



A black and white photograph of a vintage car, likely a Rolls-Royce Phantom II, parked in the rain. The car is the central focus, with its license plate reading 'NP 5462'. Several people in period clothing are standing around the car. On the left, a man in a suit and a woman in a long coat are talking under a dark umbrella. In the center, a man in a dark coat stands near the driver's side. On the right, a woman in a long coat stands looking towards the car. The rain is falling heavily, creating a soft, hazy atmosphere. The background is a stone wall.

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## CAST & CREW

**Eileen Atkins** Mrs Croft

**Bob Balaban** Morris Weissman

**Alan Bates** Jennings

**Charles Dance** Raymond Stockbridge

**Stephen Fry** Inspector Thompson

**Michael Gambon** William McCordle

**Richard E. Grant** George

**Tom Hollander** Anthony Meredith

**Derek Jacobi** Probert

**Kelly Macdonald** Mary Maceachran

**Helen Mirren** Mrs Wilson

**Jeremy Northam** Ivor Novello

**Clive Owen** Robert Parks

**Ryan Phillippe** Henry Denton

**Maggie Smith** Constance Trentham

**Geraldine Somerville** Louisa Stockbridge

**Kristen Scott Thomas** Sylvia McCordle

**Sophie Thompson** Dorothy

**Emily Watson** Elsie

**James Wilby** Freddie Nesbitt

Casting **Mary Selway**

Costumes **Jenny Beavan**

Music **Patrick Doyle**

Editor **Tim Squyres** A.C.E.

Production Design **Stephen Altman**

Director of Photography **Andrew Dunn** B.S.C.

Co-Producers **Jane Frazer, Joshua Astrachan**

Executive Producers **Jane Barclay, Sharon Harel, Robert Jones, Hannah Leader**

Producers **Robert Altman, Bob Balaban, David Levy**

Written by **Julian Fellowes**

Based Upon an Idea by **Robert Altman** and **Bob Balaban**

Directed by **Robert Altman**



# GOSFORD PARK

by Sheila O'Malley

The byzantine rituals of the British class system may seem like a strange topic for the Kansas City-born Robert Altman, a high-risk gambler with an antiauthoritarian streak 10 miles long. But as a staunch outsider to the mainstream, he spent his career – in films as diverse as *MASH* (1970), *McCabe & Mrs. Miller* (1971), *Nashville* (1975), *The Player* (1992), *Short Cuts* (1993) – dissecting hierarchies, and what could be more hierarchical than British society? The society on display in his 2001 film *Gosford Park* is presented with such fetishistic detail it becomes obvious these meticulously observed rituals were designed to raise the bar for entry. 'Upstairs' was built to be impenetrable. Poet John Betjeman lampooned this in his 1958 poem 'How to Get on in Society', one verse of which reads:

*Phone for the fish knives, Norman  
As cook is a little unnerved;  
You kiddies have crumpled the serviettes  
And I must have things daintily served.*

Novelist Nancy Mitford gleefully exposed the secrets of her class in her 1956 book *Noblesse Oblige*, where she observed, "An aristocracy in a republic is like a chicken whose head has been cut off: it may run about in a lively way, but in fact it is dead." Her pal Evelyn Waugh, also a documenter of the End Days of the British aristocracy, contributed an 'open letter' to *Noblesse Oblige*, including this passage: "There are subjects too intimate for print. Surely class is one? The vast and elaborate structure grew up almost in secret. Now it shows alarming signs of dilapidation. Is this the moment to throw it open to the heavy-footed public? Yes, I think it is."

Altman loved throwing open the doors of closed worlds "to the heavy-footed public" and *Gosford Park* opens doors within doors within doors. The film takes place in December 1932, just one month before Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. Nobody in the film, upstairs people or down, has any idea their interconnected life is headed for the cataclysm. In Altman's hands, English murder-mystery is a portrait of a world about to vanish from the face of the earth. In less than a decade, that grand old house will probably be commandeered by the military for troop barracks and hospitals.

Longtime friends Bob Balaban and Altman had always discussed working together, and when Altman mentioned how much he wanted to do a murder-mystery Balaban saw the possibilities. Altman loved riffing on familiar genres. As Robert Holker observed in his book

*A Cinema of Loneliness* (1980), Altman needed “[Hollywood’s] conventions as material to dismantle and reconsider”. In their initial discussions, Altman made it clear he was more interested in the ‘downstairs’ people, the black-clad servants who normally float by in the background in such films. What if the aristocrats were seen primarily through the servants’ eyes? This was the spark that lit the flame. They reached out to Julian Fellowes, an actor and television writer, who knew this world first-hand, to write the script (which would win the Oscar). Altman and Balaban described the film as “*Ten Little Indians* meets *The Rules of the Game*”. The connection to Jean Renoir’s 1939 masterpiece is instructive. *Gosford Park* dissects the rigid class system of aristocratic England in the same way *La Règle du jeu* goes after the decadence of aristocratic France. In both films, you can see the cracks in the facade of an entire society. Altman achieves this initially by taking us into the house via the servants’ quarters not the front door, and throughout he never shows an ‘upstairs’ person without a ‘downstairs’ person present.

In a confusing collage (made even more confusing since the servants are referred to by their masters’ and mistresses’ names), we meet all the characters in the first 20 minutes of the film. Upstairs, Lady Sylvia (Kristin Scott Thomas) and Sir William McCordle (Michael Gambon) greet their guests. Their sulky daughter, Lady Isobel (Camilla Rutherford), is embroiled in an increasingly fraught argument with the married Freddie Nesbitt (James Wilby). We only learn what this argument is about close to the end of the film, and even then, it’s gone so quickly you might miss it. Freddie’s dowdy wife Mabel (Claudie Blakley) suffers the scorn of the other guests for being so publicly humiliated by her husband (also, she doesn’t travel with a maid). Sylvia has two married sisters, Lady Louisa Stockbridge (Geraldine Somerville), in the midst of some sort of affair with William, and Lady Lavinia Meredith (Natasha Wightman), whose desperate husband, Anthony (Tom Hollander), makes a nuisance of himself asking William for money. The great Maggie Smith plays Sylvia’s prickly Aunt Constance, terrified that William will cut off her allowance. Over-reliance on ‘the help’ is apparent in one of the earliest scenes where Constance asks her brand-new ladies’ maid Mary (Kelly Macdonald) to twist the cap off the Thermos bottle for her.

Downstairs buzzes with its own equally fraught cast of characters. There’s the stern Mrs Wilson (Helen Mirren), head of the household, who says at one point, “I’m the perfect servant. I have no life.” Mrs Croft (Eileen Atkins) is the proprietary head of the kitchen, in a bitter struggle with Mrs Wilson for dominance. This relationship ends up being the key that unlocks the most secret door of the film, Alan Bates plays Jennings, the stern proper butler, and Richard E. Grant, Derek Jacobi, Jeremy Swift and Adrian Scarborough play footmen and servants. Clive Owen is Robert Parks, a servant for one of the visiting guests, whose mysteriously independent spirit is cause for much gossip. Emily Watson plays Elsie, the head maid, who takes newbie Mary under her generous wing (and, as a bonus to us, explains how the household works). There’s Bertha (Teresa Churcher), a kitchen maid who appears to be the only person on the premises enjoying an active lusty sex life, and maid Dorothy (Sophie Thompson), in a state of unrequited love for Mr Jennings.

To remind us of the insularity of this world, Altman gives us four outsiders. Mary is the naïve newcomer who turns into an amateur Girl Detective, the only one who discovers the truth of what happened and why. Real-life movie star Ivor Novello (Jeremy Northam) steps into this fictional story, visiting his cousin Sylvia, his Hollywood ‘career’ condescendingly tolerated by his relatives. Novello has brought with him Hollywood producer Morris Weissman (Bob Balaban) and Weissman’s ‘servant’ (i.e. paid-lover and undercover actor), Henry Denton (Ryan Philippe), who affects a Scottish accent, and wears a black derby like a figure from Magritte.

The murder of William McCordle happens at almost exactly the midpoint. Altman does not bury the lede. Early on, long before the murder, there’s a show-stopping zoom in to a cluster of bottles marked, conspicuously, POISON. Later, Bertha stands over a row of carving knives, remarking that one is missing. There’s another zoom in to a bottle of poison, with a voice saying, off-camera, “Everyone’s got something to hide.” The film is so filled with red herrings it’s a wonder the characters don’t trip over them. As the film progresses, it becomes clear *Gosford Park* is not a ‘whodunit’ at all. Altman joked in a 2001 interview at the AFI that it’s more of a “who-cares-who-did-it”.

What could have been an exercise in style is instead a richly textured, funny – and occasionally heartbreaking – film about the human condition. There isn’t just one secret onscreen. The air rustles with the ghostly whispers of thwarted hopes, disappointments, dead dreams. Altman’s films are filled with people withholding information and yet who constantly give themselves away. A perfect example is the nightclub scene in *Nashville* when Tom Frank (Keith Carradine) sings ‘I’m Easy’, and multiple women in the audience assume he’s singing about them, including Linnea Reese (Lily Tomlin), but she’s the only one who’s right. *Gosford Park* is one of those films that reveals more and more depths with repeat viewings.

Altman gave only one direction to the huge cast of *Gosford Park*: “All of you are the lead. Whenever you’re on the screen, your story is the main story.” Some of the cast members were living legends, others had only a couple of credits to their name. It’s not every director who could convince the illustrious Derek Jacobi to take such a small role, but as Corey Fischer (who appeared in *MASH*, *Brewster McCLOUD* [1970] and *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*) observed, Altman wanted an “entourage of actors who were not playing primary characters who would enliven those edges and give the final work a special feel that he became known for”. Altman was always more interested in the edges than the bullseye.

This informed his signature camera movements, the zoom, and the slow drifting pan. Close-ups are rare in his films. The cinematographer for *Gosford Park* was Andrew Dunn (in his first collaboration with Altman; they would pair up again in 2003 for *The Company*), and in the film the camera floats through those gorgeous rooms, with seemingly no purpose, rarely landing. When the camera zooms in on something, the voices continue above and



around the image, dis-embodied from the camera's actions. Robert Holker observed in his book that Altman's zoom creates a "subjective sense of vagueness and disorientation", and makes any given environment "a place of inquiry rather than accepting it as a pre-existent whole". Fellowes observed that "[Altman] creates this illusion in the mind of the spectator that they are directing the camera. It becomes an autonomous being that is moving around the room. Because you are the viewer, you take responsibility for the image."

Because this is a film with two completely separate worlds, coursing along in parallel lines with only occasional intersections, the stylistic differences between upstairs and downstairs are acute. The upstairs was filmed in an actual country estate, and the colours are cool and elegant, pale greens and pinks, ivories, with lots of space for people to wander. The servants' areas (created with meticulous detail on a sound stage by production designer Stephen Altman), are dark and deep, punctuated by shafts of light from the outside (these images are straight from a Vermeer, a Rembrandt, a Caravaggio). The shadows are pitch-black, threatening to engulf entire rooms. Some of the 'downstairs' sequences – servants settling down to their dinner seen through mottled panes of glass, Clive Owen lounging on his bed smoking, surrounded by dark shadows – are among the most beautiful and painterly shots in Altman's entire career.

Altman spent a lifetime in resistance to the establishment, and despised snobbery of all kinds. The snobbery on display in *Gosford Park* is extreme (watch for Lady Sylvia's expression when Weissman asks her where the telephone is, or Aunt Constance's reactions to... everything). However, the upstairs people in *Gosford Park* are not monsters. In many ways they are more trapped than the downstairs people. In their rejection of modernity, their disinterest in movies and current music, they wed themselves to the past, to irrelevance. When Ivor Novello entertains the guests at the piano with contemporary songs (the real-life Novello was also a composer), the reactions range from smiling tolerance to outright scorn. But the servants, drawn to the music, drift upstairs, loll on the dark staircases, huddle in nearby rooms, in a reverie of rapt listening. They are the future. Elsie, smoking cigarettes and flipping through movie magazines, staunchly walking away from her job into the unknown, is the future.

*Gosford Park* was critically acclaimed upon its release, a hit with audiences, and nominated for seven Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Supporting Actress (twice, for Helen Mirren and Maggie Smith), Best Original Screenplay, Best Art Direction and Best Costume Design. Only Fellowes won for his script. But the film's stature, if anything, has risen in the intervening years. Stephen Holden, in his review for the *New York Times*, states the case plainly, "What makes the achievement of *Gosford Park* all the more remarkable is that Mr Altman is 76. If the movie's cool assessment of the human condition implies the dispassionate overview of a man who has seen it all, the energy that crackles from the screen suggests the clear-sighted joie de vivre of an artist still deeply engaged in the world."

Altman has almost no heirs, although Paul Thomas Anderson (handpicked by Altman to take over *A Prairie Home Companion* [2006] should he become too ill to continue) is in that rare ballpark. Altman could not be classified as an optimist, or even a 'humanist'. He knew people were selfish and often cruel, and he did not shy away from that in his films. (Just ask poor Hot Lips in *MASH*.) But he was a curious man, and curious about people, who they were, why they did what they did. He always said he wanted to see things he hadn't seen before. He wanted to discover it along the way. Kenneth Branagh, who worked with Altman in 1998's *The Gingerbread Man* observed, "He was not a man who talked much about the first act or third act or the story-arc stuff. He didn't want knowable, tangible coherence."

Who murdered William McCordle is not exactly irrelevant, it's just that it's not the point. The point is the tender and yet electric possibilities in Mary and Robert's connection. The point is the coiled intensity of Mrs Wilson folding napkins, vibrating with bottled-up pain, or the two maids dancing together as Ivor Novello plays an up-tempo song in the next room. The point is Elsie's proud indomitable walk out of the house, head held high. She's going to be fine.

Altman once said, "The greatest films are the ones that leave you not able to explain, but you know that you have experienced something special. I've always had this feeling that the perfect response to a film or a piece of work of mine would be if someone got up and said, 'I don't know what it is, but it's right.' That's the feeling you want – 'That's right' – and it comes from four or five layers down; it comes from the inside rather than the outside."

The people in *Gosford Park* are obsessed with and devoted to the 'outside' of things, the forms of politeness, the placement of silverware, the proper pouring of tea. And yet the film itself comes beautifully from the inside.

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## ALTMAN ON ALTMAN: GOSFORD PARK

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*The following interview was first published in Altman on Altman in 2006. Reprinted with permission.*

**David Thompson:** *What brought you to England to do a period film?*

**Robert Altman:** Bob Balaban has been a friend of mine for years – he’s sort of a Renaissance man, an actor, producer, and director. And he said, “Can’t we do something together?” I said to him, “I tell you what, I’ve never done a murder mystery, you know? A whodunit set in a big house, *Ten Little Indians*, an Agatha Christie kind of murder mystery. I’d like to jump into that genre if we could find something.” So Bob read everything by Agatha Christie that hadn’t been done and said, “They’re all exactly the same, there’s nothing there.” So he started reading more obscure material from that period, but that all turned out to be similar stuff. So I said, “Well, what we want isn’t there. We want a house where everyone’s invited, the whole thing.” And we went to Eileen Atkins and Jean Marsh, who had done *Upstairs, Downstairs*, neither of whom I knew, to see if they could come up with an outline. What they did was fine and excellent, but the exact opposite of what I wanted to do – it was rather sentimental. But they were very generous about it.

Then Bob came up with Julian Fellowes, who had been working with him on another project for Anthony Hopkins. And I literally hired Julian on the phone. I’d never met him nor read anything by him. He did a rather complete outline, and I got excited by it, so he came to California and we made some changes, changed some elements, and it kind of grew. I approached Eileen to play a role, thinking, “Gee, she won’t want to do this,” but she was thrilled. In fact, everyone who became involved in the project was very generous, and we encountered very little of the neuroses and paranoia you usually run into.

I knew we were going to have a lot of people in the cast, but by casting someone like Maggie Smith I knew we weren’t going to have a problem with knowing who she was each time you saw her. It was very important to help the audience separate and keep track of who’s who. Also, everyone liked the script, and the actors were very keen to be part of it.



**DT:** *There was a lot of comment about how you required the actors to be available to you throughout the shoot.*

**RA:** Part of the deal. So many American actors will say, "I'd love to be in your film, six days, hell, I'll be there." And I'd say, "No, this is ten weeks..." Then their agents come in, and they don't want them to do it. In *Gosford Park*, Alan Bates worked for five days a week for the first six and a half weeks of shooting, and I don't think he had five words to say – he was bubbling in the background there. But he was there all the time. I found that the philosophy of English actors – and I think it's related to the theatre – was that they were all there and knew what they were doing. And I never saw an agent the whole time I was shooting. If I had any American actors who would let their agents near us, they would have been out measuring trailers and saying, "He has seventeen more steps to walk to the set than she does. I want my client's trailer moved closer." And then everything falls apart.

**DT:** *Was tackling a period drama in a country foreign to you a worry?*

**RA:** I'm sort of an Anglophile. I think most Americans are. We share a language and a literature, so it's in our genes, I guess. I don't know who the American antecedents of this type of murder mystery are – perhaps [Nathaniel] Hawthorne. But we didn't say, "Well, if we do it in England it'll be this kind of picture." We just followed the arrow where it took us. Now, given the English setting, my problem was how do I get it right? So Julian, who is 'to the manor born', became our technical advisor as well and was on the set for just about every scene we shot. We also had a housemaid, a butler and a cook, all in their mid to late eighties, who had been in service in this period. They were available to the actors all the time. I said, "I don't want to have any situations where the drama is more important than the truth." I wanted behaviour and manners to be right, as I knew I would be under scrutiny. I didn't want people saying, "Oh, that's an American coming over and telling us how to clean our scullery."

**DT:** *Why did you bring American characters into the piece – the movie producer and his young companion?*

**RA:** I needed a voice that in a way would be *my* voice, that could respond to the customs and behaviour that I would find surprising, so I needed a surrogate in the film. I think having the producer of Charlie Chan films took away the Merchant-Ivory/Jane Austen kind of approach to these things. It allowed me in the room. But I don't say that to be derogatory to Merchant-Ivory – in fact, had they not done their films, *Gosford Park* wouldn't have been made, as there wouldn't have been a reference. The first people I called were Ismail [Merchant] and [Merchant-Ivory screenwriter] Ruth [Praver Jhabvala] to ask for their advice, and they gave us a lot of help.

**DT:** *Did you ever feel in danger of creating what is often referred to in Britain as 'heritage cinema', Merchant-Ivory being the most famous example?*

**RA:** I didn't want to confuse the two. I didn't want to copy anything. I wanted to take the elements that the audience would be familiar with and present them properly, because most of the period films done about the 1920s and 1930s are not very accurate. We went through a few artisans in hiring our crew, who said they knew about these things, but we'd look at them and say, "Well, they're simply wrong. I mean, they didn't use that fork, and they didn't put tablecloths on the table, and they didn't have breakfast served to them, and so on."

I mean, we're in a cycle with movies in our lives, I don't think there is a policeman alive today who didn't learn his behaviour from looking at films. Nor a gangster... And when the World Trade Center was attacked, everybody said, "What's going on? Are they making a movie?" So I was determined not to copy other movies that were wrong. And we had really good technical advice and looked into it very carefully.

**DT:** *There's no question that your camera style in Gosford Park is very distinctive.*

**RA:** I wanted to take the preciousness out of the period drama. The minute you go back in time, you have people talking more precisely, more slowly. That's how we think they behaved in those drawing rooms, and it simply isn't true. The only way I know it isn't true is that I lived at that time, and I saw my mother and father and my aunt and my uncles and how they behaved, and everything wasn't that formal and precise. The way to take the formality out of it was in the camera shots. Normally the camera is very precise – I mean, *Brideshead Revisited* and all of those things. There's a shot and everything is perfect; you cut in while the person says their line. I said, "I don't want to do that." And I decided to do what I had done in *The Long Goodbye*, that is, "We're going to move the camera constantly, but arbitrarily, not in any rhythm that you would think belongs to the action." If the snapper line was "Did you love him?" followed by "I hated him," then instead of going for a close-up on the person who says that, they'd be on their way out of the door. It might be off-screen. So you make the audience find the drama in the situation, rather than serve it up to them.

**DT:** *Do your editors find this difficult to deal with?*

**RA:** As Geri [Geraldine Peroni] was doing something else at the time, my editor on this film was Tim Squyres, who does all of Ang Lee's films. He was working on the material for four weeks in America while I was shooting in England and didn't know what to make of it at first, because this isn't the way it's supposed to be... But in the end he got it just fine. If somebody asked me why I did it this way, I'd say, "The truth of the matter is I'm trying to make it sloppy and ragged. I'm trying to make it more difficult." In my mind we serve the

audience up most stuff. We put it in front of them, and we don't make them do any work. They fall asleep or they're just not that interested. But if I can make them move their body – and I sit in on screenings and look at the backs of people's heads – if I can see those heads bobbing, then I know I've got people into the film.

**DT:** *How does it affect the lighting of your scenes?*

**RA:** Using more than one camera saves time. The cutting is easier, because the actors are always in the right place, and unless you are lighting for one shot to create a Vermeer, you simply light the arena and throw the actors into it. I'm not trying to make the kind of film where the close-up is lit quite differently from the two-shot to make the girl look radiant, and you can't move out of the light. Though they make it so it matches, it really changes totally.

**DT:** *Why did you choose Andrew Dunn as your cinematographer?*

**RA:** The reason I chose him was seeing *The Madness of King George* on video, and I couldn't figure out what it was that made it so compelling, except that there seemed to be a hot spot in every frame. There was always one place where there was a kind of a blow-out, which gave depth to it. If you see white light in a frame of film, you can't see the details of what it's covering, and that means there's a mystery to it, there's more in there than your eye is getting.

**DT:** *From what I witnessed on set, your way of using cameras had a strong influence on the way the actors performed.*

**RA:** With the two cameras on tracks running around and moving, and the actors out there going through their stuff, they don't know whether they're on camera or not, they don't know if it's a close-up... So suddenly they're relieved of the responsibility of saying, "Oh, this is my close-up. I'd better be good here." They figure out, "I'd better be good all the time because I don't know whether they're getting me or not." I think that relieves them, in a way, but it also throws them back more into the theatre. Many of them were theatre actors, of course. In a case like this, all these people became peers, so there weren't three leads and six supporting actors and then the extras. Everybody was a peer and the behaviour was quite different. Also, when there's that many of them, they tend to police themselves, because nobody wants to be the bad boy, no one's going to throw a tantrum or become difficult or not come out of their dressing room.

In this film, the downstairs people were not allowed to have any make-up, except if they were putting it on to go out. I said, "They didn't wear it." And they might say, "Well, don't you have to balance the lighting?" I'd say, "No, don't worry about that." Suddenly, they're in the arena and their own behaviour becomes consistent with the behaviour of their character.

**DT:** *Gosford Park had a screenplay by Julian Fellowes, a man well steeped in the peculiar ways of British aristocracy – his wife is Lady-in-Waiting to Princess Michael of Kent – which took into account the particular manners of the different classes in Britain and a period manner. Did you still allow the actors to improvise to some degree?*

**RA:** Well, if you have a dinner scene, with twelve or fourteen people at the table and five servants attending to them, there would be a linear progression in that. The scene might open with Maggie Smith saying, "Anybody want to play bridge after dinner"? And it ends when somebody drops their teacup in the soup. So we'd start there, with everybody knowing who their character is, and we know when we get to the teacup we're going to stop. In the meantime, I just let them talk, and they're very good at it. And, of course, we had microphones on everybody. When we look at the dailies, we've got maybe three or four mikes mixed, because that's all the mixer can do at the time. But when we cut the film, we find things coming up in the dialogue I never heard. So we fold these things in, and it makes the soufflé a lot tastier.

**DT:** *I noticed when you were shooting that you rarely referred to the script.*

**RA:** I wouldn't look at the script unless I had to check something. I had a person to do that for me. And I don't learn the script. I can't tell you the number of times we would do a scene, and I'd say, "That's great, OK, let's move on." And the script girl would say, "But she didn't say anything about stealing the toilet water." And I'd say, "Well, that's the point of the scene, we're gonna do one more and get the toilet water bit back in." It's because I'm not looking for that. I'm not trying to underscore the plot. I'm really interested in the behaviour of the people.

**DT:** *The one character who actually existed was Ivor Novello. Why did you introduce him to the party?*

**RA:** He is the only real person that we referred to and used in the film. I was sitting at the my desk, and the room I look into is a library, where I keep all my thirty-five years' worth of research stuff. I was thinking about how to get indigenous music into the film, without having Georgie Stoll conducting an orchestra. And I remembered research I had done over thirty years ago for the World War I project, *The Chicken and the Hawk*, and on the shelves was all this stuff about Ivor Novello. So I pulled it out and started going through it, and it was exactly the same period. So we added Ivor as a character, and by having to be fairly accurate with the way we treated him, that gave credence to the fictional characters.

**DT:** *What's revealing is that not all the characters react to him in the same way.*

**RA:** Well, the posh people aren't into that form of entertainment. But all of the downstairs people were his real audience, and he probably had more work out there and was more

popular than Noël Coward. So his character gave us what I call a real good clothes line to hang stuff on. He was not posh – his mother was a schoolteacher – but he was accepted into this group because he was an entertainer and a movie star. It was a bit like having Bobby Darin to dinner.

**DT:** Like your other multi-cast films, did you plan to have a tour guide?

**RA:** Our philosophy was that we would tell the story through below-stairs gossip. Kelly Macdonald becomes our tour guide. She's a maid to Maggie Smith and a novice. She's new to everything, so we're able to see things as she's told what is what, and any time I had to have something explained, I would have her there to have it explained to. She's the thread that takes us from the first to the last shot.

**DT:** Do you see Gosford Park as a portrait of a society in decline?

**RA:** The film was set during the hunting season in November 1932, the last shooting season before the fall of the Reichstag, which was also the end of that upstairs-downstairs world of indentured servitude. Society was opening up for women in particular; the social structure was changing. A lot of it had to do with increased communication and transportation. Previously, if a fourteen-year-old girl was born in a small village, sleeping with four sisters in one bed, she couldn't really get an education or find a job anywhere, and if she wasn't going to get married she would have to go into service to be taken care of and live in safety. Otherwise she went to London and became a prostitute. There weren't any other options until after World War I, and then by the end of World War II this form of servitude had gone, though there are echoes of it everywhere. We saw hundreds of stately homes, in each of which forty servants had worked indoors to handle a household of four people.

**DT:** Before you began filming, one precedent for Gosford Park used in the pre-publicity was Jean Renoir's 1939 classic *The Rules of the Game* (La Règle du jeu), which, of course, also dealt with class conflict over a weekend at a country house when a shooting party gathers together.

**RA:** Although we went in saying it's *Ten Little Indians*, I became more interested in it being like *The Rules of the Game*. It was like having the Iraqis and the Americans living in the same house. It was these two totally different societies, who had totally different opinions of each other. To me, that became the drama, what the film was about. The upstairs people who live by these particular rules, they're not very deep, they don't go past the surface much. There's much less of an infrastructure than below stairs. You could say the downstairs people are more stupid, because their hierarchy is more complex. But their lives are fuller.

I was constantly trying to underscore the plot, because I was more interested in the behaviour of the characters. I talked freely at the time of the film's release about the fact

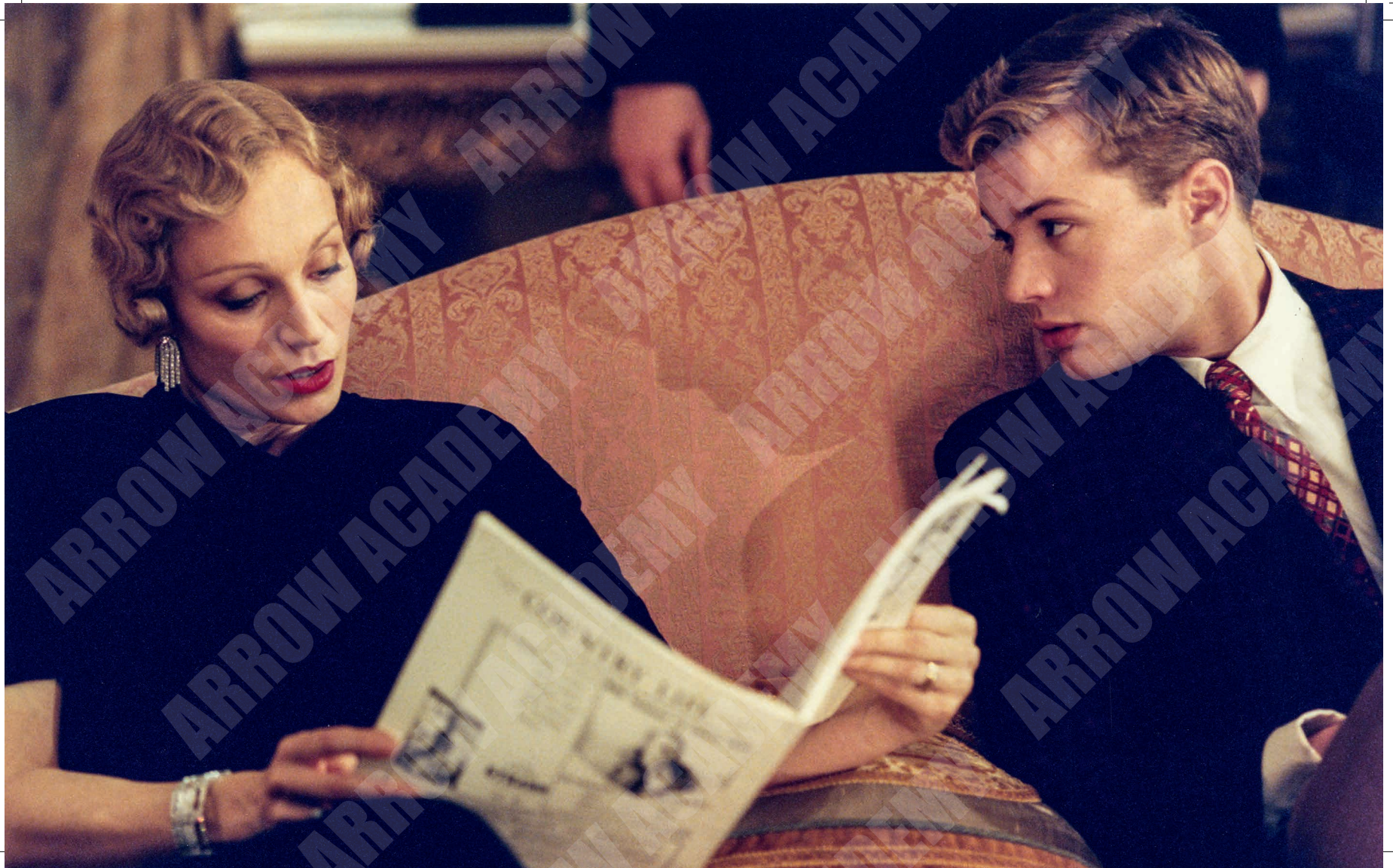
there's a murder taking place, because I didn't want people to spend the first hour of the picture wondering what's going to happen. If I take an audience of two hundred people, twenty of them would get it right off the bat. They wouldn't say, "Oh, here's the guy, this is happening here, this is happening there..." I didn't go to great pains to disguise or hide anything.

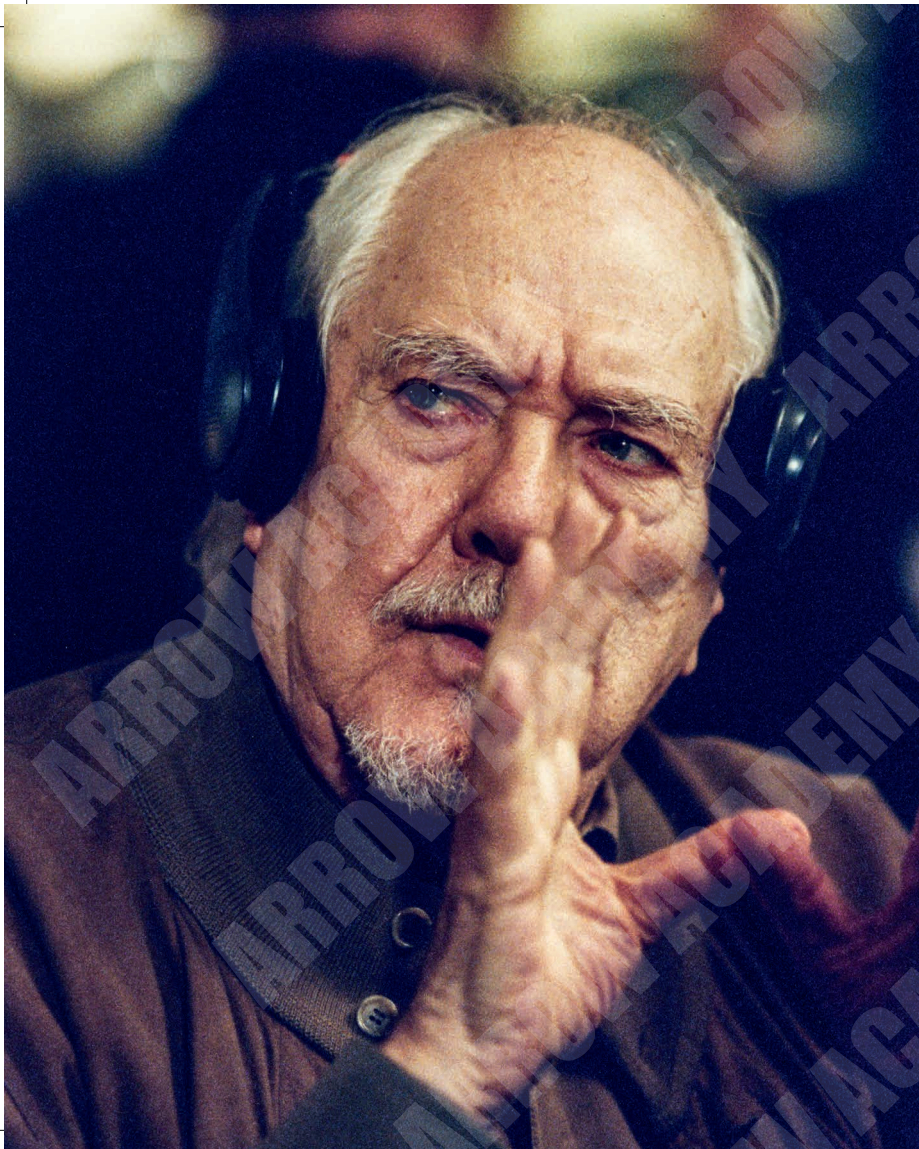
**DT:** I believe a significant change in the script was made when shooting was under way.

**RA:** After six and a half weeks of shooting, I saw Helen Mirren and Eileen Atkins in the lunch hall together in costume for the first time. And I said, "My God, these women look like sisters." I had made a terrible mistake, because I had been very careful in the casting not to have any two people who looked alike. I think one of the big problems in films today is they cast them according to "Oh, this guy is really hot now, and this guy is hot, let's put them in the same film." And you dress them alike, they look alike, and you can't tell them apart. So I was very careful to separate everybody in the casting. It was a long process. And when I saw Eileen Atkins and Helen Mirren in mufti, they weren't at all alike. But with their wardrobe and wigs on, I thought I was in trouble.

Julian was at another table. I said right then, "Let's make them sisters who hate each other." And this whole thing was done over pudding! Without that change, I think we would have had an intellectual film of which people would have said, "Hey, that's really nice." But I don't think emotionally we would have had a catharsis. So having a scene at the end of the picture, which was not in the original script, allowed the audience to go "Ooh!" because they were told something they didn't know before and they see the emotional response to that information.

Had I been obliged to go to a studio or to a producer and say, "I'm going to change this after shooting six and half weeks," it would never have happened. So now if it was a mistake, it's my mistake, but I know it wasn't because it was indigenous to the material. It happened because it was right, and I had the power to allow it to happen.





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## PRODUCTION NOTES

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### Finding Gosford Park

Ever since his 1970 film *M\*A\*S\*H* garnered both Academy Award nominations and box office success, filmmaker Robert Altman's career has earned him the reputation of a true auteur. His carefully selected ensemble casts, his collaborative working process, and his ingenious story lines have resulted in several classic films. Now, this American original has "crossed the pond" to England, to make *Gosford Park*.

Producer Bob Balaban remembers, "About two years ago, I had the very simple germ of an film idea – one that I thought Robert Altman would be a wonderful director for. He and I started talking about making a seemingly traditional 1930s murder mystery, set in an English country house over a weekend, that was told entirely from the point of view of the servants."

Robert Altman adds, "I think I said, 'I've never done a murder mystery before, although I've done almost every kind of genre.' I love to take genres and turn them over a little bit, look at them differently. So we started talking and looked at all sorts of material, including Agatha Christie works, and none of it was quite right. But it grew from there: I didn't really want to do a 'whodunit' but rather a 'that it was done.' We decided to deal with the social issues within the period. At first we set it in 1934 or 1935, but then decided that we didn't want the rise of Hitler to colour everything, so we set it just before that, in 1932. I also like that period because I was alive and I have a frame of reference for it, rather than just reading someone else's reports of it."

Screenwriter Julian Fellowes was already working on a script with Balaban. When Balaban introduced him to Altman and brought him into *Gosford Park* discussions, Fellowes found himself drawn to the narrative's potential, the filmmakers' ideas, and the project's relation to Altman's oeuvre: "I think that what interests Robert for movie projects are narratives wherein people arbitrarily have to share a geographical position, and not by emotional choice: the gathering of a family wedding, for example [as in *A Wedding*], or the variety of individuals employed by a Hollywood studio [as in *The Player*]. They are brought together, not necessarily because they want to be together, and therefore they almost always have entirely different agendas.

"It occurred to Robert that an English country house weekend in the 1930s would lend itself to this. To him, the servant/employer situation affords a rich setting of people with completely different lives and with different aims – all under one roof. The murder is a device so that none of them can leave and they are all tied to this house. Further, he decided, in deference to Agatha Christie and the whole country house-mystery genre, that there should be a murder in the course of the action. I had to come up with the characters and their stories to flesh this idea out. I was familiar with the way these houses were run at that time, and Robert was determined that it be based on absolute truth – i.e., he wanted the details of the many and varied activities carried out in a house like Gosford Park, above and below stairs, to be correct."

In keeping with keeping the project's foundation true and correct, it was also decided early on that *Gosford Park* would be filmed in the U.K., and almost entirely with U.K. actors. When the project was announced in the late summer of 2000, it may have seemed strange to some that an quintessentially American director would be exploring such quintessentially English subject matter. Would the filmmaker who had so richly captured *Nashville's* burgeoning country music scene and *The Player's* closed-ranks insularity of the film industry be the right man to suss out the vanished classes and class differences of *Gosford Park*?

As Alan Bates (cast as Gosford Park butler Jennings) explains, "It doesn't strike me as odd because I think Robert is a great director of nuance, behavior, atmosphere, and mood – these qualities are potent in all of his films. After all, this film is about people, and is shot under his wonderful, careful, watching eye. I always feel that he understands life – watching everyone all the time, and being slightly amused. It's a wonderful quality."

Active pre-production began in late 2000, with the priority being the assemblage of an impressive ensemble cast. While that is the norm on many a Robert Altman film, this time the pool of actors was on the other side of the Atlantic. Producer David Levy, a long-time Altman associate, praises casting director Mary Selway for her contributions: "She has incredible taste and knows everybody in London. Never before had I been in a situation where every actor who came through the door was interesting, vital, and charismatic."

Levy adds, "For the sort of actor who tends to count their speeches or wants to have everything fleshed out on the page, this was not their project, nor Robert their director. On the other hand, if they were willing to take a little leap of faith and realize that, as an actor, they could have a lot to say as to where their character goes and what their character says, and they would enter into a collaborative relationship with Robert – then they were going to be served very, very well."

As is so often the case with an Altman ensemble, the cast grew to embrace a wealth of talent ranging from acting icons to fresh faces. There is nothing like a Dame, and *Gosford Park* has two: Maggie Smith and Eileen Atkins. (The latter actress has long had an affinity for the above and below stairs contrasts, as she had co-created [with actress Jean Marsh] the classic U.K. television drama series *Upstairs Downstairs* some three decades earlier.) Joining the Dames are two Sirs: Michael Gambon and Derek Jacobi. Among the relative screen newcomers recruited were Claudie Blakley and Camilla Rutherford.

Altman was certainly delighted with the actors who joined the project: "I think it is because of the ties to the stage that acting in the U.K. is so strong, and I think that the actors themselves generally understand and respond to ensemble work." In fact, for the actors in an Altman movie, the ensemble work is rewarding and can be less stressful. Richard E. Grant, who had worked twice prior with Altman before signing on as part of the *Gosford Park* ensemble (as Gosford Park first footman George), explains: "It is a study of behaviour and manners, and individual stories are in some way hostage to the overview, which makes it very relaxing for everybody, because you know that nobody is carrying the can – it is as democratic and collaborative a process as any that I've encountered."

Clive Owen (who plays visiting valet Robert Parks) adds, "*Gosford Park* is classic Robert Altman: it's an ensemble piece; it interweaves; everybody has their own agenda; everybody has their own through line. It's very rich and full. Sometimes it did feel like doing theatre, because everybody comes in every day and you end up figuring in scenes that you're not even scripted in – being tracked through the scene. Robert works in a very fluid manner, and it's really about where he places his perspective, so every day you come in and take part in genuine ensemble work."

As he has with previous ensembles, Altman mapped out the manner in which he believes the actors, and himself, could work together – which can mean working without a map: "The characters in *Gosford Park* had very few mandates. There are certain things that happen in the plot, and most actors will read the script and come prepared, but I don't say, 'This is the way to do it.' They have the whole sphere of their character in their head, and I don't want to cut it down to a little slice of pie. I'm not looking for plot, I'm looking for behaviour. There are plenty of people [on a project] that keep track and see that we get through plot points, but if I'm just shooting to get that stuff in, then I'm looking for the wrong thing. What I really want to see from an actor is something I've never seen before, so, I can't tell them what it is."

"We normally shoot a few takes, even if the first one was terrific, because what I'm really hoping for is a 'mistake.' I think that most of the really great moments in my films were

not planned. They were things that occurred and we thought, 'Wow, look at that – that's something we want to keep!' That's where you hit the truth button with the audience, and I want anybody seeing *Gosford Park* to get excited about recognitions of truth."

Once on the set, cast members working with Altman for the first time (which constituted the vast majority of the troupe) found themselves active participants in a filmmaking style that surprised and exhilarated them. Kristin Scott Thomas (cast as Lady Sylvia McCordle, wife of Gosford Park owner Sir William McCordle) comments: "The way we worked here was very different from many other films where you prepare and you know exactly what you're going to do. We didn't rehearse, we just all turned up! Robert described it like throwing pearls onto a parquet floor – we would see who was going to bump into whom and how it would all fit together. It's very creative in that you are allowed to take risks and try things that you are not sure will work. Robert has managed through casting, writing, and the way he directed us in this improvisational fashion, to create a real feeling of family between the three sisters [played by Scott Thomas, Geraldine Somerville, and Natasha Wightman] and their husbands [played by Sir Michael Gambon, Charles Dance, and Tom Hollander]."

Altman's camera work is always distinctive. Making *Gosford Park*, he lived up to his reputation for an inventive shooting style, choosing to work with two cameras shooting simultaneously for much of the production. On the set, U.K. cinematographer Andrew Dunn's two cameras would track around different sections of the action, ensuring that the cast members in a scene were always potentially in the shot. Altman, who had never before worked with Dunn, found the director of photography "terrific to work with."

Emily Watson (who plays Gosford Park head housemaid Elsie) had worked with Altman once prior – but as producer, not director. On the *Gosford Park* set, the actress found the director's way of working "liberating and different from a lot of other ways of shooting where you know precisely when to deliver a certain thing. On *Gosford Park*, you didn't, so you just had to keep working all the time and hope that Robert's getting some of it. The cameras are like two ranging beasts scavenging for food, looking around and seeing what's going on."

Elaborating on the approach, Stephen Fry (cast as Scotland Yard Inspector Thompson) comments: "It's a fascinating process. He's a great shaggy bear, big Bob Altman, and he has a style very much of his own. One or both cameras will be moving and you somehow go in between them and say your dialogue off-camera and think that it's making no sense. You do four camera rehearsals, which are absolute chaos, and you think you are in a nightmare. But by the sixth rehearsal, suddenly this kind of ballet has emerged. Bob has a calmness and the ability to have the whole film inside his head – he's quite remarkable."

Jeremy Northam (who portrays real-life British matinee idol Ivor Novello) explains, "Robert has this amazing knack for choreographing scenes, so that scenes can be encapsulated in a single shot – he'll watch what people naturally want to do and then find a place for it within the shape of the shot where it's seamless and shown to its best advantage. So, even in a story like this where there are so many separate stories going on, there isn't one predominating plot and all these different moments and episodes are caught."

The cast's Altman veteran, Richard E. Grant, confides: "Robert wants to be surprised. He doesn't want to know what the actors are going to do, or to see what he's seen before. There are not many directors who ask that of an actor – they claim to at the beginning of jobs, but usually people want you to do what you're known for doing. But Robert goes out on a limb every time."

Among the actors who most found Altman's way of working liberating was one of only two Americans in the cast, Ryan Phillippe (cast as visiting valet Henry Denton). Phillippe says that the interplay in a scene "feels like it's happening instead of being staged. A lot of choreography goes into a movie like this because of the large cast. But at the same time it feels organic and like you're living it, which is the best experience for an actor. The circumstances on a film set are so false sometimes – the light is obtrusive and there are so many people on set, it can be hard to detach. When you're working with Robert, you're not quite sure what the camera is picking up, so you're constantly on – and everyone else is too."

Helen Mirren (who plays Gosford Park housekeeper Mrs. Wilson) adds: "Robert has a very idiosyncratic style. It's very specific and interesting for an actor because he pays as much, if not more, attention to the apparently inconsequential details as to the main push of the scene. He'll let the scene take care of itself, and often concentrates his attention, imagination, and energy into everything that's going on around the central theme of the scene. And that's wonderful, because the whole scene around you is full of detail and interest. Very often, it is one of the actors who provide the detail. We're all onscreen in *Gosford Park* nearly all the time – there were no extras – so if the scene needed to be filled up in the background, it was we who did it!"

Overlapping dialogue among an ensemble is another hallmark of Altman's films. To achieve this, all dialogue during all takes must be picked up by the production's sound recordists. Sound mixer Peter Glossop oversaw the outfitting of all the actors with radio microphones – and at times there were sixteen radio channels recording dialogue. It is because of such thoroughness that Altman can, in final editing, pick and choose what he finds interesting: "Great pieces of dialogue are often improvised. I try to encourage actors not to take

turns speaking, but to deal with conversation as conversation. In the end, they learn that it's fun, and that it's no big deal if it goes wrong because we can shoot it again and do it another way."

On *Gosford Park*, the screenwriter proved to be a willing participant in this approach. Fellowes says, "Every time we shot one of the large ensemble scenes, the scripted lines were a framework. There are lines that had to be spoken for the different narrative threads or character revelations. But, because of the calibre of these actors, they were able to ad-lib – a great bonus!"

Another bonus for Fellowes was "the unusual privilege, for a screenwriter, of being present as technical advisor for every shot, sitting by the camera, whispering into Bob's ear like his 'familiar.' After this unique experience, I have no hesitation in saying that he is an extraordinary director."

Speaking as a working actor himself, Fellowes states, "He has a real, unfeigned love for actors – and an eagerness and respect for their contribution. This in itself is rare in the extreme: it is extended to every player in the piece, and it is not an act. On top of this, Bob has a grasp of visual narrative that I have never seen equalled. I remember one particular scene, where the women are assembling before the shooting party lunch: after running through it a few times, he suddenly suggested to all of them that they should move, speak, and do everything else simultaneously, without regard for cues and without leaving any space around the lines of dialogue. At the time, I freely admit that I thought, 'What is going on?' The next afternoon, I watched the dailies and every key element in the scene, every nuance of character, was as clear as day – but all set in the context of real chaotic life, as opposed to a false stacy screen world. To take this kind of risk, with humor and confidence, is genius."

Sir Michael Gambon (cast as Gosford Park owner Sir William McCordle) states: "It was terrific. *Gosford Park* is funny, it's brilliantly written, it's directed by the best director, and all my mates were in it, so every day felt like a party!"

But was the American director's time spent in Britain worth it? Altman concludes affirmatively, "I had the time of my life making this movie."

## Dressing Gosford Park

For the actors portraying the above stairs characters, much of the shooting schedule was spent in a country house just North of London, where most of the above stairs sequences were filmed. (In addition, a few of the above stairs bedroom scenes were filmed at Syon House in Middlesex.) Production designer Stephen Altman went to work changing furniture and carpets to match the period, but felt that the basic structure and architecture of the house served his purposes very well: "In houses like this, there are antiques from two or three hundred years before, so we just added in layers of modernity. We wanted to make it comfortable and liveable, since many of the stately homes we'd seen were like museums and didn't seem like homes."

The below stairs set was created at the U.K.'s famed Shepperton Studios. Stephen Altman explains, "We set our sights on building our own below stairs set because we were unable to find anything intact and convenient for filming. The set was based on a composite of pretty much everything that we'd seen, whether from research or actual places that we visited. In compiling it, I tried to get the scale and geography right with our above stairs location house. We duplicated a couple of staircases that connected above and below stairs, but otherwise it's the best bits of many places."

Extensive research went into making the below stairs set the essence of a working household. Stephen Altman and his team fashioned a boot-and-brushing room where coats are brushed and boots are cleaned; a still room where jams are made, cordials are distilled, and breakfast trays are set up; the butler's pantry, where silver is locked up and valuable china is stored; the ironing rooms, laundry, kitchen, servants' dining hall, scullery, and some of the heads of the household's accommodations.

Being true to scale, the set would be a confined space. This was a challenge that Stephen Altman was able to solve: "Most of the real below stairs places were like labyrinths, which would have been very difficult to shoot. Hence, we added some crossing corridors and windows that are not entirely fictitious: they did have a lot of windows in the corridors to let sunlight into the dark halls. I did adjust them slightly for shooting purposes – at each one of the cross sections, there are doors and windows on each corner so we could shoot through and get a sense of feeling around it. Otherwise, we'd just have had tunnel vision all the time. You have to try and find ways of expanding the cameras' images as much as possible."

The costume department was no less rigorous in its attention to specifics. Costume designer Jenny Beavan notes, "We talked in detail about every element of the costumes, down to what underwear the maids would be wearing. Robert Altman loves this detail:



he wanted everything to be incredibly real without looking stagy or phoney. To that end, I did a great deal of research and looked at original clothes from the 1930s that we then remade. Whilst there was a lot of inspiration for the upstairs characters, there was less available for the servants. They were not greatly photographed at that time, but we did have some wonderfully written records, by Nancy Astor's maid, Rosina Harrison and by Lady Troubridge."

Speaking in his capacity as *Gosford Park* producer, Bob Balaban proudly states, "I love the way this movie looks. 1932 is a period we don't see all that often in movies. It's a great look, those great hairstyles and beautiful, voluptuous gowns."

### Above Stairs and Below Stairs

*Gosford Park* is set in November 1932, near the end of the era of domestic service in the U.K. World War II has not yet started, but the status quo has begun, almost imperceptibly, to shift away from the strict social structure so integral to England for hundreds of years.

Stephen Fry, no stranger to writing and/or performing works relating to class differences, remarks, "This is a world which we have all seen in *Upstairs Downstairs* and films like *The Remains of the Day* – but it's never been seen from quite this point of view. *Gosford Park* is shot in such a way that if there's a scene above stairs, it's only legitimately observed if there's a servant in the room – everything is seen from a servant's point of view. A footman clears away an ashtray, a lady's maid brushes her mistress' hair, and that is how you piece together the world above stairs. Meanwhile, below stairs there's what can only be described as a gigantic machine with its own protocol and etiquette."

Robert Altman elaborates, "We decided that we wouldn't bring the audience above stairs unless they were accompanied by a below stairs person, so we couldn't just cut to an upstairs scene between two people and advance the plot that way. Out of this came the idea that the audience would get snippets of information about above stairs people – but not all of it, and what there is would be transmitted by below stairs gossip, sometimes contradictory."

Helen Mirren notes, "There are these strange stylistic contradictions going on within: it's extremely naturalistic, but there's also a touch of melodrama."

Kelly Macdonald has the pivotal role of visiting lady's maid Mary Maceachran. It is through Mary that the audience first gains entrée into Gosford Park. When Mary is summoned above

stairs, though, recalls the actress, "I was usually in the background and not making eye contact with people during scenes. I could see relationships building between the above stairs actors, and we below stairs actors are building our own relationships as well. It's interesting how there's definitely an above stairs/below stairs divide – even behind the scenes amongst the actors."

Sir Derek Jacobi (cast as Probert, valet to Gosford Park owner Sir William McCordle) deadpans, "We don't mix with the Lords and Ladies above stairs, we're very, very 'umble below stairs!"

On a more serious note, Fry says, "The way the film investigates the class system, without the political banner waving, slowly reveals the ridiculousness of it – the dependency of rich adults, who own massive estates, on a servant class. Hitler and the Second World War, plus the Labour government of the 1940s, are just around the corner, so it is pretty much going to be swept away."

Mirren offers, "The characters within it are who they are and think this world is perfectly normal. I don't think it's a political comment on Britain or the English class system."

Richard E. Grant respectfully disagrees, believing *Gosford Park* to be "unequivocally a study of the English class system. Also of people's behaviour and how the class system inherently provokes duplicitous behaviour: when you're above stairs you have to be one thing, and when you're below stairs you can show your true self. It's been a source of comedy in English life and literature for the last thousand years, and long may it continue."

From concept to production, the disparity between the two settings was mined: the above stairs sequences show the characters sitting around rather languidly; while, in contrast, below stairs the characters are constantly in motion to keep up with the demands of above stairs. As the cameras rolled, the mandate for below stairs was that nobody could remain still: something was going on the entire time, even if only in the background (sewing, ironing, cleaning shoes).

Yet Altman also found subtle similarities between above and below stairs: "Below stairs, there are almost more layers of hierarchy than above stairs. Above stairs, at dinner, the same person sat next to the same person every time because of what their title was or who they were married to. But something comparable happens below stairs, where they took it even more seriously: if you are the maid to the highest titled person, you sit in relation to the head butler, emulating the same thing above stairs. Interestingly, they also dress alike – the men wear tails whether they're guests or servants!"

Along those lines, another custom, dramatized in an early *Gosford Park* sequence, is the “renaming” of visiting servants. As Gosford Park housekeeper Mrs. Wilson (played by Helen Mirren) explain to the visiting servants (and the audience), the below stairs visitors are referred to by the names of their employers. Thus, Gosford Park houseguest Morris Weissman’s valet Henry Denton (played by Ryan Phillippe) is addressed by the Gosford Park staff as “Mr. Weissman” for the duration of his stay.

Both above and below stairs existences were thoroughly researched by the filmmakers. David Levy remembers, “I did exhaustive reading, and had a lot of fun doing it – so much so that we made a point of exposing a lot of our actors to some of the same research. To get them comfortable and secure in what they were doing, we provided the above stairs actors with books on etiquette and how to address people, whilst the below stairs cast were given charts about functions for every hour of the day for servants in every capacity.”

From butler to valets and footmen, from housekeepers to cooks, from housemaids to kitchen maids, the below stairs household members all had specific responsibilities to ensure that the house was run smoothly and efficiently. Everyone working on *Gosford Park* was particularly keen to ensure that there were no inaccuracies in the depiction of life below stairs. To this end, Julian Fellowes helped secure the counsel of consulting experts who had once been in domestic service. Once retained, they remained on hand to advise throughout filming.

Arthur Inch joined the project as the consultant butler, footman, and valet. Born in 1915, Inch’s father was a butler and his mother had been a housemaid. He grew up in household service and, at age 15, he was trained by his father in all the arts of private service. Thus, while still a teenager, he was able to utter the immortal words: “Dinner is served, Madam.”

During production, the now-retired Inch was on hand to advise all the male actors portraying servants and household staff on how they should behave, dress, and carry themselves. Alan Bates marvels, “We all bow before him. He is the absolute genuine article, and he knows the jobs down to their finest detail.”

Inch was pleased with the results. He enjoyed the experience but confesses to being a touch overwhelmed: “It’s just my life being redone. When I walked onto the set, it was like going back in time. It has been amazing for me to see this.”

Ruth Mott joined the production as the consultant cook. She went into service in kitchens during the 1930s, when she was about 14 years old. She first worked at her local manor house. There, she earned 5 shillings a week, of which she sent back home over half to her

mother. She has remained a cook almost ever since, and says, “I don’t think there’s much I don’t really know about a kitchen, so I can help the actors if they get stuck. There is a huge contrast between pre-war and post-war kitchens, and I consider that I’ve been very lucky to see both sides.”

Cast as Gosford Park cook Mrs. Croft, Dame Eileen Atkins seized on the authenticity of each domain having its leader: “Mrs. Croft doesn’t mix, she’s the boss of her little Kingdom. The only people above her are the housekeeper, Mrs. Wilson [played by Helen Mirren] and the butler, Jennings [played by Alan Bates] – but she doesn’t have very much to do with him. In her world, in the kitchen, she is the Queen, and she has quite a lot of fun at the rest of the household’s expense.”

As were Inch and Mott, *Gosford Park* consultant housemaid Violet Liddell was also in service during the 1930s. She has worked for, amongst others, George Bernard Shaw; and at 10 Downing Street (the residence of the U.K.’s Prime Minister). The concept of a housemaid seeing and hearing much of interest and remaining discreet (or not) is one that is also explored in *Gosford Park* – especially from the vantage point of head housemaid Elsie (played by Emily Watson).

Cast members were given extracts of Lady Troubridge’s *The Book of Etiquette*, among them the following: ‘It would appear that there are people who feel that those who labour in the capacity of servants are inferior, but in most cases it is those who place servants on a lower plane who are themselves inferior. We owe to those who take part in the work... more than the wages we pay them: we owe them gratitude, courtesy and kindness. They, equally, should treat their employers with courtesy and kindness, and they should regard it as beneath their self-respect to ask wages for work which they are not fitted to perform. A reliable servant holds a place of importance in the home, and it should be recognised in the social world as a place worthy of courtesy and respect.’

Lady Troubridge’s instructions for servants go on to emphasize moving quickly and quietly; not speaking unless necessary; not rattling knives, forks, or plates; ensuring that hands are scrupulously clean; and not breathing heavily.

While the breathing may have been easier above stairs, etiquette was essential there as well. Here too *Gosford Park* actors found themselves scrupulously researching proper behaviour. Kristin Scott Thomas recalls, “We were given a kind of care package, with rules on how to hold your knife and fork; when to stand and sit down; and how to address people.”

Indeed, the complications and intricacies of life above stairs would be overwhelming for 21st century society. Complete Etiquette for Ladies and Gentlemen offers these instructions on the proper manner in which to eat a grape: 'Grapes are placed in the mouth and the skin is lightly withdrawn. The seeds must be removed on the fork, which you hold sideways to your mouth to receive them. Place the seeds on the dessert plate.'

Even more apropos for the *Gosford Park* cast, Eileen Terry's Etiquette for All provided numerous examples of how to behave during country house parties, with information regarding attire, dancing, motoring, and, perhaps most helpfully, turning in for the night: 'Remember that you must not go to bed when you choose, however tired you may be – unless you are really feeling unwell, a horrible sensation when on a visit! It is the hostess' duty to make the first move for bed.'

Another scenario that proved to be relevant to the production was post-supper entertainment in the drawing room. Once again, an excerpt from Lady Troubridge had the answers: 'It is not unusual nowadays to provide music after dinner. . . if good but not of too serious an order, music is generally enjoyed. If the music is to be serious, then only those persons who appreciate it should be invited. It is a sad sight to see poor Colonel Jones, who would appreciate a comic song or sentimental ballad, condemned to listen to a long string quartet! But whatever the music provided, it is the height of bad manners to talk while a performance is in progress.'

### Real Life: Ivor Novello

It was Robert Altman who had the idea to incorporate the real-life U.K. matinee idol Ivor Novello into the fictitious Gosford Park setting. He comments, "About twenty years ago, I was involved in a project where I came across Novello. I now have a whole library of his music. I thought it would be good to have the anchor of one real person within the story – and he would also furnish us with some music."

Born in Wales in 1893, Ivor Novello was one of the greatest British actors and composers of his day. An immensely popular matinee idol during the silent era, he was also a gifted playwright, screenwriter, and producer of numerous plays and romantic musicals for the stage. Several of those were later made into films.

First and foremost a composer, he received his musical training at the Magdalen College Choir School in Oxford, where he was a superior boy soprano. His first song was published in 1910, and he went on to write many successful numbers for musical comedies and

revues in London. In 1914, he composed the most popular song of the First World War, "Keep the Home Fires Burning," which made him famous. After entertaining the troops in war-torn France, in 1916 Novello became a pilot in the Royal Naval Air Service. He survived two crash landings, and continued to compose whenever he had the chance.

After the War, in 1919, Novello embarked on his career as a film actor. He made over a dozen silent films in all and several early talkies, including two directed by Alfred Hitchcock: *Downhill* (1927), adapted from a play that Novello co-wrote the screenplay; and the hit *The Lodger* (1926). The latter was remade several times, including another film with Novello again starring in the lead. It is this 1932 version (a.k.a. *The Phantom Fiend*), directed by Maurice Elvey, that is the subject of a dialogue exchange in *Gosford Park*.

Also in 1932, Novello's comedy *Fresh Fields* enjoyed a successful run on the London stage. Whitaker's Almanac named him Dramatist of the Year, for, in addition to the hit comedy, his *Proscenium* had a long run; however, a third play from his pen, *Flies in the Sun*, did not attract an audience. All told, Novello wrote or co-wrote 14 plays and appeared in 24, including Shakespeare's *Henry V*. However, his real love was composing lush, romantic, and sentimental musicals. He wrote waltzes and popular tunes and during the '30s and '40s he created eight elaborately staged musicals, starring in six of them. He composed over 250 songs.

When he died in 1951, 7,000 people attended his funeral. The women outnumbered the men 50 to 1.

Jeremy Northam, who portrays Novello, notes, "It is a slightly odd to play a person who actually lived and was very well-known, within this fictitious supposition of what part of his life might have been. Within the story he's something of a device, because he brings people who are not part of this aristocratic country house circle into that world to explore it. His music is also essential to the film. Most of my work before we started shooting involved trying to find out about him and define a personality for him. It was not our intention that I should impersonate Ivor Novello, but that I would get the essence of his personality and try to find appropriate music."

Northam's eldest brother Christopher is a professional pianist. Although himself an accomplished pianist, Jeremy looked to his brother for help with the music and to be reminded what it is like to play in public: "Sometimes you realize that being at the piano is the safest place to be, because from that vantage point you can see the rest of the world going by and you become comfortable with that sense of detachment."

The music also heightens yet another difference between above stairs and below stairs: when Novello plays after supper in the drawing room the aristocrats seem bored, while all through the halls the servants are drawn to listen to the music as if under a spell – they are truly entertained.

#### Reel Life: Morris Weissman

The character of Hollywood film producer Morris Weissman, played by real-life *Gosford Park* producer Bob Balaban, is a guest at Gosford Park who has been brought along by his friend Ivor Novello. Unlike Ivor Novello, though, Morris Weissman is a character fictionalized for *Gosford Park*.

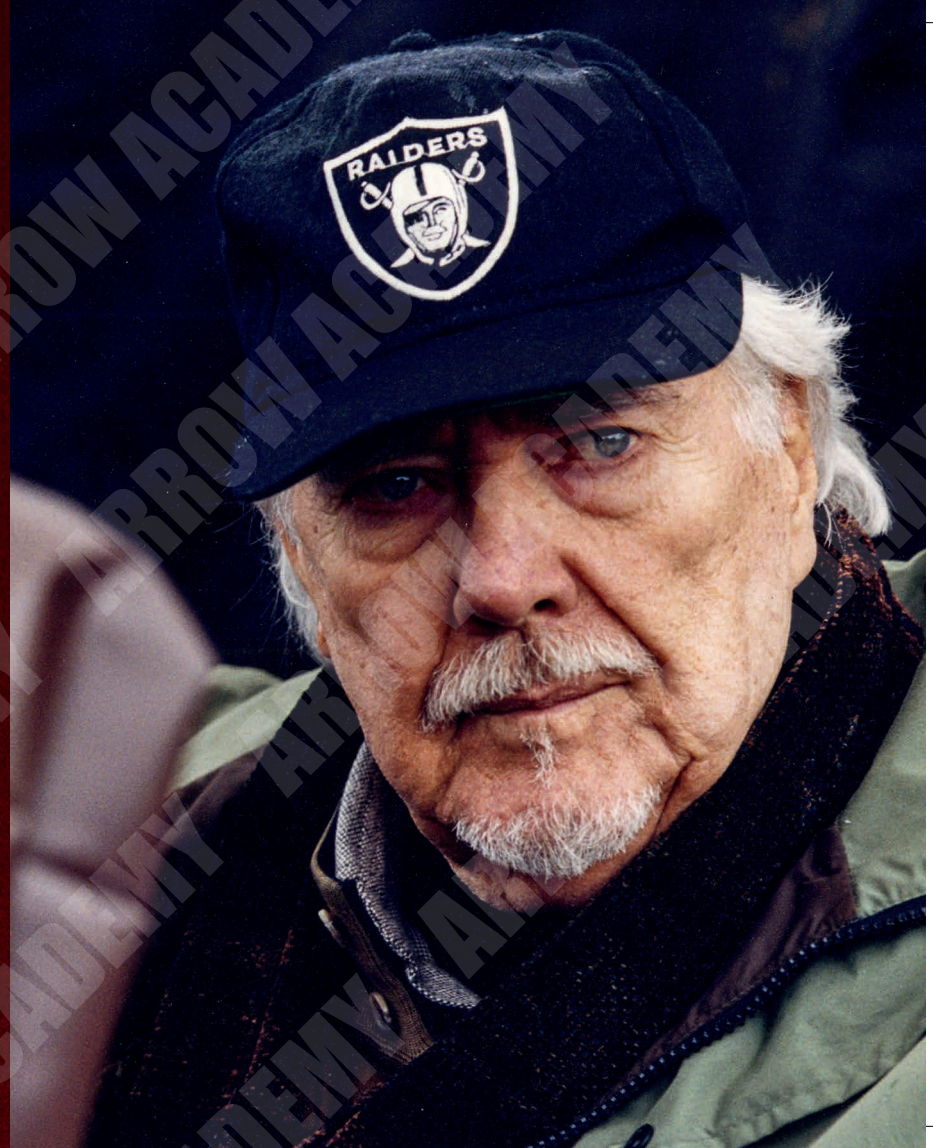
The 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox project that the fictitious Weissman is hard at work on, however, did indeed get made: *Charlie Chan in London* was filmed at the end of 1933 and released in 1934. *Gosford Park* screenwriter Julian Fellowes laughs, “*Charlie Chan in London* [produced by John Stone and directed by Eugene Forde] is all about the Chinese detective [played by Warner Oland in the sixth of his sixteen appearances as Chan] going to an English house party. So we created this joke-within-a-joke. But it’s also a device: it’s easy to see how extraordinary these rituals are that the upper classes take for granted, when an outsider, be it Charlie Chan or Morris Weissman, comes to observe them.”

#### In the Time of Gosford Park

As noted, England was between the Wars in 1932. But some of the historical occurrences in 1932 were early indicators of the conflict to come: the Nazi Party led Germany’s elections with 230 Reichstag seats, while widespread famine afflicted the U.S.S.R. Japan’s aggression in Manchuria was protested by the United States.

Back in the U.S., Congress set up the Reconstruction Finance Corporation to stimulate the economy, while veterans of the First World War marched on Washington to lobby for cash bonuses (an idea rejected by the Senate).

Also in 1932, Amelia Earhart became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean. New books were published at a rate of about 40 each day. The English author John Galsworthy won the Nobel Prize for Literature, while Pearl S. Buck won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Good Earth*. The year’s Best Picture winner at the Academy Awards was Edmund Goulding’s *Grand Hotel*, starring Greta Garbo, John Barrymore, and Joan Crawford.





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## ABOUT THE RESTORATION

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*Gosford Park* was exclusively restored by Arrow Films and is presented in its original aspect ratio of 2.35:1 with stereo and 5.1 sound.

The original 35mm camera negative was scanned in 4K resolution on a pin-registered Arriscan. Picture grading was performed on a Da Vinci Resolve. Picture restoration was completed using a combination of digital restoration tools and techniques. Grading was supervised and approved by Director of Photography Andrew Dunn.

The stereo and 5.1 mixes were remastered by Capitol Films.

Restoration supervised by James White, Arrow Films

Silver Salt Restoration: Anthony Badger, Steve Bearman, Mark Bonnici, Lisa Copson, Simon Edwards, Marie Feldman, Ray King, Tom Wiltshire



All original materials supplied for this restoration were made available by Capitol Films.

Very special thanks to Andrew Dunn for his participation in this project.

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## PRODUCTION CREDITS

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**Disc and Booklet Produced by** Anthony Nield  
**Executive Producers** Kevin Lambert, Francesco Simeoni  
**Technical Producer** James White  
**QC Manager** Nora Mehenni  
QC Alan Simmons  
**Blu-ray Mastering** Fidelityinmotion  
**Subtitling** The Engine House Media Services  
**Artist** Ignatius Fitzpatrick  
**Design** Obviously Creative

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## SPECIAL THANKS

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Alex Agran, Jane Barclay, Natasha Dwightman, Michael Dwyer, Tony Koch,  
James McCabe, Jon Robertson



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