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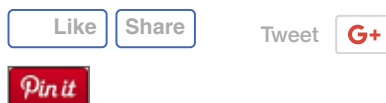


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## GOSFORD PARK

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By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) Nov 1, 2004



### Reviews

What could be more intriguing than a whodunit by Robert Altman with an all-star cast set on an English estate? The opening moments of Gosford Park augur well: black screen and the rustle of steady rain. Then the Countess of Trentham (the incomparable Maggie Smith) and her awkward new maid (Kelly Macdonald) leave in a vintage buggy through a twilight mist, promising mystery and mannered mayhem. But that's as atmospheric as it gets. This latest by the Big Daddy of American Cinema soon veers off into a showcase for the Altman stock-in-trade of episodic stories, ensemble acting and overlapping dialogue (liberally laced with free-floating misogyny)--all of it oddly out of place in this Agatha Christie territory.

It's 1932 and a covey of upper-class Brits converge on Gosford Park, the digs of Sir William McCordle (Michael Gambon) and his wife, Lady Sylvia (Kristin Scott Thomas), for a shooting party. Also on hand are Ivor Novello (Jeremy Northam), the '30s matinee idol and singer, along with Morris Weissman (Bob Balaban), a Hollywood vulgarian and producer of Charlie Chan movies, who's planning a new whodunit that mirrors the one we're watching. Recycling the upstairs/downstairs format, Altman cuts back and forth between the mostly despicable aristos at play in drawing room and field, and the subterranean crew of servants beavering away in the shadowy warrens below. Before the actual murder occurs, there's funny business galore, especially below stairs. The housekeeper (Helen Mirren) is a column of calcified fury. First footman George (Richard E. Grant) casts looks of slimy insinuation. One valet appears to be the bastard son of the host (who had the nasty habit of impregnating the local lasses and forcing them to give up their babies) and may have vengeance on his mind. And did I mention the blue bottles of poison parked throughout the mansion? As one character states, 'We all have something to hide.'

The film is not without its strengths. Altman has retooled the Ten Little Indians genre into a class analysis by filtering the murder through the servants' perspective. In effect, he's proposing that individual motives are beside the point, since the entire downstairs crew might have good reason to lace the master's coffee with arsenic, given the casual abuse of servants meted out by the bejeweled guests. (Says the butler, 'I'm the perfect servant, I have no life.") The hunting party itself, in which you root for the grouse, could be a plea for animal rights. A few acting cameos are gems, such as Maggie Smith's hilarious countess--she could patent the bloodless smile with unmoving lips; her expression conveys perpetual outrage that the world could exist without her permission. Stephen Fry as the inspector brings new dimensions to amiable bumbling. And Altman's masterful, if overlong, ensemble scenes convert chaos into a group ballet.

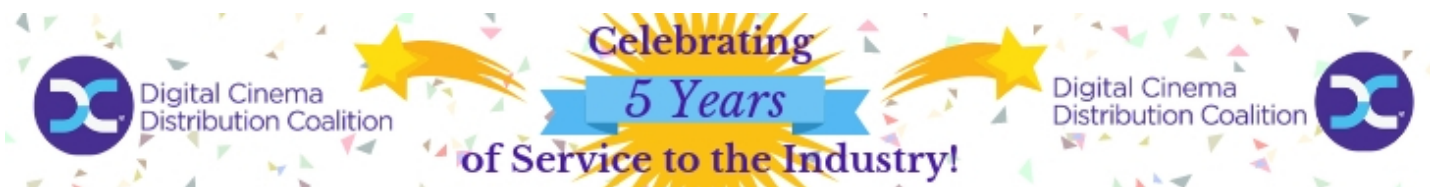
But in this Who's Who of British acting, the likes of Derek Jacobi, Alan Bates, Charles Dance and Emily Watson become lost in the crowd, while Jeremy Northam remains a smiling cypher. In fact, the decor, of an opulence to trump Merchant/Ivory, upstages the characters; you can while away the minutes gleaning decorating tips from meticulously restored rooms decked with damask sofas and onyx urns. In Short Cuts and Nashville--and, to a lesser extent, in Dr. T and the Women--the stories, however episodic, emerged as sharply drawn vignettes. Here, the storylines glance off the screen like bits of mosaic--Gambon's Sir William is reduced to bilious grumpiness, and the other characters, especially Thomas's Lady Sylvia, are so odious the film often plays as a flat-footed American parody of Brit snobbery. You can bet that in creating a murder mystery, Altman would be more interested in the why than the who. Yet the downstairs vendetta essential to the plot never clicks into clarity. And entirely missing are suspense and shivery atmospherics. Gosford Park goes a creaky genre into new relevance, but it offers no compelling stories and largely wastes the talents of its stellar cast.

--Erica Abeel

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