



# On the Job: Spotighting the Workday World of Arts and Entertainment : Putting Together the Pieces of Altman's Puzzle : Movies: Editor Geraldine Peroni begins work almost as soon as the director starts shooting. This time, she sews together 'Short Cuts.'

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If Robert Altman's "Short Cuts" is a tapestry of fragments sewn seamlessly together, Geraldine Peroni is the one with the invisible thread.

"Hopefully, when you screen the dailies, you react to something--a glance between two actors that came out of nowhere--where something magic happens," says Peroni, editor of the three-hour film, in which the lives of 22 characters intersect and diverge. "If you're lucky, you have something like that in every scene that you can focus on. With Bob, it happens a lot."

And Bob--director Altman--wouldn't have trusted anyone else for the jigsaw-structured film based on short stories by Raymond Carver.

"This film was a really tough editing job," says Altman, who also hired Peroni to edit "The Player" and co-edit "Vincent and Theo." "It's been years since I had an editor who can put scenes together and show them to me and I'll say, 'That's great--let's move on.' She has a rhythm that matches mine. She reads me well."

While people often assume that a director shoots a film before the editor sits down to piece it together, Peroni's work begins almost as soon as the director starts exposing celluloid.

"I'm on as soon as dailies start," says Peroni, 40, a born-and-bred New Yorker. "When we screen the dailies, if Bob has comments, I'll take notes. If actors are playing each take with a different mood, he'll express a preference--and then I'll put a scene together."

"Short Cuts" follows almost a dozen different stories, moving back and forth between family groups as each faces crises great and small. Altman's shooting schedule called for each story line's actors to assemble for a couple of weeks of shooting, then clear out for the next group. For Peroni, that meant working on each group's scenes, then blending them with scenes involving other groups.

The script by Altman and Frank Barhydt was a blueprint for the order of stories, but nothing was etched in stone. Peroni found that the strongest scenes sometimes were too strong: To play them from beginning to end interrupted the film's momentum.

"Like that scene where Tom Waits and Lily Tomlin are arguing because she's mad at his drinking and he's mad because he thinks she was flirting with the fishermen," she says. "To play that whole scene out just stopped things dead. So, in the middle, when he says, 'Do fishermen like looking at your ass?' it made sense to then go to the fishermen, to see what they're doing. Then we went to Andie McDowell finding her son after he's been hit by the car. And she's questioning him and saying, 'Who hit you?' Which was the obvious place to go back to Lily and Tom, because *she* was the one who hit him. Once I sat down and looked at it, it practically spelled itself out.

"I couldn't begin to think about the whole thing at the start; that would have been too overwhelming. I'd just go scene by scene, trying not to impose a structure but allowing one to evolve. That's the reason we screened and screened and screened: It's like water seeking its own level--does that make sense?"

The hardest part, she adds, “is trying to get all the great lines into a scene. For that four-minute scene with Lily and Tom, I had *two hours* of material. They were improvising like crazy, saying the most incredible things, take after take. That was the hardest scene to cut because there was so much good stuff to work with.”

Although “Short Cuts’ ” length (3 hours, 9 minutes) is unusual, the amount of raw footage Altman shot--about 240,000 feet, or roughly 40 hours--isn’t. “Hey, he shot 200,000 on ‘The Player,’ ” she points out. “I think they shot 800,000 feet for ‘Scent of a Woman.’ ”

Peroni was a latecomer to the movie business. While driving a cab, she met another woman who drove part time, between jobs as a film editor. Inspired, Peroni took classes at Hunter College, then began working on documentary films in the early 1980s.

In 1989, Peroni moved up to editing on Shirley Sun’s “Iron and Silk” before being tapped to fly to France to help Altman finish “Vincent and Theo.”

Peroni leaves later this month for Canada, where she’ll edit Michael Moore’s satire “Canadian Bacon,” then next spring heads for Paris to work with Altman again, on “Pret-a-Porter,” about the fashion industry.

“The nice thing about editing is it’s behind closed doors,” Peroni admits. “You’re not subject to all the scrutiny of the set. In the editing room, you can make a terrible cut--and then splice it back together and nobody ever knows.”