Gosford Park, directed by Robert Altman

By David Walsh
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Gosford Park, directed by Robert Altman, written by Julian Fellowes

It is certainly suggestive that the first film upon which veteran American director Robert Altman set to work following the election, or rather the installation in power, of George W. Bush (whom the filmmaker despises and has referred to as a “fool”) was Gosford Park, a study of class relations and their cruelties. As with all such convenient theories, this one has fatal flaws: the film’s planning began in January 2000, twelve months before Bush came to power. But then again, this may only point to the film’s makers having responded, perhaps semi-consciously, to an impulse emanating from a deeper, more general source: the vast social chasm that has opened up in contemporary society.

In any event, Gosford Park is a generally admirable film. It has limitations, but the picture it paints, of British society in the early 1930s, is unimpeachable and indelible. The film “smells” of truth, or at least creates the conditions in which truth might unfold, unlike virtually anything else in the present-day American cinema. It demonstrates once again, in its own way, how and why “a class standard is so fruitful” (Trotsky) in every field of intellectual and artistic life.

Gosford Park takes place during a weekend shooting party at the palatial estate of Sir William and Lady Sylvia McCordle (Michael Gambon and Kristin Scott Thomas) in November 1932. Two worlds are considered: that of the servants and that of their “masters.” Altman has deliberately attempted to frame the story from the point of view of the former. He told an interviewer: “The camera can’t be on the posh people unless there’s a servant present.... So you may hear an argument inside a room, but if a servant enters, then they’ll stop. When a servant leaves a room, the camera leaves as well.”

Appropriately, therefore, the film opens by following the activities of the youngest and youngest member of the serving class, Mary Maceachran (Kelly Macdonald), the lady’s maid to the Countess of Trentham (Maggie Smith), as she accompanies her employer by automobile to Sir William’s. Thanks to the irascible and demanding Countess, Mary gets drenched in the pouring rain three times in the first five minutes of the film. This sets the tone for what’s to come.

McCordle is an all-around swine, a businessman who has married one of three sisters belonging to an impoverished family of aristocrats. A host of money-hungry relatives and hangers-on are in attendance at the estate, as well as the film star and composer Ivor Novello (the only real figure in the film, played by Jeremy Northam) and two American associates from Hollywood, a producer of Charlie Chan movies, Morris Weissman (Bob Balaban), and his supposed valet, Henry Denton (Ryan Phillippe). Economic desperation and fear of the abyss drive most of those up and downstairs.

There are several dozen speaking parts in the film and numerous plots and sub-plots. Two viewings may be required simply to distinguish Sylvia’s two sisters, Louisa (Geraldine Somerville) and Lavinia (Natasha Wightman), from one another. A reference to a few of the narrative strands will perhaps give some indication of the complexities:

There is no love lost between Sir William and Lady Sylvia, who apparently cut cards with one of her sisters to see who would have the wealthy businessman and his money. William is having a fling with the head house-maid, Elsie (Emily Watson)—who sprins to his defense at an inopportune moment—while Sylvia beds down with Weissman’s valet, Denton. Freddie Neshitt (James Wilby), one of the hangers-on, who has gone through his wife’s money, has been carrying on an affair with McCordle’s daughter, Isabelle (Camilla Rutherford), and is attempting to blackmail the girl into asking her father to find a position for him. Meanwhile Lord Rupert Standish (Laurence Fox) is paying court to Isabelle over the weekend, hoping to carve out his own share of the McCordle fortune.

Lieutenant Commander Anthony Meredith (Tom Hollander), one of McCordle’s brothers-in-law, is trying vainly to persuade Sir William to remain in a business deal with him. Weissman, the producer of Charlie Chan films, is having casting difficulties with his latest effort and spends much of his time on the telephone to California. While no overt anti-Semitism is betrayed by any of the guests, there is a lovely moment in which Lord Stockbridge (Sir William’s other brother-in-law) does a pained double-take upon hearing Weissman’s name.

There are dramas and secrets in the servants’ quarters as well. Mrs. Wilson (Helen Mirren), the head housekeeper, and Mrs. Croft (Eileen Atkins), the head cook, despise each other, for reasons unknown to most of the present staff. Robert Parks (Clive Owen), Stockbridge’s valet, seems to have some dark agenda of his own. Jennings (Alan Bates), the McCordles’ butler, drinks when his troubles become too much for him, oblivious to the fact that one of his underlings, Dorothy (Sophie Thompson), adores him. Mary meanwhile tries to navigate (physically and socially) the semi-feudal world of a mazelike British country estate, in which the servants’ quarters have no windows, the “help” sit at their own dining table in order of their employers’ social rank and the maids and valets are referred to by their masters’ and mistresses’ names (she is “Trentham,’ for example). In general, the servants are not prettified.

After establishing the various social and personal relationships, the filmmakers stage a murder, which only complicates matters further.

It seems evident that Altman is less interested in the spectator’s ability to unravel each and every thread of the story than in his or her gaining some sense of the social whole, the general whirl of events. In this, he largely succeeds. His method of keeping a microphone on every actor engaged in a scene, no matter how peripherally, and encouraging each to improvise his or her own dialogue (the best of which is kept in the final soundtrack) adds to the overall texture of the work.

Certain social realities come across. To their employers the servants are essentially nonexistent. When Freddie and Isabelle are interrupted by a footman at a delicate moment, the former says reassuringly, “It’s nobody.” A police inspector (Stephen Fry) responds to a query as to whether the staff may go about their business during the murder investigation with the comment, “I’m not interested in the servants, only...”

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people with a real connection to the dead man.” Elsie asks Mary, speaking of their “betters,” “Why do we spend our lives living through them?” and Mrs. Wilson later observes wretchedly, “I’m the perfect servant. I have no life.”

Some of the points are bluntly made, perhaps too bluntly made, but then screenwriters and directors are out of practice for the most part at examining social life in any depth, and subtlety, we know, only comes with continuous practice. The final, somewhat melodramatic revelations concerning McCordle and his former female factory hands fail to convince entirely, but by underlining the essential brutality of the relation between capital and labor they possess legitimacy and even raw emotional power.

Altman’s tendency toward misanthropy, expressed too often in ill-concealed contempt for his characters, is largely kept in check on this occasion, or at least those who are treated contemptuously generally deserve it. He remains a remarkable figure. His best work will continue to be the films he made from 1971 to 1978 (McCabe & Mrs. Miller, The Long Goodbye, Thieves Like Us, California Split, Nashville, Three Women, A Wedding—a group of films that will stand up to nearly any by an American filmmaker in the postwar period), but Altman obviously remains an artistic and intellectual force with which to reckon.

The director, at 76 (the insurance company apparently insisted that filmmaker Stephen Frears be on hand in case Altman could not finish the shooting), is largely reliant on his scripts these days. The scenario in the present case, by the veteran British actor and first-time screenwriter, Julian Fellowes, serves him well, but not flawlessly. There are conventional and contrived elements in the film, and unnecessary ones. The murder and police investigation seem thoroughly external to the work, elements pasted on. (Altman: “It is basically [mystery writer Agatha Christie’s] Ten Little Indians meets [French filmmaker Jean Renoir’s] Rules of the Game.” But since he confesses to being no fan of Christie, it’s not clear why this had to be the case.) Fry’s inept policeman strikes a wrong and somewhat facetious note. If the shooting party weekend had simply taken its “natural” course, very little would have been lost—on the contrary. Perhaps the film’s creators lacked confidence in the strength of their own social critique, or in the capacity of this critique to attract and retain an audience.

Altman and Fellowes, in interviews, have taken pains to emphasize the historically specific character of Gosford Park’s universe.

“This time, 1932, is toward the end of this kind of servitude,” Altman told one interviewer. “These people went into service, stayed all their lives, and it was hard work. Their families were often thrilled to be rid of them. It meant there were only three in a bed, not four. If their daughter became a maid, they knew she would be taken care of and fed. People in service often worked in only one or two households most of their lives. But World War II was a turning point. After it, young girls were able to have jobs other than maids.”

But if such oppression were entirely attached to that bygone epoch, the drama would merely be an historic curiosity piece, like a story about the way people used to ride in horse-drawn carriages instead of automobiles or how they had milk delivered rather than picking it up at a supermarket. The source of the work’s emotional impact proceeds from present-day conditions, the conditions of class society that still dominate every aspect of life. If Mary’s anguish, or Elsie’s plight, or Parks’ anger or Mrs. Wilson’s inconsolable grief, or for that matter, Sir William’s hopelessly trapped condition or his wife’s icy, unrelievably bored, have meaning for us, and they do within the limits imposed by the degree of success or failure of the artistic representation, it is because they express universal, objectively true tendencies within class society.

Gosford Park possesses intellectual and moral strength and resonates with audiences primarily because of contemporary circumstances. And Altman’s own comments, as limited as they may be, make that clear. Last summer he was asked whether he yet had considered making a film “about America under George W. Bush,” and he replied: “I think I despise him and that whole Bush group so much I just wouldn’t do anything like that, because I couldn’t trust myself to have any humor about it. I just find it such a disgusting indictment of the country and I’m embarrassed by it.”

In the aftermath of the suicide bombing attacks, Altman commented: “The events of September 11 were terrible, but basically it’s the same money game in this country. They [film studio executives] had to scrap a few Arnold Schwarzenegger films, so some pollution was kept out of the river, but I haven’t seen much change over the past three months. My feelings about America have changed, however. I was in England last year when the presidential election was taking place, and I said to my mates, ‘This will be okay because it’s going to the Supreme Court.’ It did go to the Supreme Court, and we know what happened there. I felt like such a fool. I’m 76 years old, and I still believed in America up to that minute, and at my age I should’ve known better. Now I don’t feel any emotional patriotic ties to this country at all.”

It might be said, a little unfairly, that the choice of a country house in England in the 1930s with its glaring and archaic social stratification is perhaps a somewhat easy target, particularly when the parallels to our own time are played down or even denied. We still await, and there is no reason to ask this of Altman, who already has contributed a great deal to filmmaking, a serious cinematic exploration of the class divide in contemporary American life. After all, the wealth of one of America’s billionaires dwarfs that of a McCordle and the gulf between the corporate executive in 2001 and the employee who earns an income hundreds of times smaller is unprecedented in the modern era. Who will represent these circumstances and their consequences in an artistically cogent fashion? Such work must come.

At its best, at its moments, so to speak, of greatest potential, Gosford Park reminds us that the “class standard” is bound up with the most profoundly spiritual and emotional human experience. This is made clear by the manner in which the various servants respond throughout to their difficult conditions of life, but most poignant perhaps by their gathering in hallways and stairways for a few stolen moments to listen to Ivor Novello’s piano playing and singing. The sequence captures that yearning, which never disappears from the collective human consciousness, expressed in a somewhat false and fantastic form in this case, for beauty and pleasure, for another, better life, for kinder and more compassionate relations between human beings.

In Literature and Revolution, Trotsky writes that “what serves as a bridge from soul to soul is not the unique, but the common. Only through the common is the unique known; the common is determined in man by the deepest and most persistent conditions which make up his ‘soul,’ by the common conditions of education, of existence, of work, and of associations. The social conditions in historic human society are, first of all, the conditions of class affiliation.”

With roots in the more privileged layers of society, self-absorbed, indifferent to the great social questions of the day, possessed of a nearly unshakable belief in his or her own unique “genius” and “gift” (which ordinarily turns out to be a very poor and undernourished thing), the superficial studio or independent filmmaker will never understand that there is something about taking into account the struggle between the classes, the central axis of social life, that can place an artistic work on the proper track.

If such a phenomenon is recognized at all by the average contemporary filmmaker, it is viewed with hostility, as some dreadful “political” or “ideological” interference in the transcendent workings of art. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In artistically mature hands—and that is not an insignificant proviso—an orientation to the conflict that drives modern society must direct one toward the most elemental truths about the human
“soul.”

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