

# COOKIE'S FORTUNE

by Robert ALTMAN

## FICHE TECHNIQUE

Pays : USA

Durée : 1h58

Année : 1998

Genre : Comédie

Scénario : Anne RAPP

Directeur de la photographie : Toyomichi KURITA

Décors : Stephen ALTMAN

Montage : Abraham LIM

Musique : David A. STEWART

Coproduction : Sandcastle 5 / Elysian Dreams / Moonstone Entertainment / Kudzu

Distribution : Bac Films

Interprètes : Patricia NEAL (Jewel Mae « Cookie » Orcutt), Julianne MOORE (Cora Duvall), Glenn CLOSE (Camille Dixon), Liv TYLER (Emma Duvall), Chris O'DONNELL (Jason Brown), Charles S. DUTTON (Willis Richland), Lyle LOVETT (Manny Hood), Ned BEATTY (Lester Boyle), Courtney B. VANCE (Otis Tucker)

Sortie : 7 avril 1999

## SYNOPSIS

A sleepy Southern town wakes up when an eccentric woman commits suicide and the police investigate it as murder.

[http://uk.rottentomatoes.com/m/cookies\\_fortune/](http://uk.rottentomatoes.com/m/cookies_fortune/)

## AUTOUR DU FILM

Robert Altman revisits the lighthearted territory of his 1970s comedies and once again comes out a rousing success. This time, a tightly wound narrative by first-time screenwriter Anne Rapp keeps the laughs rolling as the story unfolds over an eventful Easter weekend in the small town of Holly Springs, Mississippi. The town residents are peaceful, kind folk – with the exception of Camille Dixon (Glenn Close) – a pushy theatre director with an incredibly shy younger sister, Cora (Julianne Moore), whose estranged daughter Emma (Liv Tyler) has just returned to town. On the heels of her latest play, Camille is shocked to discover that her Aunt Jewel Mae “Cookie” Orcutt (Patricia Neal) has committed suicide. Terrified at the thought of how this will tarnish the family name, she eats the suicide note to make it look like a burglary. This set-up leads the police to one main suspect, Willis Richland (Charles S. Dutton), who also happens to be Cookies best friend. Although the rest of the town is convinced Willis didn't commit the crime, an outside investigator (Courtney B. Vance) isn't so sure. As Easter Sunday and opening night of the play arrive, the truth comes out, revealing more secrets than anyone could have possibly imagined. Director Altman tells his story at a leisurely pace, beautifully recreating the eccentricities of small town life in this sweet-natured tale.

*Cookie's Fortune* is Robert Altman's sunniest film, a warm-hearted comedy that somehow manages to deal with death and murder charges without even containing a real villain. True, the Glenn Close character comes close to villainy by falsifying a death scene, but since she's in the middle of directing the Easter play at her church, maybe it's partly a case of runaway theatrical zeal... to read more.

<http://rogerebert.suntimes.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/19990409/REVIEWS/904090303/1023>

## PISTES PÉDAGOGIQUES

### 1 – Who is who?

Au début du film, la multitude de personnages présentés peut poser quelques problèmes. On peut donc en amont de la séance donner une fiche (une sorte de grille) aux élèves avec les noms des personnages afin qu'au moment du film ils aient déjà en tête le nom de ces personnages. Cette fiche sera à remplir après le film et permettra éventuellement de rebrasser le génitif. (*Cora is Camille's sister and Cookie's niece also she was thought to be Emma's mother.*)

Ce sera aussi l'occasion de revoir le vocabulaire de la famille.

### 2 – Drawing the portrait of the characters

- La présentation des personnages permet de voir ou revoir le lexique de la justice (attorney, court, lawyer, deputy sheriff etc.). De plus, les personnages sont souvent assez opposés les uns des autres que l'utilisation du contraste pourra aussi être rebrassée (while, whereas, unlike, contrary to).

- Draw the portrait of both sisters and then set them in contrast:

Camille is an egocentric, bossy woman for whom appearances are everything (a southern characteristic). And since "people from good families simply don't commit suicide", she is completely beside herself. She scolds her dead aunt for the inconvenience: "You crazy old lady! How dare you do this to me".

Cora is a doltish submitted girl who obeys her sister in her life as well as in the play she's acting. At the end she repeatedly answers: "Cookie was murdered, she did not commit suicide" as she was ordered to answer by Camille if ever asked what had happened.

*Camille is bossy whereas Cora is submitted.* (rephrase using unlike)

### 3 – The irony

"Now, irony is a conventional storytelling mechanism for framing reward, justice and retribution. Not a fiercely arbitrary, uncontrollable force of nature catapulted from the glove of some angry Norse god." (Michael S. Goldberger)

- Repérer les éléments d'ironie présents dans le film (ils sont nombreux). Le moindre n'étant pas de maquiller un suicide en meurtre. Un maquillage qui se tournera contre l'auteur même de ce maquillage. Un autre étant que la cellule soit toujours ouverte pour Willis et qu'elle se ferme pour la première fois sur Camille. Le policier arrête un suspect dont il est sûr de l'innocence (Why? Because I fish with him.). Emma la « desperado » qui flirte avec l'adjoint du Sheriff, etc. A cette occasion un travail sur les mots de liaison (yet, despite, although, in spite of, due to, since, as, therefore etc.) pourra être fait pour exprimer ou expliquer cette ironie.

- Si vous disposez de la cassette, en amont, il peut être intéressant d'étudier le passage du début où Willis entre, ivre, chez Cookie en pleine nuit, puis de passer à l'arrivée de la police après le suicide maquillé en meurtre et qui va tout naturellement accuser Willis :

- Who is he? What's he doing? Why? What's going to happen?
- What has happened? Who is going to be suspected? Why did he do it? Etc.

### 4 – A southern film in a southern atmosphere

The presence of the South permeates the action, the atmosphere and the themes of *Cookie's Fortune*. The film is set in Holly Springs, Mississippi, a sleepy Southern town where life is slow and people are simple and friendly, between Memphis and Faulkner's home in Oxford. The landscape is typical of the South: the lush vegetation, the giant live oaks and the cypress swamp where the group goes fishing.

The town has several elements that are characteristic of Southern towns. The architecture recalls the old white-columned plantations, and Cookie's house is the best example. The old town center is similar to hundreds of towns throughout the South, but many more no longer have the courthouse square and commerce sprawls along a strip on the highway, with the center used mainly as an administrative area. The country is never far away, as the locations of Theo's Bar and the catfish farm show. The church is Presbyterian, befitting the Scots and Scots-Irish roots of so many Southerners, and one can be sure that

the Baptists and Methodists are present as well. The accents are also Southern (typified by, among other features, post-vocalic non-rhoticism (final Rs are not pronounced after a vowel) and extended diphthongs, as well as by a generally slow rhythm of speech), and perhaps most notably so in the church play.

The social life of the town is Southern. As in all small towns, there is a tightly knit community, where everyone knows everyone else and keeps up with the latest local news. The Southern small town has been variously portrayed by Faulkner, Welty and Harper Lee to be constricting and potentially murderous in the attention it affords its members. At several points in the film, townsfolk spy or watch others, discreetly. The tone of the film is light, so the foibles and intrusions of others are tolerated and do not become serious problems. People steal liquor or Easter eggs from one another, but with the tacit understanding that their faults are not as important as the value of the individual to the community.

In spite of the very friendly relations between Blacks and Whites in the film, a certain geography of separation is established, with all-White (the church) and all-Black (Theo's Bar) places. Most of the town officials are White (sheriff, lawyer, policemen). However, the South has moved, or been moved by the federal Civil Rights Acts, beyond the old policy of Segregation and the workplace of the sheriff's office is shown as integrated, even to the point of having the expert investigator as being Black. Nevertheless, no matter the progress and the friendly complicity between Willis and the other characters of the film, a Black man falsely accused of murder and jailed in a small Southern town suggests the potential for lynching.

The concern with history, the past and origins is a key element both thematically and in the plot. As in Welty's *Morgana*, or Faulkner's *Jefferson*, each towns person has a history, just as each family has a history and a role in the town, and these histories will become part of the town's history. The individuals seem locked into the roles the town accepts for them and the personal and family histories that created them. In the liquor store, a sign proclaims: "In this store in 1892, nothing happened". And yet the town is filled with history, going from the battle between North and South in 1862, to the desire to reproduce Biblical history in the church play, and especially to the weight of history, and histories, on Cookie and the other inhabitants of the town. Cookie dies because of her wish to reclaim the past. Camille's tragedy is caused by her desire to rewrite and to manipulate history as she destroys the evidence of Cookie's suicide. Nobody in this family commits suicide. Suicide is a disgrace! Only crazy people commit suicide. She wants to protect the family's good name in the community, because she knows that the present will last into the future in this community. She had wanted to protect her good name once before, when she had a child in New Orleans and told the town that the baby was her sister's. The theme of filiation is closely related to history and figures prominently in Southern literature, particularly when race is a factor. The discovery that Willis is a member of Cookie's family fits this pattern of determining the present through one's ancestors or past.

The fortune that Cookie left was not so much monetary, as others believed, but the token of the love she yearns to experience again. Many Southern writers have suggested that the South was immobilized and backward, held back by its fascination with the past, and with the legends of The Lost Cause and antebellum glory.

Altman's South is probably closer in tone to *Fried Green Tomatoes* (by Jon Avnet), *Steel Magnolias* (by Herbert Ross) or *Driving Miss Daisy* (by Bruce Beresford) than to films such as *In the Heat of the Night* (by Norman Jewison) or *Mississippi Burning* (by Alan Parker). It shares common elements of tone with Faulkner's *The Reivers*, rather than *The Sound and the Fury* (by Martin Ritt), Tennessee Williams's depiction of Southern decadence or the Gothic tales of Flannery O'Connor. The knowledge of the South, its culture, literature and its problems the viewer brings to allows several layers of meaning and interpretation.

## **5 – A few comments on the names of some of the characters**

A few of the characters seem to have names that were given after some research and considerable thought!

Order given on the *International Movie Data Base*. Etymologies found at the *Behind the Name*.

| <b>Actor</b>    | <b>Role</b>               | <b>Comments on name</b>  |
|-----------------|---------------------------|--|
| Glenn Close     | Camille Dixon             | Camille is the French form of Camilla, a warrior maiden who fought against Rome. To people in Mississippi, the name would instantly recall the worst hurricane of the 20 <sup>th</sup> century, which hit the Mississippi Gulf Coast in August 1969, with sustained winds of 305 kph and a wall of water 7 meters high and 30 kms wide. 143 fatalities and massive destruction were recorded. In both cases, the overtones are of combative fury and destruction. Dixon would surely suggest Mason-Dixon (border between the North and South) or even Dixie. |
| Julianne Moore  | Cora Duvall               | Cora is a Latin form of Korè, which means maiden. In the film, this alone would justify the choice of the name, because she is not Emma's mother (and hence perhaps a maiden). Korè is also a name of Persephone in Greek mythology, who was kidnapped by Hades, and whose stay in Hades corresponds to winter, and her return to Earth begins springtime, which adds to the Easter and springtime symbolism, as well Cora's own liberation from Camille's control.  |
| Liv Tyler       | Emma Duvall               | Derived from the German ermen meaning whole or universal. She is a central, unifying character in the film.  |
| Chris O'Donnell | Jason Brown               |  |
| Charles Dutton  | Willis Richland           | Willis is based on the Germanic root for will, and it seems in tune with the stability and poise of the character. Richland foreshadows the dénouement.  |
| Patricia Neal   | Jewel Mae "Cookie" Orcutt | Jewel recalls the necklace that gives the film its title. Mae is the modal and the month in spring. Cookie is obviously the sweet, but it is also a 1930s/1940s slang for a woman (often in the expression one smart cookie, meaning a quick-witted woman).  |
| (not present)   | Buck (Cookie's husband)   | Cookie is a slang generic term for women; Buck is a slang generic term for men. A buck is another word for a male deer, as well as being the slang word for a dollar. His role as lover and her fortune are perhaps both suggested.  |
| Lyle Lovett     | Manny Hood                | The catfish entrepreneur who seems interested in his employee Emma has a name that suggests a diminutive of man, somewhat less than a man (?). The actual origin is straight Hebrew for God is with is. Hood is the name of a Confederate general, as well as a slang word for thug or neighborhood.   |