

## A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH ROBERT ALTMAN

Robert Altman's films play with the viewer's conceptions of American film and of America itself. Altman has created a unique cinematic style, with a trademark mixture of documentary camerawork, semi-improvised performances, overlapping dialogue, and multiple narratives. His films reinvent Hollywood genres while revealing the layers of spectacle that make up American culture and society. A month after winning an honorary Academy Award, Altman opened a 22-film retrospective of his career by speaking at the Museum following a screening of *Kansas City*, a panoramic and jazz-like melodrama about politics, race, crime, and the movies, which is set in Altman's hometown.

### **A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Kansas City*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (April 29, 2006):**

SCHWARTZ: And here is Robert Altman. (Applause)

ALTMAN: Thank you, thank you. I hadn't seen that movie [*Kansas City*] in a long time.

SCHWARTZ: Well, some of the people who loved this movie when it came out said that it's going to hold the test of time. It's one of those movies that people will look back at ten years from now. And now it's ten years later.

ALTMAN: Well, the music in it is just—in itself, is classic. Those players are... You'll never see them together again. To me, I wanted the jazz to be as much as the film.

SCHWARTZ: You've described this as a movie that's made in the style of jazz, in a way; that—not just that there's music in the film, but that it has sort of a... The movie is—like this conversation, the movie is in the style of jazz. (Laughs) Not just that it has music in it, but that you...

ALTMAN: No, the structure of—or the way we did the scenes... It just kind of bled off, one thing onto another. The scenes were highly improvised. Harry [Belafonte]'s scenes, that long—those monologues he has with Dermot Mulroney. Those were—you know, they were jazz riffs. And each character in this play had a musical connection. I don't know how this film holds up.

SCHWARTZ: Yeah. I think it holds up quite well. It's a beautifully crafted movie, for one thing. (Applause)

ALTMAN: Well, yeah, it's beautifully shot.

SCHWARTZ: Not just in terms of the musicians, but the craftsmanship, the photography. One thing I love about the movie is the editing. This was one of the movies edited by Geraldine Peroni, who did a brilliant job, who passed away a few years ago, but she was a great editor.

ALTMAN: She died during the—she was editing Ang Lee's film *Brokeback Mountain*. And her assistant, who had worked—did the music editing and stuff—on this film, went ahead and finished that picture. Dylan Tichenor. And he now works mostly for Paul Thomas Anderson. He works on all of his films. And Dona Granata [in the audience], this was the first time I had Dona as a costume designer. And it was a beautiful job. And all those cars. Where'd I get all those cars? (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: I'm sure this was not a huge-budget film; [yet] there's a lot of attention paid to the detail, the production design, the look of the film.

ALTMAN: Yeah. No, it was—I can't remember what it cost, but not a lot.

SCHWARTZ: And how did the impulse to make a film [called] *Kansas City* come about? You obviously were raised in Kansas City, started your film career...

**ALTMAN:** Well, Frank Barhydt, who co-wrote this with me and has worked for me—he's from Kansas City. And we were doing—I think it was *Tanner '88*; we were doing the editing. And we were just sitting there in that editing room, and Frank and I just started talking a lot. And we kind of dug into our Kansas City lore. His father was a friend, a contemporary of mine. And we just started noodling on it, and came up with this kind of story. And these are all pieces of stories that I had heard growing up. My father was not far separated from the culture of those people, so I had heard all those stories. And you know, during the Depression, which is when this time was, they didn't close a bar in Kansas City. They just didn't pay any attention to it. And you'd see all these things about bootlegging and all that. It was just wide open. And with connections to the White House, right on down through. And the musicians gathered there, and kind of—it became a music town, because all these bands were forming and going west, and doing those high-school graduations and proms. They'd get out on the road and they'd get stuck. The band would break up or they'd get broke, and they ended up kind of hanging out in Kansas City. And the night of this film, in the Hey Hey Club, was a Monday night. And on Monday nights, the bars—the clubs were dark. But all the musicians came out and just came in, went from club to club and kind of jammed. It was quite a time.

**SCHWARTZ:** What was your experience of this music where you were growing up? I read one story that you were introduced to jazz by a black woman who worked in your house.

**ALTMAN:** Yeah. And it was "Solitude," was the thing. I'll never forget it; she said—I remember we were in the living room, and she said, "Bobby, now sit down and listen to this." (Laughter) And I said, "What?" And she said, "Just sit down." I remember I sat on, like, a footstool, in front of a radio, and she said, "This is the best music there ever was." And it was "Solitude." And it just stayed in my mind. I mean, it's in this film twice. We did two nods to it.

**SCHWARTZ:** And tell us a bit about Kansas City, your work in Kansas City. Early in your film career, you actually went out to Hollywood, tried to make it out there, and came back to Kansas City and spent a lot of time making industrials back there.

**ALTMAN:** I made industrial and documentary films, and anything I could lie myself through.

**SCHWARTZ:** So that was your film school, in a way.

**ALTMAN:** That was my—yeah, there were no film schools then; it was... But I worked for this place called the Calvin Company. And we made films for *How to Run a Filling Station* and—instructional films. And I did a lot of sports-rules films for high schools, and... Anything. Action.

**SCHWARTZ:** And was it true that before you left Hollywood to go back to Kansas City, you started a business where you came up with a way to tattoo identification labels on dogs?

**ALTMAN:** Yes, I did. I tattooed... (Laughter) That was my real job. I tattooed dogs. I went to Washington, when Harry Truman was president, and I tattooed his dog. (Laughter) I was the tattooer. My other two partners just took the money and, ultimately, ran.

**SCHWARTZ:** Now, you said something when you got your honorary Academy Award this year. You said that you view your films as sandcastles. You used this metaphor. And that's, of course, the name of your production company [Sandcastle 5 Productions]. But the films really don't go away. The films stay around.

**ALTMAN:** Well, they stay in my memory, like the... But when I say that, I mean that one film—it's all one film. Just different chapters, they seem like now.

**SCHWARTZ:** And how does this film—how much of it is sort of about your memories of how Kansas City actually was, versus a sort of fanciful...?

**ALTMAN:** I mean, it's a romanticized version of, probably, what really happened. But it wasn't far off. All those things happened; those places were there. That place where the sister shot the gun at her, and where Steve Buscemi was gathering those guys together to go out on that voting thing, that... When we were there, it was there, of course. And my dad used to own a garage just around the corner from that—that club was going then. And it was one of those clubs where the waitresses didn't wear any clothes.

And they had a unique way of picking tips up off the table. Fifty-cent pieces. People would go in there and have a drink, and they'd tip big tips. (Laughter) I didn't put that in the movie. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** I think it's the last film of yours where you actually have a screenwriting credit, one of the main writing credits. You've been involved, of course, in writing, at different levels, in all your films. But can you talk a bit about what the writing process is like? How do you leave it open to then go after this freedom?

**ALTMAN:** Each project has different DNA. During the eighties, I took several theater pieces, *Streamers* and *Come Back to the Five and Dime, Jimmy Dean, Jimmy Dean*, things like that, and took them right off the stage. Didn't have a screenplay at all; we just took the Samuel French book and put a fourth wall in, and shot it exactly like I would set up the theater piece.

And this credit business on... You look at the end of this picture. If you enjoy the music, it's okay. But my God! You know, most of those people, you couldn't find out *who they are*. I don't know half of them. And the list gets longer every film. I think it says, "Legal services by so-and-so, so-and-so," you know. And so we're doomed (Laughter) to that sort of thing.

Well, I don't think you want to just see a bunch of names. And even if it's your mother or daughter or son or what, you're the only one that's going to know it. "Oh, look, there's Charlie's name!"

**SCHWARTZ:** (Laughs) Okay, well, maybe we won't show the credits during the rest of the retrospective, (Laughter) for all the films.

**ALTMAN:** Well, I try to use that space up, because I have to do it; so there's usually some good music going on...

**SCHWARTZ:** The way that you approach dialogue—there's something wonderful about it, which is that you don't feel like you always have to have people talking. You observe characters. Miranda Richardson, in her whole last scene, doesn't say anything. We just get to watch her think.

**ALTMAN:** That's what it is. And you know, different situations call for different things. And also, then,

the actors you get, these are the people that really do this work. And they have a different style. And I want to incorporate that. I want to take the positives, or the—what I want to see from them. And sometimes it's silence.

**SCHWARTZ:** I know this is something that you must be asked a lot, because acting is so important in your films, but how do you create the atmosphere on the set where this can happen?

**ALTMAN:** Oh... I have no way of answering. I don't know. I don't know. We just get up in the morning, and people show up, and you say, "Well, we're going to do this." And you're paying attention to the set and the props, and setting the camera, and then pretty soon the actors are there, and it's all happening.

**SCHWARTZ:** Harry Belafonte, who had done some wonderful movies in the late fifties, and then up through *Uptown Saturday Night*, into the seventies—this was, in a way, a comeback for him, as a film actor. Could you talk a bit about working with him?

**ALTMAN:** Well, Harry's the best. He's a very, very close friend of mine, and I love him dearly. And he and I worked for, oh, a long time. He made an appearance—he was in *The Player*. He made an appearance in *The Player*, as himself. And then... And he and I worked on an *Amos 'n' Andy* project for about three or four years. And I can't remember whether that was before, during... I think it was before we did *Kansas City*.

**SCHWARTZ:** Before this was made, right.

**ALTMAN:** Yeah. And he's a great artist, and he's a great person.

**SCHWARTZ:** What happened with the *Amos 'n' Andy* project? That was a fascinating idea.

**ALTMAN:** We just—it was too big. It was too big for us. It was too big a project. My ambitions, I think, were too high on it. It became extraordinarily expensive. And nobody wanted to pay for it because they said, "In the long run, who really cares?"

SCHWARTZ: What was it that made you want to do it? What was it about...

ALTMAN: What, *Amos 'n' Andy*?

SCHWARTZ: Yes.

ALTMAN: Well, I think the story of it is just—is fabulous. The beginning of vaudeville, and the music, and this whole history of these people coming from the slaves and—where they weren't even allowed musical instruments. And they made up their *own* musical instruments. And it just indicated to me that, you know, people are going to whistle in their life, no matter how tough it is. And it became a real history. It was a big, big part of this—Kansas City and American music. All these bands. Most of them were black guys. And they created a music that didn't exist anywhere else. And still doesn't.

SCHWARTZ: What I'd love to know about you and Harry Belafonte is what your discussions are like about politics, because you've both been so outspoken in the past few years.

ALTMAN: Well, we tend to agree on a lot of things.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay. So Union Station was rebuilt for the film?

ALTMAN: It [Union Station] was totally trashed. And I grew up, as a kid; some of my—when I was three years old, we would always have to go to the station to meet my Uncle Howard, when he was coming in for Christmas or these different times, and we'd go down... I remember I lost a balloon, one of those... And it went all the way to the ceiling. I just had—in my own memory—that was a big, big place in my life. And when we got there, we went to the city, and it was nothing. And we redid—they let us redo half of it. And then as they saw what was happening, they kind of supported us in other things. And I think that's still open.

SCHWARTZ: I think that there's a museum there, actually.

ALTMAN: Yeah, I think there's a museum there now. But it kept that building from going down. That was one of the original train stations. They were all—

the train stations like that were designed after some place in Germany.

SCHWARTZ : (Repeats audience question) Okay, so just the way—about [how] the political process often becomes a part of the film, the campaign and the election bringing people out.

ALTMAN: In some of those films, it's kind of what it's about. Certainly, *Nashville* was. But those things are, I think, they're very—they impress me. I think they're very important. I like to have a sense of when a story's going on or things are going on in the small thing, that they're set into a larger dynamic, with these elections and things. Anyway, I pay attention to it.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) How do you cast your films? How do you select actors?

ALTMAN: I kind of just kind of go to whoever I'm... If I meet a guy in a bar, and I'm getting ready to shoot a film, and I say, "Oh, listen, you want to be in my film?" (Laughter) I mean, they remind you of themselves, and... You know, we go after—we have certain people; you say, "Oh, I want so-and-so in this film." And you can't get them, for various reasons, and it just grows like *Topsy*, in a way. I don't know, really, how it happens. The phone starts ringing.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) If you could talk about your decision process: How do you decide which films to make?

ALTMAN: I decide which films to make by the ones I get the money to make. (Laughter) And that's the truth.

SCHWARTZ: Have you written many films that have not gotten made?

ALTMAN: Well, I've been *involved* in lots of films that didn't get made. But I've never done a script and then gone out and tried to sell it or make it. I've always done the film. It's a process—and I finally stopped putting my name on the credits, because there's so many names on the credits, and there's so many people that do all this stuff. And it doesn't mean anything. To give the credit in all the films I've made—say, "Who is the writer that was the most responsible for them?"—that would be the actors.

Because they're the ones that are improvising, and they're showing me what these characters are. And I'm just saying, "Ooh, that's great. Let's do this, let's do that."

SCHWARTZ: Well, I think everybody here knows you're being a little modest right now, about that, about your role.

ALTMAN: Well, yes and no. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: Just following up on that question about getting projects made, how much did *The Player* change things? You talked about that as your third comeback film, that you had been doing a lot of cable projects. And it seems like after *The Player*, things must've changed for you.

ALTMAN: Well, you know, it got more attention and got awards and all that, and you get... But that's always what happens. The most popular... The film of mine that's made the most money and the most—is *M\*A\*S\*H*. And I'll never over-shoot that, I don't think. I don't know. It's just, you know, you kind of just go through your life, and an occurrence happens. After *M\*A\*S\*H*, I could've done almost anything I wanted.

SCHWARTZ: Yeah.

ALTMAN: And a guy came to me with the *Brewster McCloud* idea, and I said, "Oh, let's do that." And it was—people—my agents and everybody said, "Oh, you don't want to do that. Let's go and get Fredric March and do something *really* big." (Laughter) But that's what I wanted to do. And then *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* was the same way. We just went up to Canada and made this cheap little Western.

SCHWARTZ: You didn't feel like something special was going on? I mean, you were actually, I think, around 44 when you made *M\*A\*S\*H*...

ALTMAN: Yeah.

SCHWARTZ: Because you had a lot of experience in series television. And then one after the other, *California Split*, *The Long Goodbye*... I mean, you're talking about these...

ALTMAN: Well, those all came rather—fairly easily.

SCHWARTZ: Okay. But they're quite—I mean, they really changed how films were made. They were very...

ALTMAN: And none of them really broke through. None of them was... *Nashville*, oddly enough, which most people know a lot about, was probably one of the lowest-grossing films I've ever made. And *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* was the lowest-grossing film. (Laughter) I mean, *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* just died when it came out. And then something happened in Europe or someplace, and it started popping up on these "Best Twenty," "Best Fifty Films" lists and things like that. But I don't think that many people bought tickets to see it.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Can you name some of the actors who were most surprising to you, in what they brought to the film or the performance?

ALTMAN: Well, Elliott Gould was great. What he brought to *The Long Goodbye* was just staggering. And I just followed him around. And I just finished working on this *A Prairie Home Companion*, this film that opens in June. And you're going to show it here.

SCHWARTZ: That's right, we're showing it on June 8.

ALTMAN: And I'd never worked with Meryl Streep before. And we shot the first day, a long, long scene with Meryl and Lily [Tomlin] and Lindsay Lohan and... And I went home that night, and I was *depressed*. I mean, she is so *good*. I went home, I told Kathryn [Reed, his wife], I said, "You know, I didn't have to be there." (Laughter) It wouldn't have made a whit's difference whether I was there or not. And she's not pushy, she's not... She's just the nicest person to *everybody*. But she just is 25, 30 percent above everybody. I mean, she just *knows*. It's just something in her. And so you don't interfere with that.

SCHWARTZ: Tell us about—I think Jennifer Jason Leigh is a great actress. What was she like to work with on this film?

ALTMAN: Well, she's great. Jennifer...

**SCHWARTZ:** And you worked with her father [Vic Morrow]. You directed her father in *Combat!*

**ALTMAN:** Well, yeah, in *Combat!* And her mother [Barbara Turner] has done screenplays for me. Actually worked as an actress for me once. But Jennifer—we got a lot of a criticism after this film came out about her acting, that she over-acted in this, she was too hammy. But I didn't think so, and that's exactly what I wanted. I thought her performance was delicious.

**SCHWARTZ:** I know her working process is incredibly intense, and she's somebody who does incredible preparation. But can you say anything about that?

**ALTMAN:** Well, these actors, when they do all that preparation, they don't tell me about it. (Laughter) You know, they do it. And they're very secretive about their process. They don't... You know, I don't talk to an actor very much, once we cast them. And we have a little blah-blah-blah about the picture. And then I usually bore them with, "Oh, I'm going to shoot it with this kind of a lens and that kind of camera." (Laughter) And you know, then we just go. And once you start shooting, you don't have time for those conversations. You're just dealing with the moment. And I think if we shoot a scene in any of these films on a— we shot it on a Tuesday; had we shot it on a Thursday, the whole film could've been different.

Many of my friends will sit down and do lots of readings, and they'll do rehearsals—they love to rehearse, and... And the actors always love to rehearse. I don't like rehearsing too much, because I—in most cases—because I think it gets tired. I like to have it really fresh, to my mind, so I can get excited about it. I think.

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** I just wanted to ask you about some of the recurring themes that you use from film to film. Like the American flag, et cetera, et cetera.

**ALTMAN:** Well, I don't really know. These things come up, and I don't really—am not really aware that I'm being that blatant. But usually, I'm running out of ideas. (Laughter) And so I'm reaching into something that: well, it worked before, and... (Laughter) I did a film called *Cookie's Fortune*, right after this [*Kansas City*]. (Applause) No, no, I did

another film before that, *Gingerbread Man*. But [in *Cookie's Fortune*, I had a scene with Lyle Lovett and Liv Tyler and Chris O'Donnell in a certain location. And we shot that scene. Then there was another scene with them, the same people. And we went out to the same location to set it up. And I was shooting that scene, and I said, "I've already shot this scene." And I realized that I had staged it and was doing it in exactly the same way I had done the scene before. And I thought, Well, I'm doomed. (Laughter) That's it. And it's evident. And I'm a little—I have a feeling I was—that many brain cells are dying while I sit here. And many of them went... They go away. Believe me. (Laughs)

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** What do you give the actors, actually, to begin with?

**SCHWARTZ:** Do you believe in a lot of rehearsal time? Or do you believe in being more spontaneous?

**ALTMAN:** No, no, no, no, I don't use—I'm too impatient for that. I don't know. I don't know. We talked about what kind of picture we want to make, what we're looking for. And I'm mainly trying to kick them to tell me. I'm trying to get *them* to tell *me* what they're going to deliver. Because they're the ones that are doing it, you know.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) Yes, about your interest in directing opera; what it's like...

**ALTMAN:** Well. I really don't even know how it started, but the dean of music at the University of Michigan called me, woke me up, and said, would I be interested in directing an opera, *The Rake's Progress*? And I said... And I was familiar with *The Rake's Progress*. And I said, "Well, I don't do that." I mean, "No, that's a mistake. I don't—I wouldn't know how to do that. I've got a tin ear, and music is something I can just enjoy, I can't contribute to." And he said, "Thank you, blah-blah-blah," and I hung up. And I turned over to go back to sleep, and I got (clicks tongue). I said, "Well, if I could put eighty people on a stage, and all these things..." And I called him back, and I said, "I can do that, if I can have eighty people on the stage all the time. If we can do..." He said, "Well, let's do it."

**AUDIENCE MEMBER:** How do you feel about other filmmakers referencing or paying homage to your work?

**ALTMAN:** Well, that's the nicest thing in the world, you know. It's like going to a dance—you've got this neat dress that you're wearing, and you see four other people wearing the same dress. (Laughter) It pisses you off in one way. But in the other way, you're kind of flattered. (Laughter)

**SCHWARTZ:** Just following on this question about other directors copying you or paying homage to you, I think one thing that you were doing very early on was this idea of multiple storylines, moving around freely. And that happens a lot now. Film is getting more and more nonlinear. But you were doing that, really, first.

**ALTMAN:** Well, yeah, I was. I mean, I did that—I did. And I think the reason I did that is because if what I'm doing gets sort of boring, I can always cut away to those two guys and then come back. It can help you in truncating the process. It's kind of chicken. It covers my back.

**SCHWARTZ:** How did you make the breakthrough to full feature films?

**ALTMAN:** The first film I made, I was in Kansas City doing industrial films, and there was a guy there who was—his father owned a chain of theaters, movie theaters. And he was kind of a bon vivant character. And he said, "Let's make a film." And I said, "Okay." And I wrote this film, *The Delinquents*, in a weekend, and cast it, and we started shooting it. We made it for \$65,000. And it was really terrible. But Hitchcock saw it, for some—one of those weird things, and asked to meet with me. And I met with him, and he was doing his half-hour series, and they were just starting an hour series, called *Suspicion*, I think it was called. They were shooting it in New York. And he said, "We have never—we don't go out and shoot on locations. We build sets." He says, "And I need somebody that knows how to do that." So he actually hired me—although I wouldn't take the job, but I *did* the job, but I wouldn't allow [myself] to be—I wouldn't take the money for it, because I didn't want to be categorized as a production manager. But I set up a film in New York, one of those *Suspicion*s. And a Scottish director named Robert... Blah-blah-blah...

(Laughter) MacBlah-blah (Laughter) did this film. And I came in. And then for doing that for Hitchcock, they then gave me the [Alfred] *Hitchcock Presents*, which was the first kind of professional thing I did. And I did one of those, and then I did—and they gave me another one. I did another one, with Joseph Cotten. And they worked out pretty good. Then they gave me another script, and I was becoming the fair-haired boy there. And there was a woman that really ran that whole television thing for him, named Joan Harrison. And Miss Harrison gave me this script, and I read it, and I said, "Well, Joan, you don't want to do this. I can't do this." (I should've done anything!) I said, "I can't do this. This is not a good script. It's not going to work. The stories are ma-ma-ma." And I just turned it down. And she said, "Oh, all right." Well, I found out later that it was her script. (Laughter) So that was the end of my Hitchcock days. But because of the Hitchcock mystique and name and all that, and I had done two of those, I then got a job doing *Whirlybirds*, which was a helicopter and two fools running around and... I did a hundred of those; I just did...

(Answers audience question) I am a big fan of that, of [Ingmar] Bergman. I am a *big* fan of Bergman's. One of my favorite films is *Persona*. And also, David Lean. I am very impressed with *Brief Encounter*. And then Federico Fellini and those... And I started really paying more attention to those than I did the... I took a lot. I get a lot of credit. People say, "Oh, you started all—you do all that overlapping dialogue. You started that." I say, "I didn't start that. Howard Hawks started that." And I used to just love his pictures. Not for the content or anything else, but just for the fact that they went so fast. I stole that.

**SCHWARTZ:** (Repeats audience question) Okay, would you say you have a bleak or dark...?

**ALTMAN:** Well, you have to tell me that; I can't. (Laughter) I don't think—I think there're two sides to every coin. And I think there is a dark side. The *Prairie Home Companion*, which we're just starting to release now... And everybody—the critics, everybody who's seen it likes it a lot. We're getting really, really good responses to it. They say, "Oh, this is terrific!" And we've had very, very few negative things. But nothing came out and said, "Oh, this is the greatest thing since...hash."

(Laughter) The critics, they're saying, "Oh, we love this, we love this." I didn't, myself, think the picture had any particular thrust—or some words like that—except I thought Lily was very good, and my God, Meryl and, you know. And they've all been positive stuff. But there's been a little caveat, because they don't really know... I think that the seriousness that one finds in *Brokeback Mountain* or films... doesn't seem to exist here, because it seems too easy, too facile. And they don't quite know how to praise it. But they don't un-praise it. So I'm kind of anxious to see what happens when this gets out here this summer.

**SCHWARTZ:** I think you like to mix things up. I think *M\*A\*S\*H* was a war film, came out during Vietnam, but it's a comedy. This movie, *Kansas City*, that we just saw, has melodrama and music. So I think a lot of times, they're hard to pigeonhole.

**ALTMAN:** Well, and they should be. But they're kind of funny about what they say about... And yet, when you really look at the *Prairie Home Companion*, it is all about death. Everybody dies. Or is... (Laughter) And everybody's... But they sing. (Laughter) And they're happy.

**SCHWARTZ:** But to say that people die is sort of telling it like it is. It doesn't mean you have a bleak...

**ALTMAN:** I know, but nobody noticed it, is what I'm saying. It didn't... (Laughter) These people said, "Well, there's a very dark place in there, when this guy's..." L.Q. Jones dies. And ultimately, all of them do.

**SCHWARTZ:** But still come see the movie, please. (Laughter)

**ALTMAN:** Well, actors are—why I say they lie: they have to protect themselves so much, because they go in and no matter if they come in for one day and do one job, they have no control over that film. If they're Meryl Streep, they have no control over that film, other than just an economic control, really. And so they're really at the mercy of me, and the editing, and... I suppose I should—when I first finished *M\*A\*S\*H*, Dick Zanuck—Darryl Zanuck—came back with a couple of French cuties from the Riviera, where he was kind of spending out his days. And he came back, and they looked at my film. They had two other war [movies] going on.

They had *Tora! Tora! Tora!* and *Patton*, which were big films, and then they had this *M\*A\*S\*H*. And the studio people saw it and they said, "All the operating scenes have to go. We're not going to have any of that stuff in it. And this film is—get it shorter. It's going right to the drive-ins." And it was doomed. It was finished. And these two girls that Zanuck had with him just loved the picture. And they said, "Oh, you don't want to change anything in that," and blah-blah-blah. And then we went to San Francisco and had a sneak preview up there, when *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* was playing, in a big house, three thousand people. And they just went nuts over that movie. And [Richard] Zanuck, the younger, happened to be there because there was a Stanford football game. So he went up to see the game, and he wrote the plane off for going to the preview. (Laughter) (And it's because I said something like that that I didn't work for Fox again for—until he was gone.) But...

Oh... actors. When I say lying, I'm... They will tend to—they'll protect themselves. They'll say, "Oh, yeah, that's a good idea." And they'll try anything. They've got a really tough spot out there, because they don't have any control, really, over their work when it's finished. And if they do have enough power to have—if they're Tom Cruise people, they do have enough power that they can control what it is, and so they *make* what it is, and it's all shit. (Laughter, applause) So I feel I have to stay away from those very powerful actors, because they're not going to want to do [it]. They got too many people whispering in their ears.

**SCHWARTZ:** We have a show, *Jazz '34*, coming up, so just as a last question, if you could just tell us a bit about that project.

**ALTMAN:** Oh, boy. (Laughter) Well, all the music that was in *Kansas City*, we shot all of those songs and things full-blast. And *Jazz '34* is simply a musical about the music. It's just all the music, you know.

**SCHWARTZ:** Well, thank you. I'm sorry we're going to have to stop, but we will see you again on June 8 with *A Prairie Home Companion*. (Applause) Thank you.

**ALTMAN:** Thank you.



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