

## Document Citation

Title	<b>Altman's goin' to Kansas City</b>
Author(s)	Judy Brennan
Source	<i>Los Angeles Times</i>
Date	1995 Mar 05
Type	article
Language	English
Pagination	Calendar, pp. 18, 24
No. of Pages	2
Subjects	Altman, Robert (1925), Kansas City, Missouri, United States
Film Subjects	Kansas City, Altman, Robert, 1996

**FILM CLIPS**  
**HOMECOMING**

# Altman's Goin' to Kansas City

**By Judy Brennan**

**D**irector Robert Altman appears to be in the midst of a turnabout.

After his Paris-based "Ready to Wear" left him practically threadbare at the U.S. box office, he's returned to his hometown for the setting of his next film, "Kansas City."

Altman's last three films—"Ready to Wear," "Short Cuts" and "The Player"—had the domestic muscle of a Miramax, New Line Cinema or New Line's sister company, Fine Line Features, behind them. This time, he's tapped France's Ciby 2000 to finance his \$21-million, Prohibition-era gangster movie; there is no domestic distributor yet.

Both Miramax and New Line are apparently wary of Altman's bankability and say that while both haven't completely counted out Altman's newest effort, they want to wait and see what he has up his sleeve—in the way of cast and script—before they commit to distribution.

"'Ready to Wear' was not a pretty experience for us," says one Miramax source. "We may wait this one out." To date, the \$18-million "Ready to Wear" has grossed only \$12 million in

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JOYCE RUDOLPH

**BACKING:** Robert Altman's latest will be French-financed.



# Altman

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U.S. box office, but Ciby executives and Altman representatives are quick to defend potential success overseas. The film, about Paris' ready-to-wear fashion show, has just begun to open in European markets, where it is expected to generate more interest.

Altman was not available for an interview about "Kansas City," but a remark he made to *The Times* in a 1992 interview about "The Player" seems germane today: "I know how this works. Suddenly, I'm hot.

But I'll pay for it next time. This time you're the darling; next time you're the goat."

Those in the Altman camp say that, for once, he's in the ideal position with "Kansas City"—to have a film completely financed with foreign money and not to have to hustle U.S. distributors for production money with only the seed of an idea or a script.

"Bob is a great filmmaker," says Wendy Palmer, head of Ciby's sales. "He's a maverick in this business. We have no problem standing behind him. This is a wonderful project. It's all about Altman on love."

The film, which will be written by Altman and Frank Barhydt and reportedly will begin filming next month, is set in Kansas City in the 1930s, at a time when the city was a hotbed of gangsters, eclipsed only by Chicago. But in Kansas City, the mobsters who ruled were black, and Altman hopes one of the key roles in the film will be played by Harry Belafonte.

While the gangster world is the film's backdrop, the story focuses on the relationship with two women, who Altman hopes will be played by Jennifer Jason Leigh and Kim Basinger. Gangsters run by a mob boss kidnap the husband of one of the women, a working-class girl. She comes up with an idea to kidnap the governor's wife and swap her for her husband.

Altman is currently in negotiation with all three stars, and Ciby has been using their names in its pitch to overseas and U.S. distributors at the American Film Market in Santa Monica, hoping to lure them into buying rights for their respective territories.

Ciby's involvement is particularly interesting on any risky venture, since it is the company that abandoned U.S. film production in 1992 after the failure of David Lynch's "Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me," which it had bankrolled.

But Ciby's Palmer says it is unfair to judge the company's performance by that one incident. She notes that Ciby also financed "The Piano" and the upcoming "Muriel's Wedding," and is currently producing another Jennifer Jason Leigh picture, "Georgia."

"We believe this is one film that has breakthrough potential," says Palmer, noting that the film is a labor of love for Altman, who grew up in Kansas City.

Even AMC Entertainment, which is headquartered there, has expressed an interest in cross-promoting the film because of its title alone.

"Maybe, just maybe," says one AMC executive, "we'll get lucky and have a 'Nashville' on our hands." □