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Noir with a Roar

Altman's 'Gingerbread Man' is a quirky, compelling thriller.

by chris reed

Talk about your ultimate odd couple: Robert Altman, the iconoclastic filmmaker responsible for several of the greatest movies ever made, and John Grisham, the callow-young-lawyers-in-trouble formula novelist whose popularity is out of all proportion to his artistry.

Altman makes films ("Nashville," "Short Cuts," "The Player," "M*A*S*H") that resonate years after viewing. Grisham writes forgettable page-turners in which characters refer to their "ex-fathers" (the first page of "The Client") and the heroes gloat about getting away with adultery (the

last pages of "The Firm").

So what's the result of their pairing in "The Gingerbread Man," an Altman-directed thriller based on an original, unpublished Grisham short story?

A quirky, compelling and thoroughly original take on the noir genre that has only one thing in common with Grisham's past fiction: The protagonist is an attorney.

But otherwise there's nothing in Grisham's body of work that suggests he's capable of the believable, funny dialogue and eccentric storytelling power that Altman and screenwriter Al Hayes put on display in "The Gingerbread Man."

The plot is established briskly and involvingly: After a party to celebrate his big win in a police-brutality case, Savannah, Ga., lawyer Kenneth Branagh (absolutely convincing as a Southerner despite his Brit roots) has a one-night stand with a gauntly attractive waitress (Embeth Davidtz of "Schindler's List"). But – in noir movies there's always a "but" after sex because it always has nasty consequences – Branagh gets much more than he's bargained for when he finds himself caught between Davidtz and her crazed father (the riveting Robert Duvall), the leader of a small oddball cult of antisocial hillbillies.

To the dismay of his law partner (a surprisingly good Darryl Hannah) and

wastrel investigator pal (a hilariously disheveled Robert Downey Jr.), Branagh chooses to play knight in shining armor for Davidtz – a decision that ends up putting at risk his life and the lives of his two children by a failed marriage.

The only further plot detail that can be mentioned without spoiling "Gingerbread Man's" many twists and turns is the chaos caused in Savannah by the approach and arrival of a massive hurricane. Altman choreographs the storm's building intensity in tandem with the shocking events of the third act in a way that makes the last half-hour as compelling as the finale of any thriller in years.

To be sure, this isn't the sort of cerebral, subtle drama one has come to expect from Altman; "Gingerbread Man" definitely isn't the sort of film he's made before. But there's a precise precedent for it: Martin Scorsese's work on the powerhouse 1991

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MOVIE

REVIEW

THE

GINGERBREAD MAN

★★★★

(based on four-star rating)

Opens today: Century City

(310) 553-8900; Beverly Hills

(310) 777-3456

Stars: Kenneth Branagh,

Embeth Davidtz, Robert

Downey Jr., Robert Duvall

Director: Robert Altman

Rated: R for some sexuality,

violence and language



Kenneth Branagh, right, plays a Georgia lawyer entangled with a tormented waitress (Embeth Davidtz) in the new thriller "The Gingerbread Man."

remake of "Cape Fear."

Both Scorsese and Altman are revered directors who hate being pigeonholed and love taking on new challenges. What they prove in "Cape Fear" and "The Gingerbread Man" is that their brilliance transcends genres.

"Cape Fear," of course, became a big hit, thanks to a lavish Universal Studios promotional campaign and good word of mouth. Alas, "The Gingerbread Man" is produced by

Island Pictures, a weakling studio without deep pockets. Here's hoping the John Grisham connection gets "Gingerbread" the attention it deserves – even if the film bears as much resemblance to a Grisham novel as it does to a documentary about iguanas.

Meanwhile, it's worth remembering that Altman is now in his 70s. He won't be around forever. Let's revel in his genius while we can.