta Scacchi after accidentally bumping off her boyfriend.

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