

Long Goodbye shows humor, subtlety second time around

Robert Altman's year-old film *The Long Goodbye* is one of those rarities of the cinema that successfully are re-released with a new ad campaign after having been an earlier box office bomb.

Last year the ads were showing detective-hero Phillip Marlowe (Elliot Gould) as a loner, a solitary figure standing on a deserted beach looking out at the ocean. Now they are playing up the film as a comedy, using caricature cartoons and hoping Altman's previous efforts (*M*A*S*H* and *Brewster McCLOUD*) will pull in the audiences.

While *The Long Goodbye* is often a very funny movie, retaining many of the subtle inanities of Altman's other work, it also has an unconscious depth and feeling that goes beyond this. Either way, it's a darn good movie.

Marlowe is the detective creation of Raymond Chandler who was one of the best pulp fiction writers from 1930-50. Marlowe has been played on the screen by many actors but perhaps never as memorably as by Humphrey Bogart in Howard Hawk's 1946 movie *The Big Sleep*. Marlowe, then, was the tough guy with a code. He was poor and a loner, but he had romantic machismo and unyielding dignity amid corruption.

Altman has Gould maintain much of that style, but in such a way that it often seems a comical parody of the role. Gould constantly is striking wooden matches on any surface in sight and smokes more cigarettes in one movie than anyone since Bogart. Both actors have a characteristic lisp, but while Bogart's became part of his tough-guy aura, Gould's almost is faggish. He drives around Los Angeles in an old '48 Lincoln, mumbles most of his dialogue in a barely audible monotone and takes great care of his best friend, a cat.

Marlowe, in typical Chandler fashion, is a loser. Everyone else (the cops, his clients, even one of his best friends) seems to know what's going on while he doggedly wanders around trying to find some answers. But he is smart, determined and just effective enough that with a lot of luck, he gets the job done. It is hard for an old-fashioned private eye to cope amid the weird characters and foibles of modern Los Angeles' social life.

Like other Chandler novels that have been filmed, the plot line here becomes entangled, with a host of seemingly

divergent characters and incidents popping up along the way. (Screenwriters on *The Big Sleep*, including William Faulkner, often were baffled by that story.) Finally, though, they all come together in a quick "Now I see what's going on" resolution at film's end.

One of Marlowe's best friends apparently has murdered his wife and committed suicide, but Marlowe doesn't believe it. While investigating a case for a wealthy young woman (Nina van Pallandt) trying to find her crazy writer-husband, Roger Wade (a Hemingway caricature marvelously played by Sterling Hayden), he becomes involved with a vain, playboy mobster searching for a lost \$350,000. Everyone ultimately ties back to Marlowe's friend Terry Lennox (ex-Yankee pitcher Jim Bouton) who did kill his wife but faked the suicide to get away.

There is little violence in the movie, but what there is comes so suddenly and unexpectedly that it stuns. The scene in which Marlowe tries to rescue Wade from a suicide attempt is breathtakingly stylized filmmaking.

greg lukow key grip

These scenes, combined with the elusive plot, may make the movie's pieces seem better than the whole, but I don't think this is true.

There are flaws in the story, and some of the myths Altman tries to explode seem to throw themselves back at him.

But Altman's humor, depth and craft rise above any trouble spots.

Perhaps he speaks best in a final scene that is both ambitious and ambiguous. Lennox had used Marlowe to get away, and when Marlowe finally finds him, he laughs and says "You always were a born loser." "Yeah," replies Marlowe, "I even lost my cat." Then he pulls out a gun and kills Lennox without warning.

As we see him walking away in the distance, jaunting along with baffling exuberance, we know that, for Altman, the Phillip Marlowes of the movies are gone. They have been replaced by the Popeye Doyles and the Dirty Harrys.

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