

Robert Altman's mood swing

David Walsh Reviews *Cookie's Fortune*

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Cookie's Fortune, directed by Robert Altman, written by Anne Rapp

The films of Robert Altman that I like best were those he made in the 1970s: *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), *The Long Goodbye* (1973), *California Split* (1974), *Thieves Like Us* (1974), *Nashville* (1975) and *Three Women* (1977). These were emotionally extravagant and socially critical films, which combined relaxed and apparently casual story-telling with a surprisingly rigorous aestheticism. I don't know of a superior body of American films made in that decade.

Altman, born in Kansas City in 1925, "disappeared" from Hollywood at the beginning of the 1980s, his semi-anarchism having fallen out of favor with the powers-that-be (after several commercial failures) and, I suspect, the film world having fallen out of favor with him. He worked primarily in theater and television for a number of years. He reemerged with *The Player* in 1992, *Short Cuts* (1993), *Prêt-à-Porter* (1994) and *Kansas City* (1996).

Altman is an enormously talented artist. He has an intelligence and a feeling for human difficulty that are rare in this day and age. One knows that he is not primarily concerned with career, with money, with status. His works possess seriousness and beauty. Altman's reputation for integrity has been earned through a career of consistently working against the grain. Performers seem eager to work with him.

Cookie's Fortune, his newest film, takes place in the former cotton town--and home to 13 Confederate generals--of Holly Springs in northern Mississippi. "Cookie" Orcutt, an elderly widow, lonely and tired of life, takes a gun and shoots herself, but when her status-conscious niece Camille destroys the suicide note, suspicion falls on a middle-aged black man, Willis Richland. In the course of the subsequent "murder" investigation some surprising facts emerge.

The film has genuine virtues. It is likable and amusing. Charles S. Dutton, as Willis, confirms his status as one of the best actors presently at work. Patricia Neal and Liv Tyler give winning performances, as the old lady and her great-niece, respectively.

In her first feature script Anne Rapp, a veteran of the film industry and a native Southerner, has dealt in a humane manner, by and large, with contemporary life. I doubt that *Cookie's Fortune* is consciously meant as a belated response to Billy Wilder's *Fortune Cookie* (1966), a relatively misanthropic work, but the title is suggestive.

Altman's film is commendable in its unfashionable insistence on the essential insignificance of race. It turns out everyone is related to everyone else, and "black" and "white" are meaningless terms. Willis's "Passion" and "Resurrection" take place over the Easter weekend, suggesting that America's salvation is an issue here. (Camille is staging a version of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*, with her pliant sister Cora in the leading role.)

Not everything is convincing. Camille and Cora are not clearly defined roles. Glenn Close and Julianne Moore have to do too much to try to make sense of them. The result is simply strained. How malevolent is the empty-headed Camille? In such a "humanist" work her fate stands out as rather brutal. Does she truly deserve it? The film exhibits, at the last moment, an unexpectedly nasty streak.

Altman and Rapp present a sympathetic portrait of the contemporary South and its inhabitants, also an unfashionable and creditable undertaking. But was it necessary to create such an idyll, complete with a large assortment of genial Mississippi policemen? At a certain point, this begins to grate.

More generally, what is Altman's attitude toward his fellow creatures? He has always veered between

genuine sensitivity and sneering condescension. This opposition has now assumed alarming proportions. His last film, *Kansas City*, adopted an extremely hostile attitude toward its unfortunate protagonists. In that work America was largely peopled by dolts, whores and thugs. *Cookie's Fortune* gives us a much sunnier Altman. Too sunny. Here everyone has his or her quirks or momentary lapses, but virtually no one's essential goodness is questioned.

What is one to make of this mood swing? I don't believe it can be attributed to a lack of sincerity or to cynicism, although there may be a dose of the latter. (Age and years of battling the philistines have also no doubt taken their toll.) I suspect that the vast changes the world has undergone over the past decade or two have more to do with it; changes, including those in the temperament of entire social layers, that are not widely understood.

My own sense is that Altman felt secure in his footing 20 years ago, but does not today. A master improviser, an inveterate gambler, he was never averse to taking shots in the dark within a particular film. Now that has become generalized. From film to film, his approaches vary radically. One, apparently, is as good as another. There is nothing wrong in principle with this, but the overall result is that each individual approach seems rather arbitrary and lacks depth and commitment.

Once someone capable of extraordinary artistic success and equally spectacular failure, Altman has become a director from whom one expects minor triumphs and minor defeats. *Kansas City* was a small setback, *Cookie's Fortune* a small victory. One consoles oneself with this thought: Altman very likely has extraordinary work left in him.



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