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'MY FOURTH COMEBACK'

"LOOK, AM I GETTING PAID ON THE 23RD?" HOLLYWOOD's subversive, a real Peck's bad boy, with a chokehold on his phone, wants to know where the money is. Fifteen years of rebellion, burned bridges, self-imposed exile, good movies and bad, and some things never change. Robert Altman, one of the country's preeminent filmmakers, a director on the verge of a

ROBERT

comeback, still needs to know if the check is in the mail.

Scott Bushnell, Altman's longtime aide-de-camp, one of a long line of loyalists, sits on one of her boss's black leather sofas, sucking on a Marlboro Light, muttering darkly: "If we don't get paid by

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then, I'm going to consider this an interest-free loan."

In the midst of the ballyhoo over Altman's return, battle lines are still drawn. The new, improved Robert Altman no longer lives in Paris, no longer drinks, no longer carouses and has made what many finger-crossed critics expect to be his most important movie since "Nashville"—"The Player," a wry, postmodern view of Hollywood. Yet the 67-year-old director, creator of some of the best American films of the last generation—"M*A*S*H," "McCabe and Mrs. Miller," "Nashville"—has made his comeback film with his irascibility intact. The querulous outspokenness is what elevated Altman from artist to folk hero, if you liked him, or demagogue if you didn't.

Shelley Duvall, who acted in seven Altman films: "Working with Bob is a family affair. People love him and you won't hear that kind of endearment about other directors."

Peter Bart, editor of Weekly Variety and a former MGM execu-

Ative, wrote: "He was arrogant. He had an authority problem. He drank too much. He behaved badly in public."

Clearly the journalists and critics sweeping into the director's New York office have been eager to dust off their hero after his decade on Hollywood's unemployment line, the post-"Nashville" years when Altman sought cover from a string of bad movies—"Buffalo Bill,"

ALTMAN

"Quintet," "H.E.A.L.T.H." and his Waterloo, "Popeye." Altman spent the '80s bouncing between Manhattan and Europe working in almost any medium, television, theater, small films, but not the one he wanted. The old Altman, everyone has discovered, the one who

tilted at the studios, the bean-counters, the *Establishment*, is still here, honing his lance. And "The Player," with its gleeful skewering of Hollywood's craven politics, may be his sweetest revenge.

"My *fourth* comeback," snorts the director, having dispatched Bushnell and the deadbeat on the phone. He plops his formidable frame on the sofa with the agitation that is his signature. "I know how this works," he says. "Suddenly I'm hot. But I'll pay for it next time. This time you're the darling, next time you're the goat."

Whether Altman's fortunes will change with "The Player" remains to be seen. Certainly heads have been turned by the wattage generated by a mere \$8-million film. Headlined by Tim Robbins, Greta Scacchi, Peter Gallagher and Whoopi Goldberg, the film also features 65 cameos by the likes of Cher, Nick Nolte, Julia Roberts and Bruce Willis. Almost all the major studios vied to distribute the Avenue Pictures film—the cynical story of a Hollywood executive who

BY HILARY DE VRIES





To his actors, strongman director Robert Altman is an angel; to Hollywood executives, a Nightmare on Elm Street.

murders a screenwriter who he believes has sent him a series of threatening postcards, and wins the writer's girlfriend. Ultimately, the deal was struck with Fine Line Features, a division of New Line Cinema. In the process, a number of studios even offered Altman other pictures to direct. Carey Brokaw, executive producer of "The Player" and chairman of Avenue, says, "I'm hearing that Bob's on everybody's list now."

Yet other observers predict that "The Player," with its chilly attitude toward power and fame, will play the coasts and die in the heartland, ironically the Kansas-reared director's home turf. As for the handful of executives who've called Altman about suiting up and joining their team, the director is, as usual, brutally frank. "They're all pictures that I don't know how to do," he says. "I don't think I'll ever work for a major studio again."

Altman clings to his pet projects—"L.A. Short Cuts," a film version of some of Raymond Carver's short fiction that even his old pal, MGM executive Alan Ladd Jr., shrugged off, and "Pret a Porter," the "Nashville"-esque look at France's fashion industry the director has been trying to finance since his Paris days. Love me, love my movie, no matter how uncommercial is still the Altman bottom line.

"Maybe I like being on the outside," he says, tossing down his lines like a see-you-and-raise-you bet. "Maybe I enjoy that position. It happens once and you dig it a little bit, so it happens again. Or maybe I just know enough now not to be afraid of the consequences."

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AN EXCHANGE BETWEEN TWO HOLLYWOOD producers overheard in Manhattan last month:

"The Player?" snorts producer #1. "Never heard of it."

"The new Robert Altman film," says producer #2.

"Robert Altman? Robert Altman is not a player."

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles, word of the Altman-Mark Canton contretemps is making its way across town. Upset with the Columbia mogul's third-reel-only viewing preference at a private screening of "The Player," Altman calls Canton "rude," "stupid," "a jerk" and has his editor remove the print from the Sony lot. Canton retaliates by calling Altman a "bully," and Columbia becomes one of the two studios to decline to distribute the film.

Altman's exchange rate with those above him in the food chain—producers, studio heads and those "25 vice presidents that nobody really knows who they are," as he puts it—has always fluctuated. Although his standing with the critical community has the aura of gold, executives have felt burned. Only two of Altman's films, "M*A*S*H" and "Popeye," were commercially successful. Even 1980's "Popeye," which took in \$60 million worldwide, was deemed a disappointment, since Paramount was anticipating that Robin Williams' comic anarchy would deliver a blockbuster. "I think Bob has a lot of friends in Hollywood," says Brokaw, who has known the director since their days at 20th Century Fox. "I just don't know how many of them are studio executives."

It wasn't always so. After a long apprenticeship in the '60s directing such television dramas as "Bonanza" and "Combat," among others, Altman made "M*A*S*H" in 1969 and six years later, "Nashville."

Those films were greeted as icons, as if Altman had carved two new heads on Mt. Rushmore. For the pre-Spielberg crowd, Altman reigned as "the colossus of Hollywood's last golden age," as Vanity Fair's Stephen Schiff recently wrote. He was one of the few American auteurs to rank with the international greats, Bergman, Fellini, Truffaut, Kurosawa.

Between 1970 and 1975, Altman made eight films, and the best of them, along with Arthur Penn's "Bonnie and Clyde" and Sam Peckinpah's "The Wild Bunch," opened a new chapter in American filmmaking. They were dark, knowing comedies in which he spurned traditional rules of the craft, pioneering a new egalitarian aesthetic that captured the country's ambivalent feelings toward power, fame, community and authority. Altman knocked the stars down to the level of extras, packed the frames, blurred the edges, muddled the sound. "You pay more attention if you miss a phrase," he said, and played on.

But the fall from grace was as swift as the ascension. Altman's hobbies were plucked right from Dante's seven circles. The director's drinking, gambling, philandering and feuding were legendary. "They would have killed a normal person," says director Alan Rudolph, a longtime protégé. Those vices proved a handy scapegoat for the years when Altman made more bad movies than good. "A Wedding," "Quintet," "H.E.A.L.T.H.," all made during the director's residency at Fox, were box-office failures.

But it took the debacle that was "Popeye" to finish Altman in Hollywood. His complex, multilayered approach to filmmaking was deemed out of step with the industry's new teen-age target audience. In 1981, Altman abandoned Los Angeles, sold his production company, Lion's Gate, and somewhat sulkily decamped to Paris, where he is revered to a degree somewhere between Jerry Lewis and Mickey Rourke.

There were a couple of flashes—"Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean," adapted from the 1982 Broadway play, and "Tanner '88," a political pseudo-documentary for Home Box Office—that let the faithful know Altman was still out there hustling. But it wasn't until "Vincent & Theo," the neurasthenic, moving Van Gogh biography, appeared two years ago, that critics began the drumbeat hailing Altman's return—a vote of confidence that was premature considering the media bandwagoning that has greeted "The Player."

That Altman has generated a high-decibel buzz with a low-budget thriller says much about the director's gambler's approach to his craft as well as his talent for summoning the industry's A-list. When Michael Tolkin first peddled the script adaptation of his novel four years ago, Hollywood was understandably skittish at airing even its fictional dirty laundry. Although other directors, including James Dearden and Sidney Lumet, were initially approached, it wasn't until Altman signed on that Avenue Pictures gave the project the green light.

"I was basically a director for hire," says Altman. "But I told them I needed to make this film my way."

Never a respecter of a finished script, Altman fine-tuned Tolkin's narrative and added a satirical sheen to the otherwise straightforward whodunit, in part by casting celebrities to play themselves.

Long regarded as a quintessential actor's director, Altman operates with the miscreant authority of a professor denied tenure who simply moves off campus while luring the best students for some metaphysical bashing of the Establishment. Even during his lean years, Altman was renowned for plucking unknown actors from dark corners. He launched the film careers of several, most of them women, notably Shelley Duvall, Lily Tomlin and Cher, who had her first major role in "Come Back to the Five and Dime."

"Without him, I wouldn't be here," says Cher. "If he calls you, you go. It's kind of what you have to do."

"Making 'The Player' was one of the best times I

ever had in the movies," says Whoopi Goldberg. "I hope to spend the rest of my career working for him."

That enthusiasm is testimony to Altman's personal charisma as well as his overweening need to work with a coterie of devoted followers—an us-versus-them alignment that has been the director's greatest strength and most serious weakness.

Altman's talent for subversion, so effective on screen, has been less salutary in his off-camera dealings. As far back as his days as an industrial filmmaker in Kansas City during the 1950s, Altman was spitting in the eye of the guy who cut the checks. Since his arrival in Los Angeles more than 30 years ago, he has publicly tangled with the Teamsters, denounced the sponsors of his TV shows—his dismissal of Kraft, "as bland as its cheese," was a storied event—and crossed movie bosses, including Lew Wasserman, the powerful chairman of MCA, and former Paramount mogul Barry Diller. There was gossip that Altman punched a Paramount executive who wanted to re-edit "Nashville." During the shooting of "Popeye," Altman reportedly threw a glass of wine in the face of a journalist who had written a less-than-flattering article on the film.

In the years between "M*A*S*H" and "Nashville," Altman chewed through six studios, a take-no-prisoners ethic the director seemed to follow in his personal life. Dogged by debts, many of them gambling losses, a renowned user of alcohol and drugs, Altman was notorious as a womanizer during his first two marriages. He is now on his third—a 30-year liaison with Kathryn Reed, a former actress—and the sire of five children, nine grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Altman has mellowed, according to those who know him,

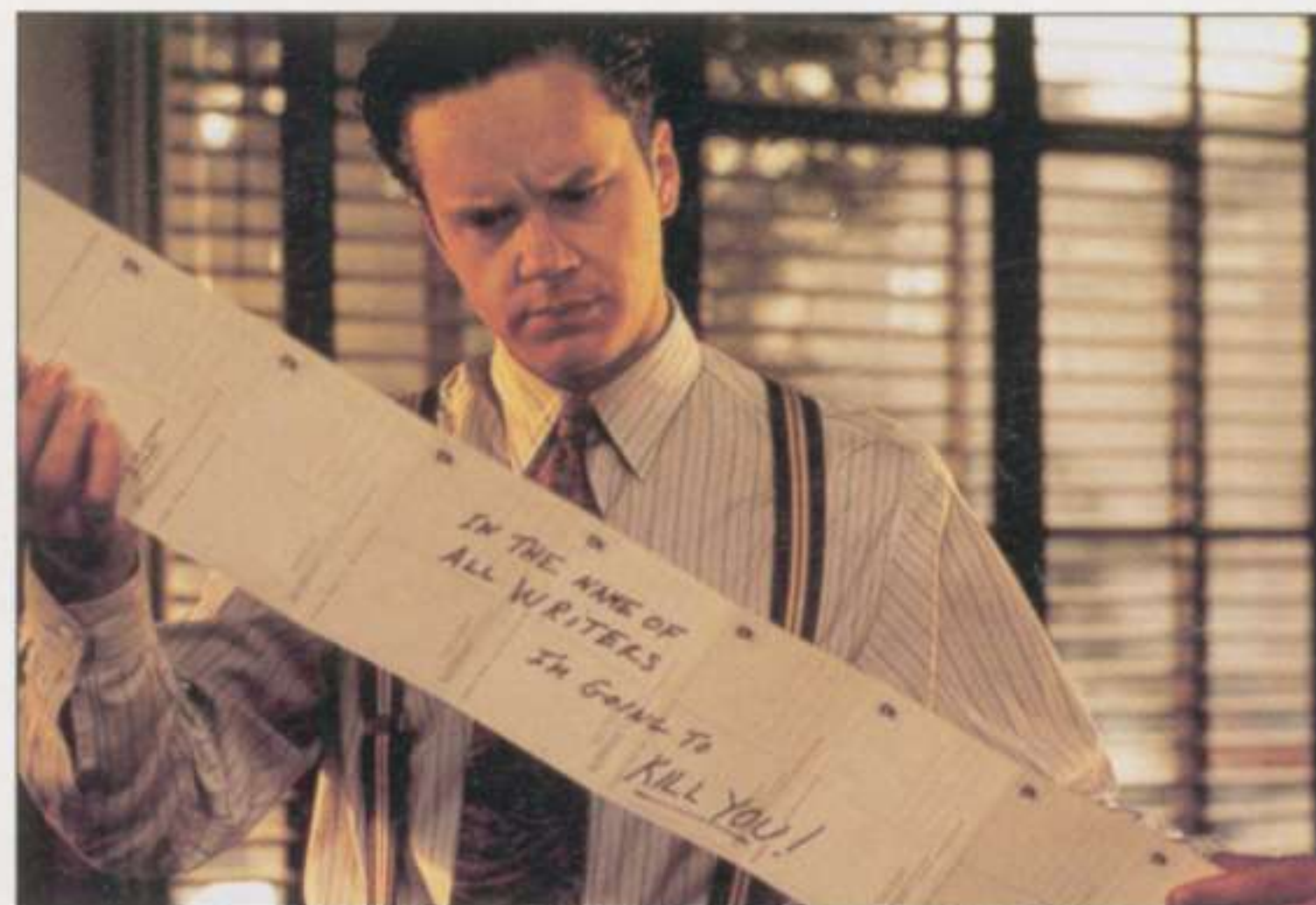
Rather, he is a large, impatient man who uses his bulk to good effect; he seems able to pace even when he is sitting still, as he is on this afternoon, clad simply in chinos and button-down shirt. Like anyone with a bone to pick, Altman moves directly to his favorite topic, the decline and fall of Hollywood, and stays there. He is less loquacious when discussing his own films—"I don't know why 'M*A*S*H' looked that way, I just wanted it to look that way," he says with some irritation, as if he were being asked to hand over his notes to a class the rest of us missed.

On more personal issues he turns almost snappish. Ask Altman to diagnose his own psychic restlessness, and he goes into bluster mode—one that almost always includes a reference to his former drinking habits. "That's assigning reasons for behavior to other things," he says, clearly annoyed. "This conversation wouldn't have gone on in the late '60s. It would have been, 'Jesus Christ, what do you mean you don't drink?'"

Ask friends to explain Altman's roiling persona, and the reasons run the gamut. "DNA—it's just the way Bob is," says one colleague. Others suggest that Altman's battles with the Hollywood system have left him scarred. Freudians have probably had a field day sifting through the director's childhood. Altman grew up in a largely female household where he learned to manipulate family members as a

Bob: 'Action, come on, anything.' "

WHEN DAVID BROWN OPTIONED TOLKIN'S novel "The Player," Robert Altman was not on his list of potential filmmakers. Although Brown had worked with the director more than 20 years earlier on "M*A*S*H," he had other candidates in mind for "The Player," which he envisioned as a standard-issue thriller with either Chevy Chase or William Hurt playing the vengeful studio executive, Griffin Mill. When Brown could not come to terms with either of his initial directorial choices, the way was opened for Altman. Over a breakfast meeting in New York two years



Tim Robbins gets a scare as a studio bureaucrat in "The Player."

SPEND SOME TIME WITH HIM AND IT BECOMES OBVIOUS THAT ALTMAN IS A MAN WITH A COMPULSION TO RUN TOWARD GASOLINE WITH A LIT MATCH.

redirecting his self-destructive impulses into garden-variety workaholicism and an innocuous addiction to backgammon.

"I quit gambling," says Altman, tapping a leather game box. "I'll play poker and backgammon. Anybody who plays backgammon who comes into this room plays," he warns. "I end the interview and play for four hours."

It has been suggested that the whiskered and potbellied filmmaker, the third generation of a German immigrant line, bears a resemblance to Santa Claus. The jolly old elf gene-spliced with Mephistopheles is more like it. Spend some time with him and it becomes obvious that Altman is a man with a compulsion to run toward gasoline with a lit match. With his player's knack for brinkmanship, he is a masterful manipulator of his followers, be they family, friends, colleagues or the audience. As Duvall puts it, "Bob really knows how to pull your chain, he knows all the right buttons."

Interviewing the director is like climbing into a frame of one of his films, with their overlapping dialogue and multiple story lines. On a top floor of one of New York's residence hotels—elevators packed with upper-class transients, women in sheared beaver coats and legal residences elsewhere—Altman's office is in effect the apartment's living room. You are aware that there's a conversation going on somewhere down front, but in the background there are the constantly ringing telephones, the sound of midtown traffic and the constant buzzing of the giant "Five and Dime" neon sign behind his massive black desk. Assistants wander in and out, and Bushnell, who seems to operate on a 15-foot leash, frequently enters stage left to cadge ice, to smoke and circle.

"Now, where were we?" Altman says repeatedly. For all of Altman's advance billing as either Hollywood's savior or devil, in person he seems neither.

way to remain center stage.

Still others have simply accepted the director's excesses as the price of his talent. Producer David Brown, who worked with him on "The Player" as well as "M*A*S*H," advises, "You don't speak frankly with Bob, you listen and place your bets carefully."

"Bob can be intimidating," says Cher. "He loves a good fight."

"The only other guy who kept things that interesting was Sam Peckinpah," adds director Graeme Clifford, one of Altman's early associates. "He doesn't look for fights but I would say he doesn't suffer fools readily."

"I've taken a few lumps from Bob," says Brokaw. "It was always 'our fault' when his movies failed."

The disagreeable qualities of the man have been recognized at times in his work. David Dortort, the producer of "Bonanza," once said that Altman produced "his best work when there was cruelty involved in the story." Critics have supported that theory with charges of misogyny that appeared first in reviews of "M*A*S*H" and reached a crescendo with "Nashville." In one scene, an actress performed a forced striptease at a political fund-raiser. One reviewer's reaction: "Altman's treatment of women often borders on celluloid rape."

While Altman dismisses such accusations out of hand, he doesn't differ with the suggestion that his career, for better or worse, has been a flouting of the rules and a consistent burning of bridges. "Yeah, probably. But I think it's bulls—, because what it means—I don't know what it means. When I've felt I was violated, I spoke out. There were times I probably should have kept my mouth shut, but now when I think about it, I don't know why."

It is Altman's pal Alan Rudolph who perhaps best sums up his mentor. "He is so American, because his philosophy is that it is all a game to be played," says Rudolph. "There is a line in 'California Split' that is



Peter Gallagher takes a meeting in Altman's new film.

ago, Altman insisted he was "born to make this film."

His fee, in the neighborhood of \$500,000, was a quarter of what Sidney Lumet was asking, and Altman even deferred a portion of it to win the nod from Brown. Altman also had a crucial meeting with Avenue Pictures' Brokaw, with whom he had tangled during their shared tenure at Fox.

"We had a history, and I was upfront with Bob about my concerns," recalls Brokaw. "But Bob wanted to make an accessible film, and I think his having to work within a specific genre kept him disciplined." That and the fact that Brokaw patrolled the set nearly every day of the film's eight-week shoot in Los Angeles last summer.

Altman insists that his directing "The Player" should be interpreted as neither a bid for revenge nor the calling card of a kinder, gentler Bob Altman eager to re-enter Hollywood's good graces. Rather, the director went to great lengths to imbue the novel's narrative with his own layers-within-layers, inside-joke, Chinese-puzzle storytelling techniques. "Tolkien's book is in my movie," Altman says pointedly.

The director reordered some of the novel's events, added a Möbius-strip ending similar to the conclusion of "M*A*S*H," and fashioned a much-discussed long opening shot—a six-minute pan of people discussing long opening shots. But it was Altman's decision to cast well-known actors and Hollywood power-brokers as themselves that elevated the project into an uncommonly clever commentary on the industry.

That was "the most important decision Bob made," says Tolkin, who also served as one of the film's producers. "It established the movie as a satire. It cannot be a sexy Warner Bros. suspense thriller when Jack Lemmon is in the background playing the piano."

"I don't care diddly squat about who killed who," says Altman. "I've created a piece of fluff, their kind

tions; this one just happens to be about Hollywood," says Tolkin. "This is the first real black comedy since Ronald Reagan was elected. Bob makes fun of everybody. There are no obvious villains, which is why he hasn't made a successful film in 10 years, because Hollywood has insisted that there be those kinds of easy distinctions."

Altman agrees. "We've been duped. We've been through the [Michael] Milken thing, the S&L thing, all this financial and political stuff, and everyone has got a real prospect of being not as well off as they were two years ago. We hit a nerve with this film. . . . I haven't fashioned this after one individual. It's about everybody, including myself. We're all part of this system, we're all guilty. The satire is as much on me as it is on them."

1969, when Altman was 44, that he was offered the opportunity to direct "M*A*S*H," which had been refused by 14 other directors. That film established Altman as one of the most original and prescient directors working in Hollywood. It was an iconoclastic examination of community that Altman has come back to in subsequent films.

"Misplaced people, people in alien situations," says Altman, asked to define his films' subject matter. "But I can only see that in retrospect. I don't ever see the story [while shooting]. The story doesn't interest me. Something occurs to me, strikes me. I don't know why something hits me. I don't have to know why. It's just behavior."

Altman's almost journalistic fascination with human behavior—as Rudolph says, "Behavior is Bob's

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of movie. It doesn't mean it can't be a good document on culture, but everything [studio executives] are buying, I'm attacking—the stars, the feel-good, the happy ending. I think it's very satirical, but they don't see the truth in it. They don't get it."

Altman pauses. "I'm getting all the credit, but this was a collaboration where everyone seemed to know what it was and that they wanted to contribute to this truthful look at our culture."

"Wanting to contribute" is something of an understatement for a film that became the fashionable cattle call among actors. Although he initially cast the film with his usual cadre of up-and-coming actors, word quickly spread and soon the director was fielding lots of calls.

"Whoopi did in fact come to me and say, 'I want to be a part of this,'" recounts Altman. "I told her I didn't think there was a part for her, but she said she had read the script and could play the role of the cop. So I said you can play the cop."

Whatever ire Altman's use of improvisation and ad-libbing has roused in producers and screenwriters, it has won him the devotion of actors. "Bob loves actors, and you feel that immediately," says "The Player's" Peter Gallagher, who also starred in Altman's TV movie, "The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial." "So many directors are just interested in angles and lenses that they are afraid of working with actors, and they make up for it by becoming bullies. Also, his taste is personal, not market-based, and he is not afraid of collaboration. He is not afraid of allowing others to participate."

On "The Player," that extended to his allowing most of the actors making cameo appearances to write their own lines—dialogue that is as caustic and cleareyed about the industry as Altman's own jaundiced view.

"There is always somebody who represents the fence—those 25 vice presidents nobody really knows who they are," says Altman. "So when Burt Reynolds and Malcolm McDowell came to the set, I said, 'I can't tell you what to do, you're playing yourself. I'm not responsible for your actions.' Nothing was written for them. I said to Burt, 'Here comes Griffin Mill. What do you want to say to him?' And he says, 'I want to call him an asshole.' With Malcolm, it was the same thing, his lines were his own writing."

Such tactics, while an amusing bit of internecine verisimilitude, would not have been sufficient to generate the kind of attention that "The Player" has. Tolkin suggests that Altman's take on Hollywood has coincided with a shift in the nation's mood, capturing the post-'80s era in much the same way that "M*A*S*H" evoked the alienation of the '60s.

"At his best, Bob makes films about social situa-

ALTMAN WAS A TEEN-AGE ENLISTEE STATIONED at the Army's March Field near Riverside when he first arrived in Hollywood, almost 40 years ago. He was dazzled by the town, this kid from the Midwest, the only son and oldest of three children born to Helen and Bernard Clement Altman, a well-to-do insurance salesman and one of the pillars of his Kansas City community.

"How do you know all that?" asks Altman. "Did you read that book that guy wrote? It's a dreadful book." Patrick McGilligan's biography of Altman, "Robert Altman: Jumping Off the Cliff," has been something of a thorn in the director's side since it was published three years ago, and Altman's dismissal of the only book-length chronicle of his turbulent life is telling. "There is truth in it, but it is not true," he says. "Memories are not valid. Two people can have the experience of meeting you and 10 days later they will tell totally different stories."

Ask Altman for a description of his childhood and he is succinct and to the point.

"I was the oldest child of my generation," he recalls. "My sister wasn't born for five years, so for five years I was king. To all the aunts and uncles and grandparents—it was me. I'm sure that had some effect. Also my father wasn't around a lot. We didn't play baseball or go fishing, any of those things. The same was true with my mother. We weren't close."

Altman pauses. "I had no problem ever leaving anybody anywhere."

He possessed a restless intelligence but was an indifferent student who would only later, after much professional gnashing of teeth (he once tried to start a business tattooing dogs), parlay his interest in math and his painter's eye into a creative career. Like other directors of his generation, Altman came to movie-making the hardscrabble way. There were no film schools, so in the wake of a brief stint unsuccessfully peddling screenplays after his Army discharge, Altman returned to Kansas City and took a job making industrial films. Six years later, he was back in Los Angeles directing episodes of "Alfred Hitchcock Presents." The famed director of mysteries extended an invitation after viewing "The Delinquents," Altman's first feature, which was shot in Kansas City with local actors.

"I came from a more commercial aspect," says Altman. "There were a whole group of us who came from television. I learned more from hands-on experience with the industrial and documentary areas. I didn't study films the way Demme and Spielberg and Scorsese did."

He worked for several years directing episodes of "The Whirlybirds," "The Millionaire," "Bonanza" and "Combat," among other series. It wasn't until

food"—has formed the basis for his directing approach, which begins, Altman says, when he casts a role. "I'm 80% there when I'm finished casting," he says. "I'm not trying to cast somebody like filling a role in a play. I'm looking for somebody to sit in a chair and tell me what the role is so I see something I never imagined. If an actor just does what I've imagined, believe me, it's bad. Because no matter how facile or brilliant or complicated my mind is, it will never be as good as three other people's minds [working] together."

Scripts, Altman says, are mere "blueprints, not really writing. But the minute you put an actor up there who is, say, 35 years old, well, that's 35 years of information. I might have chosen somebody who murdered someone and we don't know that, or someone who has deviant sexual impulses that they've covered up or someone who is stupid and has learned not to show that. Our personalities are all so diverse, but to write a person like that would take pages."

"We become the product of our information," he continues. "Every new piece of information has to be pushed into our consciousness. There isn't a step you've taken from the cab into here that you are not now melding with all the other parts of your life. You can never get rid of that. You can't de-experience anything."

Rudolph, who has worked with Altman on several films as an assistant director, says, "Bob is very instinctive. He sees raw material and forms his own opinions. He doesn't pay much attention to reality out there, but he creates his own reality. You are instantly a character in a movie Bob sees."

That perspective is one that Altman has sought to translate onto film by the use of techniques that frequently have more in common with documentary than feature filmmaking—hand-held cameras, close-ups, multiple microphones, ad-libbing, improvisation. "Do we know if everybody perceives everything the same?" Altman asks. "I think not, and if all that is happening on film is the story and I don't see detailing around that, then I'm not interested."

In his use of soundtracks, Altman also sacrifices clarity for "the way you would normally hear it. Nobody hears half of what you say anyway. It's really a matter of telling the actors they don't have to speak out."

Joan Tewkesbury, who wrote the script for "Nashville," describes Altman's process as "a labor of layering. Bob always felt that was the best way to add a level of irony and show what a situation *wasn't*."

"When Bob sees somebody doing something interesting, he puts the camera on them," says Duvall. "It's why he likes to work with new actors. He believes

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their behavior is more instinctive and real."

It is the kind of approach that Altman insists has its roots in a personal vision, an individualism that Hollywood, he says, no longer tolerates.

"In the early days, most filmmakers were aspiring artists with artistic reasons for making movies," he says. "Whether they were narcissistic reasons or not, they were reasons to create something, to be able to say, 'Look, I made this.' Now, you can't even shame them. There's not even a political agenda. There's nothing. No human connection. They're just making cotton candy. The studios are all run by the empty room at the top. There are no terrible Jack Warners or Louis B. Mayers anymore. Everybody reports to an empty room."

Altman is happy to continue his rant for several minutes. "Today, no person follows their instincts. And without that, you're dealing with data, and it's all negative data. It started in the '70s with 'Star Wars' and Spielberg, and

when that kind of money started to come in, it changed the people who are making the decisions. The bottom line became king. [Paramount Pictures Chairman Brandon] Tartikoff and [Fox Film Corp. Chairman] Joe Roth have said flat-out they're not interested in creating anything but 'product,' films that reach a full mass audience. They're not interested in trying to create a new audience or even part of an audience.

"The studios are run by greed. A quarter are owned by Japanese equipment manufacturers who are interested in procuring software for their hardware. They are not concerned about culture."

While Altman's complaints would have little trouble finding a sympathetic ear, one senses that what he misses most is some studio head, some mogul, *someone* with whom he can lock horns—a professional sparring partner willing to go the distance.

"Every step of every picture has been a battle," he says. "But I don't think it should be any different. I think if I had been able to have my where-withal, I think I would have failed. It's the struggle to solve

problems, that's what [filmmaking] is, solving problems.

"We aren't even in the same business really," he says, reflecting on his standing within the Hollywood system. "We don't do the same thing, so why should I be upset or the studios be upset?"

He says this without apparent rancor, then turns puckishly combative again. "But my ego would like somebody to offer me a great big 'Batman'-ish film—so I could turn it down."

TWO HOURS HAVE passed, and Altman moves toward his desk. "Hey, look at this," he says, reading from a fax listing audience responses at screenings of "The Player."

"Hey, here's somebody who didn't like it," he says. A smile works the corners of his mouth. "'It didn't blow me away,'" he reads, his eyes already moving down the list.

"Oh, here's the Hollywood Reporter," he says, grinning. "'It is the policy of the Hollywood Reporter never to comment on a screening.'"

And Altman throws his head back and laughs and laughs at all those who refuse to play along. ■