

Quick takes

by [Phil Christman](#) in the [February 13, 2002](#) issue

Gosford Park: One could easily mistake director Robert Altman for a misanthrope; his dark humor (famously displayed in *M*A*S*H** and *The Player*) borders on meanness, while the parabolic ironies of a film like *Nashville* throw the audience off balance. "Is this guy making fun of the human condition?" we wonder. The answer is yes and no, but in *Gosford Park*, a spacious murder mystery set in prewar Britain, it's mostly no.

The year is 1932; English aristocrats arrive at the country home of a swinish rich man (Michael Gambon) for a weekend of gossiping and pheasant-shooting. Downstairs, their servants attempt to keep things running smoothly. The guests treat the help abominably, but, ironically, depend on them for companionship, gossip and sex. When the philandering owner of the house is both poisoned and stabbed, we doubt that his guests have the competence to commit such a crime.

After the murder, an investigator arrives and everybody is temporarily stuck in the house. The film is more about the house than about the murder plot. Or rather, it's about the spaces in which human lives overlap. Like *Nashville*, the film is less a story than a walking, talking painting. The pleasure of the film, which is considerable, comes from Altman's direction, from Andrew Dunn's photography, from the dialogue, and from the adroit ensemble acting of a great cast.

Altman takes a compassionate, detached view of his characters. His humanism resembles that of an amused Greco-Roman playwright, as opposed to the earnest neo-Christian sensibility that animates Paul Thomas Anderson (*Magnolia*, *Boogie Nights*), a younger filmmaker often compared to Altman. In *Boogie Nights*, for example, Anderson gives us a long close-up scene of a porn actress (Julianne Moore) weeping after she is denied custody of her son. Had Altman shot the movie, he would have cut away to a party, or a happy couple walking somewhere, or a drug orgy. He's always keen to remind us of the ways some people's moments rub up against other people's quite different moments.

In the Bedroom: Todd Field's movie explores a small-town marriage suddenly

exploded by grief. The painful vignettes of the film's middle third make it one of the year's most impressive and intense. Watching Tom Wilkinson and Sissy Spacek as parents grieving for their son, the viewer grimaces, as if to make up for the cavernous gap between them. When, inevitably, the big fight comes, one is stunned but utterly convinced by its brutality.

Spacek's and Wilkinson's performances set such a high bar and Field manages the subsurface tension of domestic scenes so well that the rest of the film can hardly fare as well in comparison. But there is still much to praise. *Bedroom* is another in a growing number of films that examine the consequences of one violent act in a small town. As with *Fargo* (1996) and its evocative but humorless cousin *A Simple Plan* (1998), part of the film offers a careful rendering of a locale--in this case, a small town in Maine. We watch crab fishing, summer cookouts, card games--and the photography, by Antonio Calvache, is beautiful.

Field and screenwriter Robert Festinger (taking off from a story by the late Andre Dubus) manage to convey the infuriatingly stubborn quality that the physical world takes on during periods of pain, the way a fly buzzing or a yammering television set can seem to symbolize the whole careless universe. When the local Catholic priest tries to comfort Spacek, reminding her that her grief is not unique by telling a story about a woman similarly bereaved, she asks an irrelevant question about the woman, scaling the conversation back from the universal to the particular: trapped inside her loss, only particular situations seem real.

Toward the end, the film strangely turns into a revenge drama. The film doesn't quite prepare one to believe that Wilkinson's character, a kindly doctor, would behave as he does. But the final moments are haunting, as is the film as a whole.