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Altman and Gould Make a Brilliant 'Long Goodbye'

THE LONG GOODBYE, directed by Robert Altman; screenplay by Leigh Brackett, based on Raymond Chandler's novel; produced by Jerry Bick; executive producer, Elliott Kastner; director of photography Vilmos Zsinnond; editor, Lou Lombardo; music, John Williams; distributed by United Artists. Running time: 112 minutes. At the Trans-Lux East Theater, Third Avenue at 58th Street. (This film has been classified R.)

Philip Marlowe.....	Elliott Gould
Eileen Wade.....	Nina van Pallandt
Roger Wade.....	Sterling Hayden
Mark Augustine.....	Mark Rydell
Dr. Verringer.....	Henry Gibson
Harry.....	David Arkin
Terry Lennox.....	Jim Bouton
Morgan.....	Warren Berlinger
Jo Ann Esenweller.....	Jo Ann Brody

By VINCENT CANBY

In "The Long Goodbye," Robert Altman, a brilliant director whose films sometimes seem like death wishes ("Brewster McCloud"), attempts the impossible and pulls it off.

Using a screenplay by Leigh Brackett, freely adapted from Raymond Chandler's 1953 novel, he has successfully transported Philip Marlowe, Chandler's private eye whose roots are in the depressed, black-and-white nineteen-thirties, to the overprivileged, full-color seventies in the person of Elliott Gould, who is nothing if not a child of our time.

The film, which opened yesterday at the Trans-Lux East, is Altman's most entertaining, most richly complex film since "M*A*S*H" and "McCabe and Mrs. Miller." It's so good that I don't know where to begin describing it. Perhaps at the beginning:

The nighttime view from a hillside high above Los Angeles is great, but inside the apartment you feel as if you're at the bottom of a well. It looks as if it had been furnished by San Quentin. There are smudges on the wall next to the bed where Philip Marlowe sleeps fully clothed and in desperate need of a shave.

A large, pushy yellow cat meows for something to eat, awakening Marlowe, who displays a cranky sort of affection for an animal that doesn't deserve it. When Marlowe tries to interest the cat in a plate of old cottage cheese, unconvincingly updated with a raw egg, the cat gives him a look that ought to have stuck at least four inches out of his back.

There is nothing for Marlowe to do but go to the supermarket to buy some canned cat food, even though it's 3 A.M. by the clock and in his soul.

It's the beginning of a crucial time for this particular Philip Marlowe, who, in spite of a lot of evidence to the contrary, persists in believing that not all relationships need be opportunistic or squalid.

When Marlowe returns from the supermarket, he meticulously pastes the label from a can of the cat's favorite brand over a substitute, but the cat is not fooled. It walks off, furious. A minute later Terry Lennox (Jim Bouton), an old friend of Marlowe's shows up and asks Marlowe to drive him to the Mexican border. Terry, a part-time hood and full-time pretty boy, explains that someone has murdered

his wife and the cops certainly won't accept his innocence. Marlowe does.

Almost immediately Marlowe is arrested by the police as an accessory to murder, roughed up by the associates of the syndicate boss (Mark Rydell), who suspects Marlowe of stealing \$350,000, and invited to find the drunken novelist-husband (Sterling Hayden) of a tall, beautiful self-assured blonde (Nina van Pallandt), who looks like the promises made in a Coppertone ad.

Curiously enough, Gould's Marlowe, lonely, usually shabby, with a wit that is less often turned outward than inward onto himself, does not seem an anachronism in the world of contemporary freaks. That was the gnawing problem with Paul Newman, superman, tough in the screen adaptation of Ross MacDonald's "Harper," and the fatal flaw in "Marlowe," Paul Bogart's adaptation of Chandler's "The Little Sister," in which James Garner played it for laughs.

Gould's Marlowe is entirely different from Humphrey Bogart's ("The Big Sleep") and Dick Powell's ("Farewell, My Lovely" and the 1954 TV adaptation of "The Long Goodbye"). Gould's

Marlowe is not especially tough. He's a bright, conscientious but rather solemn nut, a guy who hopes for the best but expects the worst, having experienced the social upheavals, the assassinations and the undeclared war of the sixties.

Altman, Miss Leigh (who collaborated with William Faulkner on the script for "The Big Sleep") and Gould have had the courage to create an original character and almost an original story that, by being original, does move to honor Chandler's skills than would any attempt to make a forties movie today.

There are lots of eloquent references to Chandler in Altman's method, which is to pack the screen with more bizarre visual and aural detail than can be easily taken in at one sitting. There are also references in the appreciation of California décor, luxurious as well as tacky and in the throwaway lines and uniformly excellent characterizations, including two by actors who will surprise you, Nina van Pallandt and Jim Bouton.

Don't be misled by the ads. "The Long Goodbye" is not a put-on. It's great fun and it's funny, but it's a serious, unique work.



Elliott Gould