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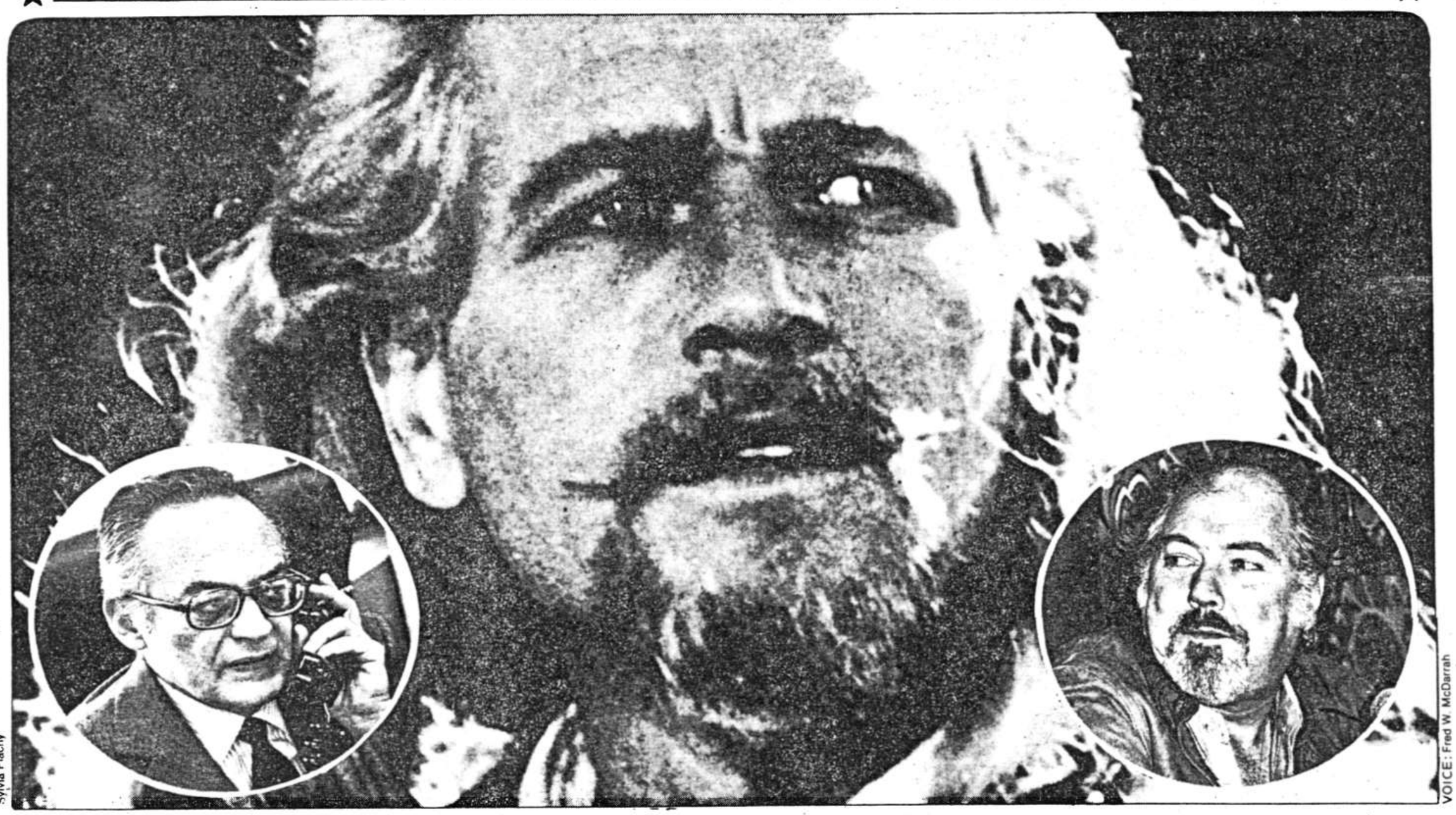
Bottom Line Buffalos Altman



"What exactly did De Laurentiis (l.) have in mind when he signed Altman (r.) for 'Buffalo Bill'? A Paul Newman shoot-em-up for European markets?"

BY ANDREW SARRIS

Robert Altman was not in the best of spirits on that sweltering summer's day when I visited him in his rambling Chateau Marmont-like apartment in the upper reaches of Delmonico's on Park Avenue. It was the next-to-last Tuesday in June, and on Thursday his latest film, **"BUFFALO BILL AND THE INDIANS, OR SITTING BULL'S HISTORY LESSON,"** was set to open here, there, and everywhere. It would normally be a time of nervous anticipation, but the cat had already been let out of the bag that morning by the New York Times in a story with the depressing head: "De Laurentiis Dismisses Altman From 'Ragtime.' " So there was Altman, walking around New York all day with egg on his face, and there I was, presumably trying to find out what it felt like to walk around all day with egg on one's face. Under the circumstances, Altman seemed to be behaving about as well as his hero did in "McCabe and Mrs. Miller," which, if you recall, is very well indeed. I have selected my analogy carefully because I sense that there is something both heroic and grotesque in the Altman-De Laurentiis contretemps.

Some key excerpts from the unsigned Times story may be useful at this point as a frame of reference: "The award-winning director said last night that he was dismissed by Dino De Laurentiis, producer of "Ragtime," three weeks ago, because of differences of opinion, not about 'Ragtime' but about how much should be cut out of 'Buffalo Bill and the Indians.'

" 'He [Mr. De Laurentiis] was disappointed in "Buffalo Bill" and requested that I cut the film rather drastically,' Mr. Altman said. 'I did my best to accommodate him, but in the end it's my movie and I had to put it out the way my conscience dictates.' . . . Mr. Altman had been working on 'Ragtime' for more than a year. Two weeks ago Mr. Doctorow [author of 'Ragtime'] flew to California in an attempt to persuade Mr. De Laurentiis to restore the director to his assignment, but failed.

" 'Mr. De Laurentiis owns the property outright,' said the director, 'and he has every right to act on it as he wishes. I'm naturally disappointed. I feel like Adlai Stevenson—it hurts too much to laugh and I'm too old to cry. It's not the artists who are disagreeing, it's money.'

"Mr. De Laurentiis was reported to be in New York yesterday, but could not be reached for comment. The name of Milos Forman was being rumored as a possible successor to Mr. Altman.

"A source close to Mr. Altman remarked yesterday that Mr. De Laurentiis 'likes to keep a tight control over his properties, which is not the way Mr. Altman works."

'There had been rumors for months that all was not well with the various Altman projects, but I felt reluctant to put these rumors into print for fear of bringing them to fruition.'

Actually, there had been rumors for months that all was not well with the various Altman projects, and I had mentioned these rumors at a Voice editorial conference, but when I was pressed to follow up the story, I felt a curious reluctance to put these rumors into print for fear of bringing them to final fruition. The superstitious auteurist critic in me had prevailed over the scoop-happy reporter. Perhaps I was too old to be scoop-happy. Perhaps Altman seemed to be following too closely on the bedeviled footsteps of such past eccentric individualists as Griffith, Ingram, von Stroheim, Keaton, von Sternberg, and Welles. Yet when I saw the Times story, the atavistic newspaperman in me began to worry that I had somehow let The Voice down by not stopping the presses with my suspicions. I therefore asked Altman point-blank who had broken the story to the Times, since the timing (on the eve of the opening of "Buffalo Bill") was, to say the least, unfortunate.

The lid started to come off, Altman explained, when Milos Forman called up Lois Smith (Altman's agent) to check out a job offer he had received from Dino De Laurentiis. Forman said that he would of course step aside if there were any chance at all that Altman would direct "Ragtime." Lois Smith then passed on this startling conversation with Forman to Newsweek's Jack Kroll, who actually broke the story in his Newsweek review of "Buffalo Bill." (Thus, unbeknownst to me, the Times, too, had been scooped on the "Ragtime" caper.) What did it all mean? Unfortunately, I have never met Dino De Laurentiis, and I have no idea what has been on his mind these many months, at the end of which period Robert Altman has found himself buffaloed on the bottom line.

In disputes of this kind, the director is generally considered innocent until proven guilty, and the producer is generally considered guilty until proven innocent. For the auteurist critic, however, the director is right even when he is wrong, which is to say that it is regarded as the financier's function to allow the artist to make mistakes without fear of reprisals. What has been particularly bizarre about the Altman-De Laurentiis encounter is that while Altman has been laboring to patch up an avant-garde tapestry of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, De Laurentiis has been hanging around the World Trade Center with a rubber dummy of King Kong. How then could the absurdist Altman have ever joined forces with the ridiculous De Laurentiis? To put it another way: How is it that with the last of the old Hollywood moguls dying away we have found it necessary to import a new mogul from Italy? And what exactly did De Laurentiis have in mind when he signed Altman for "Buffalo Bill?" A Paul Newman shoot-'em-up for the European action markets? Did De Laurentiis ever read the play "Indians" by Arthur Kopit, the play on which "Buffalo Bill" was supposedly based? For that matter, has De Laurentiis read "Ragtime," or has he simply noted the novel's sale figure? Is his switch to Forman merely a mogul's throw of the directorial dice or, rather, a crass calculation of the difference in grosses between "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" and "Nashville"?

In trying to fit together the pieces of this puzzle, I am handicapped somewhat by the fact that it is still too early to tell how "Buffalo Bill" will do at the box office. Thus far, the reviews have tended to be thoughtful, sympathetic, but not at all ecstatic. Will Middle America come rushing in to see Buffalo Bill treated as a buffoon in this Bicentennial Year? Altman, for one, thinks they will. Certainly, stranger things have happened, but I wouldn't bet on it.

Something has gone wrong with "Buffalo Bill," and yet Altman gone wrong is still more interesting than most directors gone right. His style seems to be embedded in his bones. His resistance to routine is not explosive like Peckinpah's, nor reclusive like Kubrick's, nor devious like Lester's, but curiously convivial and self-conscious, almost like Renoir's. In person, Altman is rounded, quizzical, avuncular. His eyebrows seem perpetually poised to assume an ironic position, but he listens intently. Considered by many critics to be the quintessential director of the '70s, he has been working in show biz since the '40s. Hence, he was already middle-aged when he became an "overnight" sensation with M*A*S*H in 1970. Having served a long apprenticeship with industrial documentaries in his hometown of Kansas City, Missouri, he wrote, produced, and directed his first feature, "The Delinquents," in 1955. I have never seen this movie, and not much seems to have been written about it. Altman himself has never made any special claims for it. In 1957 he collaborated with George W. George on "The James Dean Story," a posthumous tribute to the legendary young actor. Again, there was not much feedback for Altman. From 1957 to 1963 he wrote, produced and/or directed numerous episodes for such television shows as "Alfred Hitchcock Presents," "The Roaring '20s," "Bonanza," "Bus Stop," "Combat," "Whirlybirds," and "The Kraft Theatre." He was still just a name in the crowd, but he had become a mature craftsman. The dissonance and disenchantment were to come later, along with the overcompensating tendency to overload the medium with sound and imagery, as if reality were bursting in on conventional drama.

In 1967 he directed "Countdown" with James Caan and Robert Duvall, but he was discharged by Warners, and the film was edited without his supervision. Altman has always disavowed "Countdown" because the right of final cut was taken away from him. Nonetheless, "Countdown," which has appeared many times on television over the years, can be considered the first creditable Altman feature film. Seen today, it seems in retrospect to have been considerably ahead of its time. Caan and Duvall as two friends and rivals on a moon shot are subtly outside the system. But they are not treated as emotional zombies in the manner of Keir Dullea and Gary Lockwood in Kubrick's "2001" a few years later. Altman's characters are suspended between the yin and the yang of loneliness and camaraderie, holding in their feelings in one scene, and pouring them out the next. And if Kubrick anticipated the utter boredom of the actual moon shots, Altman anticipated the childlike vulnerability of the men in their space suits. Altman has claimed that he was fired by Warners for having his actors create problems in the editing room with their overlapping dialogue. This complaint was leveled at Orson Welles back in the early '40s, and at the more creative directors in the early talkies a decade or more before Welles. Anyway, Altman credits his conflict with Warners over "Countdown" with the eventual development of the eight-track sound system used in "California Split," "Nashville," and "Buffalo Bill." Altman did not get to direct another feature until 1969 with "That Cold Day in the Park," a strangely neglected and underrated study of spinsterish repression and release in British-oriented Vancouver. It was part of Altman's bad luck that Oscar-winning Sandy Dennis had become a critically unfashionable actress by the time she began to do her best acting in films like "That Cold Day in the Park," "Up the Down Staircase," and "Thank You All Very Much." In "That Cold Day in the Park" and, later, in perhaps his most poignant film, "McCabe and Mrs. Miller," Altman employed Canadian exteriors so eloquently that some critics began to regard him incorrectly as a Canadian director. More important, from "That Cold Day in the Park" on Altman moved to the forefront of the post-studio directors of the '70s. He became both an explorer and a creator of New Places on the screen. Indeed, Place is more vivid than Face in his output for the '70s: "M*A*S*H" (1970), "Brewster McCloud" (1971), "McCabe and Mrs. Miller" and "Images" (1972), "The Long Good-bye" (1973), "Thieves Like Us" (1974), "California Split" (1974), "Nashville" (1975), and "Buffalo Bill" (1976).

Still, it may be significant that he spent the first quarter-century of his career out in the wilderness as a small-time entrepreneur in the entertainment business. By the time he could come out of the cold to express himself personally, he was too old to compromise. There was no more room for maneuver. The best years of his life had been spent in anonymous drudgery and in endless wheeling without dealing. All that was left was the long twilight of inventive intransigence.

Altman has enjoyed only one massive commercial success in his life, and that, of course, was M*A*S*H. Legend has it that the project was turned down by 15 other directors before producer Ingo Preminger hired Altman. The second-unit shooting style, without any sitcom reaction shots of the principals, is certainly Altman's very creative modification of a dangerously facile we-hipsters versus them-squares script by Ring Lardner, Jr. Felicitous touches abound, but, on the whole, M*A*S*H was a happy fluke in Altman's career, the means rather than the end of his surviving through the '70s. Indeed, Altman did not even direct the over-farcical football sequences. In this corner, Altman's masterpieces are "Nashville" and "McCabe and Mrs. Miller." More than most, I have approved of Altman's forays into the fantastic with "Brewster McCloud" and "Images" (though on the latter I may have been swayed by the exquisite sensibility and sensuality of Susannah York). "Thieves Like Us" and "California Split" impressed me only intermittently. Not so surprisingly, my biggest problem with Altman has arisen with his antigenre derision in "The Long Good-bye" and "Buffalo Bill." I am not saying that Altman or any modern filmmaker should revere genre or even narrative. One may bypass it, but it is futile and unseemly to ridicule it. At times Altman evokes late Bergman's skepticism toward all forms of dramatic discourse, but in "Buffalo Bill," particularly, Altman has not devised an adequate substitute for the dramatic discourse. The result is that the grin of the Cheshire cat has frozen into a fashionable grimace of perpetual disenchantment.

This was not my first reaction to "Buffalo Bill" at the time I saw some of the footage in the spring in Altman's studio near Wilshire Boulevard. I recall that I observed that "Buffalo Bill" looked and sounded like Altman's "Lola Montes." I did not intend my remark as a malediction. "Lola Montes," despite its being one of my favorite films, destroyed the careers of both its director, Max Ophuls, who died not long after, and its star, Martine Carol. There is no reason thus far to believe that "Buffalo Bill" will be comparably fatal to Altman's career. Still, I cannot join in a crusade for "Buffalo Bill" as I would have for "Lola Montes." It is not because "Buffalo Bill" is at all inferior to the current run of releases. Quite the contrary. Altman's formal achievement positively towers over most of its competition. What I find lacking in "Buffalo Bill" is any genuine affection for its subject. I disagreed with many detractors of "Nashville" when they charged Altman with condescension and contempt toward his subject, even though I did not buy the assassination and its attendant weltschmerz. And even after the assassination, Barbara Harris's climactic musical rendition of consolation and communion was genuinely electrifying on its own terms. Unfortunately, nothing in Altman's Wild West show is even moderately exciting or enthralling.

Altman told me that he and Alan Rudolph had completed the script for "Buffalo Bill" before they had even glanced at the text of Arthur Kopit's play "Indians." I can believe it. There is very little connection between the play and the movie, but though I never liked the play very much as thesis theatre, I do recall that it had more interesting details about the show itself, particularly Raul Julia's Mad Russian Duke in the act of killing an Indian. Stacy Keach's Buffalo Bill, moreover, was treated more sympathetically than Paul Newman's. Whereas the play was harder on White America for its racist history, the movie is harder on White Show Biz for its fraudulent storytelling. No mercy here for the lies of art. Newman himself completely dissociates himself from Buffalo Bill in an ultra-Brechtian manner, and he somehow seems too short for a role previously incarnated on the screen by Joel McCrea in "Buffalo Bill" and Louis Calhern in "Annie Get Your Gun." I have no idea how tall the real Buffalo Bill happened to be, but it might have been wiser for Altman to have tried using an establishment figure like Charlton Heston for Buffalo Bill to create more ambiguity in the legend. As it is, Altman's relentlessly roving camera overcomments on the spectacle from such a cold distance that one wonders why anyone ever attended these Wild West Shows. The fault is more in the conception than in the execution. I feel that Altman did what he set out to do. Where he may have miscalculated was with his audience, not politically, since it is always open season these days on America's treatment of the Indians, but emotionally, since audiences around the world are still more interested in the plight of real Indians than in the show-biz image of the Redskin.

Yet though I disapprove of "Buffalo Bill," I thoroughly respect and even grudgingly admire it for its artistic integrity. Within its stylized framework Joel Grey, Geraldine Chaplin, Will Sampson, Frank Kaquitts, Robert Doqui, Harvey Keitel, Mike Kaplan, Kevin McCarthy, and even Paul Newman and Burt Lancaster share many moments of strikingly absurdist acuteness. The ugliness of the film's palette of dull reds, browns, and yellows with a minimum of subdued blues and virtually no greens is undoubtedly part of Altman's strategy of visual alienation, and the mockingly martial music is also an echo of Altman at his most disenchanted. This is certainly one time when the moviegoing public can confound the smugness of the bottom-line boys by flocking to a personal film written off in advance. I urge all my readers to see "Buffalo Bill," if only as a gesture of personal defiance, though normally I consider that I am doing well as a box-office influence when I manage to keep a Claude Chabrol film at the Quad and the Juliet for an extra week or so. That is why we critics should not get too personally involved even with filmmakers we admire. For one thing, it clouds our judgment. For another, we are neither individually nor collectively as powerful as we sometimes think we are. For his part, Altman was almost as depressed by the enormous commercial success of "Midway" as he was by his loss of "Ragtime." It is now certain that "Midway" will outgross "Nashville," despite the worst critical notices that I can remember. And this, I think, has been the root of Altman's problem. With all the critical approbation at its command, "Nashville" was able to garner only seven or eight million dollars in the domestic market. This was not enough for Paramount to make a profit as a distributor, although Altman and ABC made profits as producers. ("Nashville," incidentally, is being rereleased in time for Jimmy Carter's run for the Presidency, a run which "Nashville," in a sense, predicted.) So for a time, "Breakfast of Champions" seemed to be in jeopardy as an Altman project for Paramount, but now the project has simply been postponed until 1977. In the immediate future, Altman will be working on an original script entitled "Three Women" with Sissy Spacek and Shelley Duvall and a dash of schizophrenic arithmetic. Altman literally dreamed the story in his sleep, and wrote down the fragments when he woke up. He took his idea to Fox, and a production was set up very quickly. After "Three Women" will come "Breakfast of Champions." The main thing is to keep working in the hope that lightning will strike. And Altman has been working hard for more than 30 years.

I had heard that Louise Fletcher was originally cast for the Lily Tomlin part in "Nashville." Not only had she been cast for the part, Altman said, but the part had been inspired by her own life as the daughter of deaf-mute parents. Lily Tomlin, if you recall, plays the mother of two deaf-mute children. Louise Fletcher won an Oscar for a role in "Cuckoo's Nest" turned down by many other actresses. Lily Tomlin was nominated for an Oscar for the role denied Louise Fletcher. And the shadow of Milos Forman now lurks over "Ragtime" because of the huge grosses of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest," due in part to the controlled subtlety of Louise Fletcher's performance. Ironies within ironies. And Robert Altman knows the luck of the draw as well as anyone. □

"Buffalo Bill," a film filled with visual alienation and moments of absurdist acuteness