Life is Full of Brain Dead Fools and Emotional Cripples and Then You Die

Stunt Casting and Narrative Gimmickry in Robert Altman's Short Cuts

BY MICHAEL BACKUS

From the frankly beautiful opening shot of helicopters in staggered formation low over the city of Los Angeles, the agents of a man-made disaster (med-fly spraying) to the natural disaster earthquake (conveniently located at the end of the film), Robert Altman's *Short Cuts* (1993), adapted from nine Raymond Carver short stories (plus one poem and one wholly invented storyline), is a convoluted jumble of stunt casting, gimmick connections between storylines, disinterested adaptation of the source material, casual misanthropy and misogyny, along with some startling moments of genuine originality.

Released just one year after *The Player*, with its parade of wink-wink cameos, the casting of which at least contained some organic logic, *Short Cuts* has the same feeling of a series of actor walk-ons, except it's meant to be a realistic depiction of a group of Los Angelinos in various states of emotional distress, almost all of it revolving around couples. But whether it is hubris, lack of interest, or the product of the kind of ego-boost casting Woody Allen has been trafficking in for two decades ("Look who wants to work with me!"), Altman's casting here seems almost perversely arbitrary, as if he tossed a bunch of names against a wall and paired up those who stuck closest to each other. Only the storylines involving the couples Andie MacDowell/Bruce Davison and Anne Archer/ Fred Ward — significantly those that stick closest to Carver's originals — manage to create an organic sense of real lives being lived.

What's left is mostly a buffoonish freak show. We get Tim Robbins's absurdly blustering cop, an SNL performance that often veers into the unintentionally revealing — like watching a blowhard play a blowhard — paired with Madeline Stowe's bemused earth mother wife. They exist in two different movies, one a farce (crimped and unpleasant as Robbins scenes are) and the other, a tale of yuppie angst. Though Stowe and Robbins are clearly identified as lower middle class with their brood of children and modest home, it is a measure of Altman's disinterest in his characters that Stowe and her sister Julianne Moore seem much more the children of artists: sensitive, strangely centered about their respective spouses' shortcomings, sexually liberated, in deeds if not in attitude.

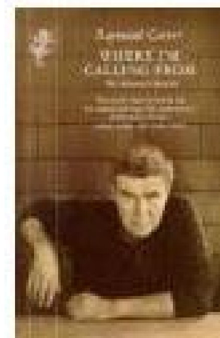
We’re also treated to yet another “daring” 90s Jennifer Jason Leigh performance, dragging her child around as she phone fucks some lowlife on the other end, too dang blame tired of her existence to even notice husband Chris Penn, who appears to have just realized his wife is a phone slut, doing the slow psycho burn. Or Robert Downey (as Penn’s very unlikely best friend) playing yet another version of himself paired with working class hippie chick Lily Taylor, with not a moment of chemistry between them. Downey is a movie makeup artist student, the kind of gimmick job one of the writers should have resisted since it plays overly precious and connects with nothing else in the film.

Besides the mismatched couples, Altman has also peppered his movie with a series of non-actor appearances, mostly people with cultural hipster cred, which only further intensifies the sense that the film is an elaborate vanity project where Altman got together a group of people he wanted to hang with and built a film around them. So we’re treated to Buck Henry doing his comedy shtick and Huey Lewis’s unconvincing turn as a macho fisherman. Lyle Lovett as the baker in a pivotal role in one of the central storylines of the film is so bad, he can’t even stand convincingly on screen, much less deliver lines. And slotted into the Tom Waits spot in the film is ... Tom Waits, looking and sounding just like the real thing, mumbling to the floor and telling wife Lily Tomlin “You’re the one chipping away at the mansion of our love, not me.”

And when he's not casting celebrities to play real people, he's casting against type. Lori Singer's odd de-sexualized idiot savant cellist, prone to sweaty basketball games in the driveway with the local boys, morose sessions spent bent over her cello, naked floats in the pool, and self-mutilation, is not capable of even a single convincing moment on screen, even with all that tortured emoting.

The episodic nature of the film and the often facile and superficial connections between the various storylines may be inevitable when adapting a grouping of short stories, but they do raise an obvious question. Why adapt Carver in the first place? If you're going to gut the stories for essentially everything but character names and snippets of plot, if you're going to create not a world where believable characters exist in a realistic setting, but an LA facsimile where mis-cast stars parade grotesquely through a series of condescendingly conceived "regular people" vignettes, is there a reason beyond financial calculation? Beyond the spectre of iconoclastic film director Robert Altman adapting the working-class Chekhov?

Altman vs. Carver



It's impossible to discuss Altman's adaptation here without considering the ramifications of moving the stories from the Pacific Northwest to Los Angeles. In the introduction to the stories in the Criterion Collection set, Altman pointedly makes a distinction between his suburban LA setting and the more glamorous environs of Beverly Hills, Malibu, etc, saying his suburbs are Carver country as much as anywhere. Except of course they're not. Landscape shapes people. Maybe not as much as it did 100 years ago before the unifying collective experiences of radio and television, yet there's a fundamental emotional difference between living in sunny Los Angeles and gloomy Oregon. And if there's a fundamental difference, doesn't it follow that the emotional dynamics between characters and within individual characters are also different? Different to the point where it calls into question Altman's judgement in deciding to switch locations? In the same introduction, Altman writes that he needed a location where he could move his characters around and have them easily interact with each other, an explanation that's more than a little disingenuous since we assume the Northwest has plenty of locations that fit this criteria.

Carver's characters generally exist in a world that has a surface calmness to it, an evenness they work hard to maintain. It's not just in his landscape but in his spare use of language, there's a matter of factness to even the most dramatic epiphanies that seems particularly ill-suited to Altman's sunny, hyper-busy Los Angeles with its endless streams of cars, constant back and forth interactions, and histrionic displays of emotion. Even when their lives begin spinning out of control, Carver's characters struggle to keep things even-keeled, to maintain an equilibrium. By the end of the story "So Much Water So Close To Home," (Fred Ward and Anne Archer as husband and wife), Archer's wife character is so existentially lost, she comes to seem battered, the power of this ending coming from the pain of seeing this once proud woman fawn and

flinch, desperate to maintain the surface status quo with her husband. She's a shell of what she was precisely because of her husband's actions, and her place as the wife within that context, have so completely obliterated her sense of self, she has no clue who she is supposed to be or what she should do.

Altman does a fair job with the first half of this story, though he spends long pointless minutes with Ward and his friends Huey Lewis and Buck Henry fishing in the wilderness, something the story only alludes to because it is not the point. Included here is an ugly image that seems particularly offensive in its execution; Lewis standing on a rock, dick in hand, pisses on the naked corpse of woman floating face up in the water, the urine stream pointedly landing on the woman's crotch. But once Ward returns to his life and tells Archer what he and his friends did — they tied up the body so it wouldn't float away and continued fishing around it for two days — the film and the story run side by side for a time. Archer is upset, Ward gets angry and defensive because everyone, his wife included, refuses to understand that it didn't matter at that point whether they returned to civilization or kept fishing. She was already dead. But in the end, the world Altman has created here is simply ill-suited to the subtlety of Carver's ending and he side-steps it completely, inventing a long elaborate scene where they get together with Matthew Modine and Julianne Moore and laugh and flirt with each other and put on clown makeup. It's a lot of noise but comes to nothing of interest.

The point here is not necessarily that Altman has no interest in the meanings of Carver's work, though clearly I believe that's the case, but that stories like "So Much Water So Close to Home" or "Neighbors" (Downey/Taylor) or "Will You Please Be Quiet Please? " (Modine/Moore) are better suited to a contemplative landscape, a world where it's possible to go years on end and never even realize there is a problem. Altman's Los Angeles may be a lot of things and certainly his characters touch the edges of despair, but their lives are so active, so full of darting back and forth through a relentlessly sunny landscape, their interactions so full of huge bouts of dramatic emoting, it's impossible to imagine a quiet moment when a character might be able to think long enough to figure anything out.

Altman's reworking of this theme often runs to the ludicrously literal

And if Carver's work is often about the tenuous connections between people, the ways we say something or do something (or don't) and it changes forever how someone feels about us or how we feel about them, Altman's reworking of this theme often runs to the ludicrously literal. It's as much about the clever (and not so) ways he weaves the characters in and out, there's rarely a deeper, organic reason for the characters to be interacting. Anne Archer in full clown outfit enters Lyle Lovett's bakery, squeezing past Andie MacDowell who just ordered a birthday cake for her son and never really noticing Peter Gallagher there to pick up a cake for his ex-wife Francis McDormand. Or Archer getting pulled over by Robbins's motorcycle cop who hits on her, later prompting a curious exchange with his wife Stowe who berates him about the slip of paper containing Archer's phone number, this following scene after tiresome scene

where she calmly assimilates his insane lies about his affair with McDormand. Or Modine being the doctor treating MacDowell/Davison's child. Or Lori Singer and Annie Ross living next to MacDowell/Davison and sharing Penn as their pool cleaner. Or ...

No serious fiction writer could get away with such superficial connections between the elements of their larger story. In fiction, having characters who are strangers and from different storylines suddenly cross paths is the equivalent of the cinematic gun on the mantelpiece. Something better come of it. Yet time and again, Altman has his characters brush past each other for no reason other than that he can do it. It's as if he (and co-writer Frank Barhydt) only asked themselves whether they could make a connection and never considered whether they should.

In the storyline most faithful to the Carver original, "A Small Good Thing," MacDowell and Davison are an upper middle class couple whose son on his eighth birthday is hit by a car, walks home seemingly fine, then goes to sleep and won't wake up. The doctors say the boy should be OK, as long as he wakes up soon, except he doesn't wake up soon and the tension builds, ratcheted up by a series of phone calls to the house from someone who is seemingly mocking their dying son. Finally the son dies and the couple figures out who has been calling and in grief, heads out to confront the man. Altman handles this faithfully and seemingly sincerely, MacDowell and Davison are compelling and believable as a husband and wife facing the worst thing parents can face.

Yet Altman in the end betrays "A Small Good Thing" with a bit of depressingly misanthropic irony that is baffling even in the context of a loose adaptation. In the long version of the story (there were two published versions of this story) the boy dies, the baker who has been harassing the wife over the phone (because she never picked up the boy's birthday cake) is tracked down and the grieving husband and wife show up on the baker's doorstep at the crack of dawn. They get angry and explain the situation. The baker, ashamed of the pain he's caused, offers the only thing he has. He sits them down and serves them bread and steaming sticky buns fresh from the oven. He makes coffee. The bakery kitchen is warm and bright and smells

of fresh-baked bread. It is one of the great redemptive moments in all of late 20th century fiction, an emotional turn that's moving precisely because it's unexpected. Quite beyond the obvious Eucharistic reading, what we get is a moment of genuine grace, an island of healing in a world of pain and if it won't last, it can't, it is for a moment enough.

> "Smell this," the baker said, breaking open a dark loaf. "it's a heavy bread, but rich." They smelled it, then he had them taste it. It had the taste of molasses and coarse grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving. — *the final paragraph of "A Small Good Thing"*

Altman plays it this way for a moment, though there's never a sense that he's committed to this ending, it feels at all times perfunctory. Then Altman moves on to the real ending (not the earthquake ending), his ending. MacDowell asks Lovett if she can see her now dead son's cake and after a dramatic pause (time for the forces of irony to gather), he has to admit that he's tossed the cake away. This is what we are left with, a bit of facile "life is shit and then you die" irony. This seems to me an important clue in Altman's adaptation of Carver, a storyline that hasn't been significantly contorted by the screenplay, that in all important ways plays out as it did in the original story, yet somehow Altman finds it necessary to subvert Carver's original conclusion and replace it with something that is inferior in every way — glib, easy, misanthropic in the manner of a junior high school cynic. It smells of hubris and of disrespect. Altman can go on all he wants in his forward about how involved Carver's widow Tess Gallagher was in the making of the film, but he can't hide his basic contempt for the source material.

But does any of this make a difference? If film and literature are wholly different art forms, doesn't that mean that any filmmaker adapting a work of literature has to reinvent it? If the film works, does it even matter if it's a successful adaptation? The only possible answer here is no, though of course it's more complicated than that. A film can be a failure as an adaptation and a success as a film. *Adaptation* (for example) is an utter failure as an adaptation of *The Orchid Thief*, ultimately treating Susan Orleans's book as a kind of joke — Meryl Streep and Chris Cooper cavort through the wilds of South Florida — to hang this larger joke around, Nicholas Cage struggling against Nicholas Cage in an effort to adapt this book. Yet the film itself mostly works.

Which leads to the question, is *Short Cuts* a failure as a film? The short answer has to be "absolutely, " though it is of course more complicated than that.

Altman vs. everyone else

In a film that adapts nine stories, it would make sense that the one storyline wholly invented should be a key to understanding exactly what it is Altman is trying to say about the ways in which this

Singer's unconvincing "Amazon too sensitive for this world" routine

grouping of people live and interact with one another. In *Short Cuts*, the invented storyline is of Annie Ross, the self-centered jazz singer and her completely mismatched sad sack cellist daughter Lori Singer and Ross's singing forms much of the musical background across scenes and segues. It's not clear what should be made of her music in the film, whether he means us to take it seriously — Altman has a history of presenting amateurish and clearly ludicrous sourced music, see *Nashville*, as serious — or at least as the sum of this woman's life, or if the atonal screechy quality of her singing is meant to reveal a dark and ugly soul. It is true that by any measure Ross's character is bitter and self-obsessed, alternately ignoring and tormenting her daughter, though even with Singer's unconvincing "Amazon too sensitive for this world" routine, her suicide — gassing herself in the garage as she plays one final sad song on the cello — plays like a punch line not only because it's ludicrous, but because it feels like unearned posturing of the most superficial sort.

So what are we to make of this story? On a purely mechanical level, the characters played by Ross and Singer allow Altman to make a lot of those little connections between storylines that drive this film. Penn/Leigh and Downey/Taylor show up at the bar where Ross is singing, Waits, who also happens to be Taylor's step-father, is already there. And unlikely though it may be, they live next door to MacDowell and Davison, Singer knows their son. Penn is the pool man for both households.

But on a deeper level, there's a careless misanthropy going on here. In Altman's introduction to the collection of Carver's stories in the Criterion DVD, he says that he and Carver share a dark view of the world, but Carver's world allowed for the possibility of growth and for change. His characters felt like real people and their emotional lives had the complexity of lives lived without knowing what comes next. Altman's versions of Carver's characters, with a couple of exceptions, seem shallow and pre-programmed, without even a single moment of surprise or levity. In Carver's work, there is never a sense he has contempt for his characters, in *Short Cuts* it often seems as if Altman has nothing but.

Yet Altman is not a hack. He's done his share of hack work and it seems more obvious seen from a distance that his approach to films — to the script, to casting, to the making of the film itself — is often so idiosyncratic, that it can take off in a lot of different directions, not all of them under his complete control. *Nashville* seems more of a sprawling mess with each passing year, but films like *McCabe and Mrs. Miller* and *The Long Goodbye* benefit enormously from the offbeat pacing and Altman's unwillingness to traffic in the conventions of their respective genres, the western and the detective drama, which make both films feel fresh and revisionist even today. *Short Cuts* is not devoid of interest.

Probably the most infamous scene, and one of the best sustained segments in the film, is when Julianne Moore confesses an infidelity to husband Matthew Modine while naked from the waist down, which is a pointedly sexual image in theory (in that there's nothing between us and the holy land) and curiously non-sexual in execution (it's not a particularly erotic image). The scene is a model of what Altman does best. From the moment Modine begins talking, Moore understands he's going to return to the time she kissed Mitchel Anders and she tries hard to avoid it — stalling, mishearing him, turning her spilled wine into an inflated obfuscating drama, not to mention her distracting nudity. All this sturm and drang on her part only brings a deeper chill to Modine as he slowly realizes not only was his initial intuition right (his wife and Mitchel Anders did kiss!), it was right beyond his imagination (they fucked too). Moore is excellent here and Modine plays it just right, there's no joy to the realization that his intuition is in fact intact, and he struggles to figure out exactly how self-righteously furious he can be. But that's as far as Altman goes, he never plays out the ramifications of Moore's admission and instead obliterates it first with the aforementioned dinner party with Archer and Ward and finally by the ending earthquake.

About the earthquake I have very little to say, though I do wish he hadn't felt it necessary to show the earthquake across every storyline. If *Magnolia's* rain of frogs makes Altman's earthquake look, if not good, at least sourced in the real world, there's a similar desperate casting about for profundity to the ending of *Short Cuts* that seems even more obvious post-*Magnolia.* None of the storylines benefit from this ending, it does not illuminate anything or bring a moment into focus, it's just a camera person shaking their camera over and over, the only benefit being that it signals the end of the film.

No matter what one thinks of Carver's work, and I freely admit there is ample room for disagreement about the lasting power of his writing, he's undeniably a major figure in late 20th century literature. He deserves better than Altman's facile, glib, misanthropy and it's beyond disconcerting to see Carver's stories dry-humped to dust by a director whose main motivation appears to be marketing — Altman does Carver!! He does indeed.