‘INCIDENTALLY, the Altman movie seems to be going ahead.’ So ended a note from Julian Fellowes on 4 February 2001, in response to queries I’d put to him for the Encyclopedia of British Film I was compiling. Barely a year later, he was being awarded a well-deserved Oscar for his pains. I mention this at the outset because Gosford Park is one of the best-written movies for some time, full of lethal detail as well as having, as one would expect from director Robert Altman, a broad, sweeping grasp of its material. At the end of this review Julian Fellowes, best known in Australia as Kilwillie in TV’s Monarch of the Glen, replies to some questions about his participation: Altman is assuredly an auteur, but in this case he also has the services of an author in the older sense of the word.

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Gosford Park is a good film to see twice. As everyone must by now know, it is a country-house mystery; someone gets killed; there is a likely cast of suspects, an investigation and a denouement; but the second time around, when one no longer needs to wonder about any of these, there is a chance to savour more fully the other sorts of riches the film offers. These riches involve the collusion of a great director who can be relied on not to deliver quite what is expected, a screenplay that values wit and nuance, a cinematographer brilliantly at the
service of both, and a cast to die for.

A country-house party is gathered in 1932 for a shooting weekend at a stately pile whose owner is the more or less vile Sir William McCordle (Michael Gambon). His guests include several who have reason to dislike him and/or to keep in his good books: there are plenty who would rejoice at his death, and would indeed profit by it. The guests have their own anxieties and agendas and the spacious drawing-room where they spend most of their time seethes with explosive possibilities. Filling the gaps in the often barbed conversational exchanges are some popular tunes of the day played and sung by their composer Ivor Novello (Jeremy Northam), who happens to be a cousin of Sir William’s. His contribution to proceedings is not welcomed by Lady Trentham (Maggie Smith), who wants to concentrate on bridge—and fears Sir William may cut off her allowance. Then there are the Nesbitts (James Wilby and Claudie Blakley), who bicker constantly: she is gauche and he has his eye on someone else. Ex-officer Anthony Meredith (Tom Hollander) desperately needs Sir William’s financial support. Sir William’s bad-tempered brother-in-law (Charles Dance) glowers throughout, telling his wife to ‘stop snivelling. Anyone would think you were Italian’ … And so on.

All these characters are neatly sketched, making the most of sharp lines and oblique glances, but there are several ways in which the film then parts company with its Agatha Christie heritage. No-one familiar with Altman’s dealings with the Western (McCabe and Mrs Miller, 1971) or the private-eye thriller (The Long Goodbye, 1973) will be expecting slavish adherence to the conventions. Gosford Park pays its dues to the Christie school of crime fiction and, at the same time, has a lot of very knowing fun with it. For one thing, the detective (Stephen Fry) is no Poirot, but an upstart bumbler, played for broad comedy, his sergeant having to remind him of the protocols of their profession. More important, Altman takes as much interest in the below-stairs life as that marooned in the drawing-room above. Whereas Christie’s instinctive snobbery precludes for her the possibility of the lower orders’ having access to the sorts of emotional problems of their betters, Gosford Park sees the snobberies of class not just as a given but as a subject to explore.

This matter of class is probably the single most fascinating aspect of a complex film and Fellowes’ screenplay offers a richly textured critique, not just of the class system as it was, but of the very notion of class. There turns out to be as much snobbery, as rigid a hierarchy, below stairs as there is above. The film doesn’t offer a simple-mindedly revisionist account of between-wars social divisions: it is witty about the idiocies of the situation (like the way visiting servants
are known by the name of their master or mistress, as if to minimise their own identities), but is also alert to the reality of the pain it might cause. Early in the film, Lady Trentham from the back seat of her car snaps at her maid, Mary (Kelly Macdonald), ‘Do get on before I freeze to death’—as Mary stands in the pouring rain trying to open her ladyship’s thermos flask. When the American film producer, Weissman (Bob Balaban, also Altman’s co-producer) asks Novello ‘How do you put up with these people [i.e. the house guests]?’; the reply is ‘I earn my living by impersonating them’, suggesting that their seemingly effortless superiority of manner can be copied. Downstairs, a maid reports that ‘Lady Lavinia says a woman who travels without her own maid has lost her self-respect.’

The film is peppered with such lightly worn insights, but then suddenly one is shocked by the seriousness of head housemaid Elsie’s (Emily Watson) bitter rhetorical question, ‘Why do we spend our lives living through them?’ And part of the subtlety of giving Elsie this line is that she is not merely being stroppy: she is perhaps the only one who really appreciated Sir William, with whom she had been having an affair, just hinted at as he brushes his dog’s hair off her dress front; she ‘liked the way he talked’. Not grief-stricken at his death, she does acknowledge that he extended her horizons and when, at the end, she is leaving Gosford Park, Weissman offers her a lift, there is a quietly made suggestion that she may be the hope of the future. She has intelligence and character and just may get the chance to use them.

The real pain of the film is in the way in which Sir William, who has made his money as a factory-owner and war profiteer, has wrecked various lives, including women in his employ whom he has made pregnant but some of whom have later found work at Gosford Park. In a film that for the most part is playful about well-known conventions, deconstructing them without solemnity, there is a sudden moment of piercing grief from the great Helen Mirren (in perhaps the film’s finest performance) as housekeeper Mrs Wilson and a heartfelt gesture of comfort from Eileen Atkins as cook Mrs Croft. The film by this stage is tonally assured enough to be able to accommodate such a break with the Christie thriller tradition in which no-one really suffers—and especially not one of the servant class. Though it should be noted that Mirren’s character has never been caricatured for a moment: she has, as she says, the servant’s ‘gift of anticipation’, knowing what those upstairs will want before they do. ‘I’m the perfect servant. I have no life’—of her own that is, or at least none that she is willing to acknowledge until the pain of concealment becomes unbearable.

However adroitly the film juggles the rules of the game as enshrined in Christie and her best-selling kind, however shrewdly it mounts its class critique, it has still more going for it than these interests. This is a film by an American
director making his first film in the UK and this no doubt helps to account for the sudden sharpness of perception, an outsider’s eye noticing what the native might overlook. Altman is not to be equated with the Weissman figure, but the idea of the American as ‘other’ in this kind of fiction is not uncommon, though rarely as wittily conceived as here. Weissman is trying to set up a production of ‘Charlie Chan in London’ and is constantly trying to phone Los Angeles, heard asking the recipient of one such call: ‘What about Claudette Colbert? Is she just affected or is she British?’ Altman orchestrates his fabulous cast to make the most of the pardonable confusion between ‘affected’ and ‘British’. Whereas Americans in this sort of fiction are usually there for vulgar contrast, Weissman, who looks as if that is his function, is allowed a kind of reality and insight that goes beyond stereotype.

Whereas Altman made us see the Western with new eyes in McCabe and Mrs Miller, here he requires us to see anew a class-riven society, a literary genre and the concept of ‘heritage’ cinema that usually wants us to yearn nostalgically for leafy lanes (not sodden as here) and listed buildings (not, as here, gloomy outside and chilly inside). His cinematographer, Andrew Dunn, keeps the camera gliding up steep stairs and along the endless below-stairs corridors, emphasising the sheer physical grind involved in being a servant here, while for the most part upstairs the guests are gathered in drawing room or dining room, their sedentaryness contrasted with those who wait on them. The restlessness of the below-stairs camera work; the half-heard conversations, ellipsis preferred to full articulation; the ensemble cast in which no-one is permitted to hog the narrative or the camera and in which the servants are as extravagantly cast as the toffs; the use of the real-life figure of Novello (theatre people were tolerated but were also expected, in this case, literally, to sing for their supper), recalling Julie Christie and Elliott Gould in Nashville (1975); the metonymic sense of this story and these people resonating beyond their particularity to evoke a whole society (as in Short Cuts, 1993): these, and more, keep firmly before us the fact that this is distinctively a Robert Altman film.

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THE film’s credits state that it is ‘Written by Julian Fellowes’ and that it is ‘Based on an idea by Robert Altman and Bob Balaban’. It is instructive to have Julian Fellowes’ answers to questions that bear on such matters:

BMcF: When and how did you first become involved with Robert Altman?
Was it his idea to do a version of the English country-house mystery thriller?

JF: Bob Balaban, the actor/producer (Morris Weissman in Gosford Park), was
keen to work with Robert Altman whom he had known for years and they tried
to think of a type of film that they could make together. Altman suggested that
he had never done a whodunit of any sort and that it might be fun to pay a little
homage to the Agatha Christie type of ‘civilised murder mystery’ and set a film
in an English house party between the wars, involving characters from both
above and below stairs. To this end they approached a couple of writers but, for
some reason or another, nothing quite seemed to work out. It was then, early in
January 2000, that Balaban telephoned me. I had already written an adaptation
of Anthony Trollope’s *The Eustace Diamonds* for him and he asked if I would be
interested in this new idea. Obviously I said Yes, with bells on, and he set up a
terrifying three-way conference call which I could hardly hear and I was told to
put some ideas on paper. They were very open. I could introduce any characters
I liked, any stories, as long as there was a murder somewhere in the background.
That is a feature of Bob’s films: to take a genre and turn it on its head. This was
to be a murder mystery where you didn’t care about the murder. It was always
supposed to be subsidiary to the morals and, much more, to the manners of the
characters.

BMcF: What sort of input did he have into the screenplay? Did he, for
example, suggest the range of characters or the key events? Or did he leave
this largely up to you?

JF: At the very start, I was told that the film would be about the ‘three groups: the
family, their guests and the servants’. I pointed out that in the 1930s there would
in fact be four groups: the family, their servants, the guests and the guests’
servants. After that, they left me alone to come up with the characters and their
individual tales as well as the key events, most of which I think remained fairly
set from quite early on. Once I had completed the first draft I was invited to fly
out to California and spend a few days with the two Bobs. It was only then that I
began to think it just might conceivably happen as, up until that moment, it had
all seemed too much of a fairytale. Anyway, I arrived and we had several
sessions.

At this point Bob Altman suggested adding Ivor Novello to the mix. He was a
fan of his and he wanted some ‘live action music’ in the movie, not just back-
ground scoring, and we both felt it would anchor the film in the period to have
one real-life person of the time. This suited me for two reasons. The first was
that while I had already put Weissman into the mix (to have one total outsider who
could represent all the outsiders in the audience), having Ivor made his introduc-
tion miles easier. But my other delight was that when I researched the subject I
discovered that November 1932 was a crucial period in Novello’s life. To revive
his flagging acting career, which had taken a dip with the coming of sound, he had remade his greatest silent hit, *The Lodger*, as a talkie. It was released in the summer of 1932 and was a total flop. From that moment, he knew that his film career was finished but what was to come? All the great musicals which would make his name were in the future. This period of introspective melancholy was of course perfect for my purposes, particularly when it was so brilliantly portrayed by Jeremy Northam.

Bob Altman had many ideas throughout. He decided that Mrs Wilson and Mrs Croft were sisters when we’d already been filming for two weeks, which necessitated a bit of juggling on my part. The upstairs sisters were already rivals for the hand of William McCordle but he thought up the idea that they had cut cards for him and so on. Most of all, he was unbelievably supportive of the efforts of an untried screenwriter.

**BMCF: What did you feel was the function of introducing the real-life figure of Novello?**

**JF:** While it was Bob Altman’s idea, as I said, to bring in Novello, it served one of the main themes of the script for which I am profoundly grateful. I have always felt that the aristocracy, in a way, committed suicide by turning their backs on modern life. At a certain point in history, they simply refused to go any further and they started to turn back. You can see them today, dressed in the father’s, or even grandfather’s clothes, mouthing their parents’ prejudices, imitating their amusements. One of the key elements in this, almost an emblem of it, was their refusal to accept modern entertainment. While they were the cultural leaders, they had been happy to endorse popular entertainment in the form of the theatre or the opera but the twentieth century brought the movies and new types of popular music and later television, all of which had essentially come out of the working class. For me, their turning their backs on these things is symptomatic of their failure to move with the times. You can hear them today: ‘Oh, we’re far too busy to watch television!’ which of course is the equivalent of saying, in 1750, that you were too busy to read a newspaper.

In the film we have the long parable at the heart of it when Ivor is playing. The servants who are looking forward to the future, love his music and cluster round. The upper classes, who are still looking forward to the past, reject it. Upstairs, only Mabel really enjoys it and that is because she comes from a different world. The other guests despise her for it but we (I hope) can see that actually it makes her less of a fool than they are. All this was made one thousand times easier because of the introduction of a real entertainer.

**BMCF: How familiar were you with Altman’s earlier films in which he offered**
new takes on old genres?

JF: Of course, the moment I had received the first telephone call I dived off to the video shop to take out as many Altman films as I could find. I already knew some well, M.A.S.H. and The Player particularly, as they are among my favourite movies. I realised from this that it would be a multi-character, multi-stranded script but, more than this, I understood (to my great joy) that Bob was not afraid of making his audiences work. Instead of giving the information fifty times as they generally do in films these days, I would be allowed to give it only once or maybe twice and if you were eating your ice-cream at those moments you’d miss it. You would never discover what Isobel had done in the past or what Sylvia’s secret was.

BMcf: Did you have any particular actors in mind as you were writing? Did you realise from the outset that it was to have an all-star cast? What effects, if any, would this have had on your character-drawing?

JF: I certainly did not think I would have ‘an all-star cast’ as I didn’t think, for a moment, that the film would actually get made until we were quite far down the road. One of Bob’s great gifts (and he has many) is that once he has decided to make a film, then that film is going to be made. Long before the money is in place, long before any actors have committed, he will speak of it as a certainty. I admire this more than I can say and, if I could be granted any quality in my filmmaking future, then it would be this and not to be the trembling doubter that I really am. As for having actors in mind, well, I always have actors in mind when I write because it makes it easier to maintain their particular tone of voice if you do. But they may be actors who are dead or who are now thirty years too old. They are, in fact, just fantasy casts soon usually to be replaced by a more mundane reality. Imagine my astonishment and delight when no less than four of the people I had imagined in my wildest dreams all played the parts.

BMcf: What would be your response to a suggestion that who gets murdered and by whom is of less significance to the film than is usually the case in such thrillers? Would you, for instance, agree that the sort of class observation and critique mounted by the film is at least as important? That the film as a whole is playful in relation to the conventions of the genre?

JF: Altman himself christened the film a ‘who-cares-whodunit’ and there is no question that, from the very start, as I have said, the murder was to take a back seat. In fact, initially, the police were only very shadowy figures. Most of the information about their investigations came from reported gossip, both upstairs and down. The one survival of this early treatment is the Anthony Meredith (Tom Hollander) story. We see him ‘bruised’ by his encounter with the police, we see him humiliated by Stockbridge (Charles Dance), we see his faith in love.
restored by the still-room maid, Dorothy (Sophie Thompson), but we never see his encounter with the police. That was, at first, the way all the stories were told. However, Bob Altman felt that unless the police were actually comedic, then the audience would still think that they were expected to take the murder seriously. So I went back to the drawing board and Inspector Thompson was born. I still wonder whether the other treatment would have worked but I can hardly complain about any aspect of the script given the way things have worked out...

BMcF: Did Altman stick rigidly to your screenplay or did he want changes once filming had begun? Were you around much during the filming process? If so, is this a tense business for the writer?

JF: Altman was determined that the film would be an accurate rendition of these people. He knows that when they are treated dramatically, even by English directors, the details are seldom (if ever) correct. He also knew that he would be a sitting target if he got it all wrong. For this reason, he paid me the extraordinary compliment of inviting me to be on the set for the entire time, literally for every shot. This I was, apart from two days at the end when I had to leave for filming in Scotland. So I was there to check details, to invent lines which were suddenly needed (one of my favourites being Louisa’s observation ‘It’s a relief to me to sit next to someone who isn’t deaf in one ear,’ which I heard at a house party in Norfolk), and generally to stop any gaffes. Of course it can be quite tense. One spends a lot of the time saying ‘no’, because if things are correct one says nothing, and it is a tribute to Bob’s forbearance, I think, that I lasted the course.

As for sticking to the screenplay, in the small scenes the answer is simple. Yes. But in the larger ones, the rule was slightly different. There were two cameras permanently moving so the actors could never tell whom they were on. They would therefore say their scripted lines in the correct order and then, if they were at the other end of the table or drawing room from the scripted characters, they would simply babble on. Even though very little of this was finally used for time reasons and also because it is hard to improvise such period- and class-specific dialogue, nevertheless it creates a background feeling of reality which I think is one of the hallmarks of the movie. Of course, these things depend on the actor. Some like improvising more than others, but in this sort of stuff it has its dangers. One chap, who shall be nameless, insisted on improvising a lot and, as a result, lost most of his part as he sounded completely modern whenever he opened his mouth. On the other hand, Maggie Smith, not just a genius but a wonderfully disciplined and precise actress, played (and completely understood) the script and, though I say it as shouldn’t, reaped the rewards. Although even
she did add one line which always makes me laugh: ‘Difficult colour, green.’

BMcF: One of the visually striking things about the film is the recurrent tracking shots through the downstairs area: is this the sort of thing you might have suggested in your screenplay or was your interest confined to dialogue, structure and characterisation?

JF: You are quite correct that the constantly moving cameras is one of the best things in the film. Have you noticed that they are not (as they usually are) motivated by moves on the part of the actors? This creates the impression that the viewer is actually independently in the action, walking through the rooms wearing an invisible cloak. No, I had nothing to do with any of the photographing style. I would love to say I did as I think it one of the film’s chief glories. That was entirely Bob and our brilliant lighting cameraman, Andrew Dunn, a spectacularly successful partnership.

BMcF: Could you tell us something about the pre-Gosford writing you’ve done—and any plans you have?

JF: I got into scriptwriting by accident—as I have done most of the good things in my life. When I was living in Hollywood for a couple of years in the early 1980s, I used to pass the time by reading the scripts of directors and actors I knew who would ask me what was wrong with them. So I became a sort of unofficial script doctor. Much later, I wanted to get into television production and I was involved in a show where the scripts needed a lot of help. Because of this, the BBC came to me with a commission to write a new version of Frances Hodgson Burnett’s *Little Lord Fauntleroy* in six parts for Sunday teatime viewing. This I did and ended up making it with the television director Andrew Morgan, my partner in our company, Lionhead. It turned out well, winning an International Emmy in New York and the Festival Award at Banff in Canada. After that I was officially a writer. Next I scripted and made, again with Andrew, *The Prince and the Pauper* also for the BBC. This went down satisfactorily and was nominated for a BAFTA award. After that, the regime at the BBC changed and we were out on our ears but I had begun and, anyway, I felt I wanted to move more towards features so I started writing scripts for the cinema. Over a three-year period I wrote a good many, first for love and finally on commission, but nothing got made. One of these unmade scripts, however, introduced me to Bob Balaban and the rest, as they say, is history.

As for what comes next, well obviously, things have changed a bit now. Since *Gosford Park* I have written a modern love story for Tiger Aspect and a P.G. Wodehouse adaptation for Mission Pictures. I have scripted a version of Debi Gliori’s *Pure Dead Magic* for Universal and I am about to start on a tale of Old
New York for Warner Brothers. So I have no complaints.

BMcF: You also have a notable career as a character actor on film, stage and television. Do you want to keep this going or are you now more committed to writing? What is Kilwillie’s future?

JF: I would like to keep acting. I enjoy it and it is, of course, tremendously social as opposed to writing, which is tremendously solitary. The challenges are different but complementary and, all in all, for me it is a double that works. But as for Kilwillie or anything specific, I shall just have to wait and see. I never really make plans in this game as they only have to be abandoned when things start to happen.

BMcF: How influential on a career is winning an Oscar?

JF: Ask me in ten years.