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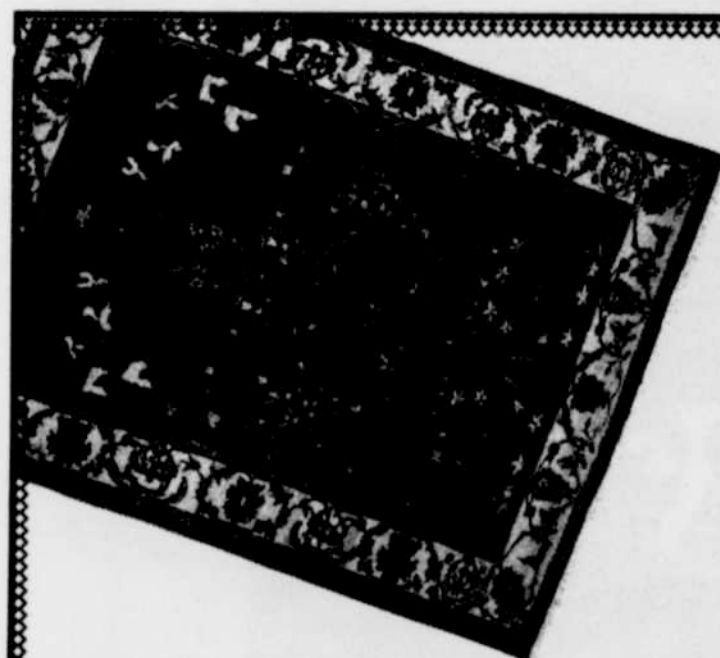


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NOTHING TO WEAR?

Clothes or no clothes, Altman's recent spoof shows this emperor is still worth watching

by Kelly M. Bryan



From left: Linda Hunt, Tracy Ullman, Danny Aiello, Sally Kellerman, and Kim Basinger

Veteran director Robert Altman is a specialist in collage. He excels at the layering of sounds, snippets and scenarios to create patchwork epics that make up for in scope what they sometimes lack in depth. Frequently eschewing scripts, Altman has a penchant for tossing his characters into situations and letting them fend for themselves. This he has done with his latest film, called either *Ready to Wear*, or *Prêt-à-Porter*. Over the

vision reporter Kitty Potter, who, spouting hilarious mispronunciations and malapropisms, accosts anyone of note; one of Altman's gaffes is the use of a Southern accent to heighten the character's laughable banality.

By the proverbial standard, one photographer must be worth a thousand writers, and Altman paints them—in the person of the smirking, pre-dacious Milo O'Brannigan (Stephen Rea)—as all-powerful. One has to put up with their quirks, though: In one humorous bit, an escaping murder suspect (played consummately and cartoonishly by Marcello Mastroianni) is caught on film by a *New York Times* camerawoman. The gendarmes are delighted, until it turns out she has documented only his clothes.

Clothes, after all, are the whole point. The genius of *Ready to Wear* is in its exploration of all the layers of meaning to the wearing—and the not wearing—of clothes. Altman shows us clothes as a commodity, an art form, a disguise, a statement, a hindrance. He invites us to consider people who wear clothes for a living; hints at the generational, professional and class boundaries of attire; and plays with the running gag of Mastroianni stealing and wearing other character's garments.

On the flip side, Altman reveals nakedness that is funny, nakedness that is sexual, and nakedness that inspires reflection. The oft-discussed final scene—during which *The Cranberries'* Dolores O'Riordan sings, "You're so pretty the way you are"—is a brilliant joke that resonates with the weight of the historic burden we took on with just one fig leaf. Shame, fear, embarrassment, guilt, innocence—all this we think we can cover up with artfully draped cloth.

Incomprehensibly, *New York Times* film critic Janet Maslin put *Ready to Wear* on her list of this year's 10 worst films. In spite of its flaws, Altman's quirky exposure of the frailties of humans and clothes makes us think and laugh. It encourages us to do what the courtiers in the fable about the emperor's new clothes forbade: look at pretension and hype and name them for what they are.

An afterword about the dog shit: Some tender souls have been repelled by the treadings in *merde* that recur throughout the film. When I lived for six months in Paris, some years ago, I learned that wags had transformed the French word *trottoir* (sidewalk) into "crottoir" (shitwalk), in reference to a certain minefield-like quality to the city's streets. Altman, ever the court jester, could hardly refrain from pointing out the fact that grime coexists with glamour.

Cinema

years Altman has pioneered sound-recording and filming techniques to capture the myriad events that can be unfolding in but one of his frames. The epitome, and perhaps the apex, of his work in this style is *Nashville* (1975), which seriocomicly dissects the worlds of politics and country music. *Ready to Wear* is no *Nashville*. But it is funny and marvelous—on all levels, a spectacle.

The material under Altman's fond yet razor-sharp knife this time is the week-long Paris fashion event known as the *prêt-à-porter*, where the industry's designers strut their wares twice yearly. Although it's hard to picture him thumbing through *Women's Wear Daily*, the director has spoken of a deep respect for the art of fashion and the talent of its creators. In the midst of the flurry of the spring '94 showings, he unleashed his actors on the only partly suspecting players in the world of *haute couture*, who thus become extras in the movie.

For the most part, Altman spares those at the creative end of fashion from his satirical scrutiny—perhaps out of respect. He chooses to focus his cutting gaze mainly on the media who swarm the event. The magazine editors—official umpires of taste—he portrays as following each other's every move, calculating all the while, caught in the ever-present bind of predicting the "next big thing" without unwittingly finding themselves in the "sale" bin. They are represented here with some fine comic turns by Linda Hunt, Tracy Ullman, and Sally Kellerman. Lauren Bacall shows up as a former *Vogue* editor, who, it turns out, is color blind.

Altman gives us journalists that, with other more important things on their minds, send stories back home that they've transcribed from the French television news. Kim Basinger delivers the most memorable performance of the film as cable tele-