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Ready to whir: Kim Basinger plays interviewer with Cher.

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# Hemming and Hawing

By J. Hoberman

## Ready To Wear

Produced and directed by Robert Altman  
Written by Altman and Barbara Shulgasser  
A Miramax release  
Opens December 25

## Speechless

Directed by Ron Underwood  
Written by Robert King  
Produced by Renny Harlin and Geena Davis  
An MGM release

**Fashion, it would appear,** has never been more fashionable, but, if screening-room scuttlebutt offers any barometer, Robert Altman is once again passé.

[*Ready To Wear*, Altman's ode to couture, seems poised to tank as it opens Christmas Day at 1000 theaters. It's not altogether true that the movie, known until recently as *Prêt-à-Porter*, puts the viewer on the rack; vicious word-of-mouth notwithstanding, *Ready To Wear* is less flaming disaster than lukewarm disappointment. *Short Cuts* provided something substantial to dislike; *Ready To Wear* looks as vapid as it feels. The texture is washed out, the fabric flimsy. The title's last-minute gringoization is symptomatic of an overall identity crisis. *Ready To Wear* is a mirthless romp. Unlike *The New Yorker's* recent special issue, it's too tired to even make the case that fashion is "fun."

As if to emphasize the movie's status as gaseous blur, Altman uses his two best jokes to bracket the vagued-out proceedings. The title sequence has Marcello Mastroianni shopping for a designer tie in an emporium around the corner from... Moscow's Red Square! But, as *The Player* (re)established

Altman as the maestro of cinematic name-dropping, the credits are rendered in Cyrillic characters only until the inevitable spin of fabulous monikers: Danny Aiello, Anouk Aimée, Lauren Bacall, Kim Basinger... all the way through the alphabet to Forest Whitaker.

Something like 36 characters in search of an offer, *Ready To Wear's* narrative plays like a bunch of pulverized one-act dramas in which everything more or less exists to serve as fodder for a misfired gag. Scene after scene of aimless milling around are interspersed with assorted bouts of spastic coupling and blasts of glitz and strobe runway glamour. Set during the week when Paris designers unveil their spring collections, the project reeks of bored self-contempt. (Cross-referenced events around town include a dog show and a cross-dresser's convention.) So many characters step in doggie doo on their way to do each other dirt, you have to wonder if Altman is proposing life as a Poodle Shit *La Ronde*.

Once fashion czar Jean-Pierre Cassell gags to death in his limo while stuck in a traffic jam on the Pont Alexandre III, Altman has his macguffin. Cassell was married to and cheating on a frighteningly well-preserved Sophia Loren who, at one point, recapitulates her striptease from *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* for her former husband... well, you'll see: Establishing a mystery insufficiently compelling to motivate a game of *Clue*, Altman whips a variety of schemes and subterfuges into a sub-soufflé froth of tepid intrigue. As rumples Mastroianni capers about breaking into suites and stealing luggage, designer Anouk Aimée's pompously duplicitous son (Rupert Everett) sells her company to a vulgar Texas bootmaker (Lyle Lovett). Meanwhile, an unholy

trio of fashion magazine editors, Linda Hunt, Sally Kellerman, and Tracey Ullman (enlivening this mediocrity as she did *Bullets Over Broadway*), vie for the services of a currently hot photographer, (Stephen Rea, playing an even more curdled version of the Keith Carradine character in *Nashville*).

The mystery, such as it is, disappears in a miasma of bedroom farce, Grand Guignol, and desultory quasidocumentary—in addition to the cameos by real models and designers, among other celebs, Altman filmed against the backdrop of the actual fashion shows from which, according to *Women's Wear Daily*, he was eventually banned. Increasingly grotesque, *Ready To Wear* is a gargyle parade that suggests nothing so much as stupefied Fellini. Given the cast, the movie is haunted by the ghost of the European art film. Perhaps reflecting Altman's anxiety over shooting in Europe, two key American characters, Julia Roberts and Tim Robbins, spend virtually the entire movie in a hotel room.

"This could be absolutely brilliant or it could be absolute trash," *Premiere's* reporter overheard Altman tell his cast, comforting them with the thought that, in any case, "it doesn't make any difference, because the audience has no taste." In that, I fear, we are not alone. Altman is the reigning master of actor humiliation. The players here are so bizarrely dressed (or undressed), so badly lit, and so uniformly buffaloes it seems cruel to single out any particular performance—although Kim Basinger works double time as the broadly parodic TV reporter who wanders tirelessly through the movie bugging the principals and butchering her high-school French.

Like the obnoxious BBC corre-

spondent Geraldine Chaplin played in *Nashville*, Basinger is the butt of Altman's jokes as well as the director's surrogate—never more so than in the final sequence when she finally drops her cast-iron poise and confesses that she doesn't know what this "bullshit" is all about. By then, of course, the movie has built up to a finale that effectively recasts the entire movie as an updated version of "The Emperor's New Clothes."