

Document Citation

Title	Satire undercut by meanness
Author(s)	Joy Gould Boyum
Source	<i>Publisher name not available</i>
Date	
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	A wedding, Altman, Robert, 1978

Satire Undercut by Meanness

By JOY GOULD BOYUM

Wherever the setting—in a Mobile Army Surgical Hospital, in Buffalo Bill's Wild West or at Nashville's Grand Ole Opry—life in a Robert Altman movie often has the feeling of a three-ring circus. Everything seems to be happening at once, with all the separate events related one to the other, not in any traditional cause-and-effect manner but simply as part of a total experience. The characters who participate in the action tend, as in a circus, to be clowns and curiosities—people who make us laugh by their incongruous personalities, their idiosyncratic behavior and their frequently eccentric appearance.

Circuses are fun and so, frequently, are Robert Altman's movies ("M*A*S*H,"

On Film

"A Wedding"

"Buffalo Bill and the Indians," "Nashville"). Their vitality is invigorating and their detailed images and crowded soundtracks are filled with the possibility of humorous discovery. Altman's loose and easy structures come across as fresh and innovative. Perhaps most important of all, the films' freakish humor tends not only to have satirical overtones but creates an aura of absurdity that seems somehow congenial to the sensibility of our age.

No wonder that Altman—if just a bit too offbeat to have found success with the general public—has been awarded special stature by many film aficionados and that his most recent film, "A Wedding," has been selected by the august New York Film Festival to inaugurate its 16th season tonight at Lincoln Center.

"A Wedding" is a comic vision of an expensive, catered affair related in the distinctive Altman manner: It tells a story that is no story at all, is populated with bizarre types and zany incidents and is rich in the elements that typically make for Altman's appeal. And it has the additional attraction of a cast of glittering celebrities—among them Lillian Gish, Vittorio Gassman, Nina Van Pallandt, Dina Merrill, Carol Burnett, Mia Farrow, Lauren Hutton, Howard Duff and an Altman regular, Geraldine Chaplin.

Unfortunately, "A Wedding" is rife with the director's characteristic failings. The problem with Altman is that, as in this case, his unorthodox form frequently lapses into mere formlessness and his jam-packed imagery results in excess and incoherence, while his penchant for the freakish ends up seeming strained, artificial and pointless.

Take Altman's oblique method of establishing character and event. In "A Wedding," this technique leaves us for a good half of the film simply trying to sort out identities and relationships. While some of this mystery would seem to have a point (we are clearly meant to wonder whether the groom's father, an Italian who has married into a wealthy, old American family, is actually a Mafia chieftain or simply an ex-waiter), for the most part it seems little more than sloppiness. And the confusion has the unfortunate effect of totally distancing us from the characters, making it impossible for us to feel for them.

Moreover, so extensive and excessive is their nuttiness that we can't even believe in them. Each of these families has not merely one black sheep among its members but a complete flock.

On the bride's middle-class, middle-American side is a nymphomaniacal sister, an epileptic brother, a father with incestuous yearnings and a mother with adulterous ones. The groom's mother is a drug addict, his uncle is a philanderer, one aunt is an officious snob, another is having an affair with the butler and a great aunt evidently has proletarian leanings. On top of this all, his grandmother has chosen to die the morning of the wedding, his family doctor is an alcoholic and one of his ushers is gay, while the staff attending his wedding is similarly populated with lesbians, drunks and neurotics.

This is not to say that we don't find something somewhere in all of this craziness that strikes us as funny. It's rather that a world where everyone is a freak is such an implausible one that it is unable to supply the makings for the satire Altman so evidently intends to fashion. And not only is Altman's satirical vision undercut by all this excess, but so too in the end is much of the humor itself. Throughout, Altman seems so anxious for a joke that he throws consistency to the winds (would the socially conscious aunt really offer up a nude portrait of the bride as a wedding present?) or stoops both to the hopelessly stereotypical (military school homosexuality, for example).

But perhaps most off-putting here is the all-inclusive downgrading, the almost indiscriminate ridicule, the film's lack, if you will, of human sympathy. We've sensed a similar mean streak in Altman before.

Just think of how he lingered on the humiliation of Hotlips in "M*A*S*H" or on the degrading striptease of the tone-deaf waitress in "Nashville." Here, despite the camouflage created by the nutty humor, such sourness seems to prevail, unrelieved by an positive vision, point or character. (The one potentially attractive person, the grandmother, dies before doing much good.) And the negativism seems all the more unpleasant in that the object of Altman's attack in "A Wedding"—that is, the wedding itself—seems so obvious, so petty, so unworthy a target for his comic energies.

But then again, to say all this may just be to take Altman and his circus world too seriously—something which critics, buffs and festivals may have been doing all along.