

THE BADLANDS COLLECTIVE  
presents



# MODERN ROMANCE

A COMEDY MASTERPIECE BY ALBERT BROOKS

**AUGUST 11, 2016**  
PRINCE CHARLES CINEMA

# MODERN ROMANCE



ROBERT

I don't think we should go out. I mean, I just think it's over.

MARY

Ok, so it's over again.

ROBERT

No, not "again". This is it. It's the last time. It's for real.

MARY

You don't love me?

ROBERT

I do love you. I mean... love has nothing to do with this. Yes, I love you. I mean... that makes it very confusing. But I just don't think... I mean... you've heard of a no-win situation, haven't you?

MARY

No.

ROBERT

No? Really? No? You've never heard of one? Vietnam. This.

Though well-known as an actor in films like *Taxi Driver*, where he played Travis Bickle's priggish love rival, and *Broadcast News*, which earned him an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor, Albert Brooks is also one of the great American filmmakers. While his films have always attracted a certain critical and cult following – Jonathan Rosenbaum included *Real Life* on his list of the top 100 American movies – they are all too frequently overlooked, especially in the UK, where availability has long been an issue. Brooks is hardly prolific as a director (seven films in almost forty years), but his work has helped shape the landscape of American comedy, from the pioneering metatextual mockumentary style of *Real Life* to the self-lacerating takedown of boomer narcissism in *Lost in America*.

Writing about Brooks for The AV Club, Scott Tobias and Nathan Rabin argued that his comedy rests on the duality in his films between scathing satire and celebratory narcissism. *Modern Romance* is his masterpiece, and, not coincidentally, it is the film that best captures this duality. Brooks himself plays Robert, a film editor who breaks up with his long-suffering girlfriend Mary (Kathryn Harrold), then worries that he's made a huge mistake. It essentially plays out as a romcom in reverse.

The key driver in the romcom as a genre is the pursuit of happiness – usually in the form of marriage or a lasting, monogamous relationship. *Modern Romance* shares this basic *raison d'être* but, unlike most cornerstones of the genre, it pursues it through neuroses and cruelty. The sense of hope that is integral to the romcom – the inherent faith in the relationship being portrayed – is replaced with despair. And yet what is most surprising in spite of these sharper edges is the film's disarmingly light touch. It's a hilarious, thematically rich picture that deserves a place in the comedy canon alongside *Annie Hall* or *Harold & Maude*. Currently unavailable on disc or streaming services in the UK, we're delighted to present this rare 35mm screening as part of the Prince Charles Cinema's Check the Gate season.

*The Badlands Collective, August 2016*

## Albert Brooks: Director A Guide by Craig Williams

### Real Life (1979)



Brooks' directorial debut is a mockumentary which would sit comfortably alongside *This Is Spinal Tap* (1984). Brooks plays an exaggerated version of himself, a pompous filmmaker who wants to shoot a real American family as they go about their daily business (spoofing the PBS hit *An American Family*). Not only does *Real Life* predict the rise of reality television, it captures the behaviour and rhythms that would define the format decades later, from the pseudo-sociological justifications of the creators to the fame-hungry desperation of the participants. But some of the biggest laughs in the film come from the brilliantly executed slapstick, involving unwieldy cameras worn inside huge, invasive helmets. ("Only six of these cameras were ever made. Only five of them have ever worked. We have four of those.")

### Lost in America (1985)

From Lawrence Kasdan's *The Big Chill* (1983) to Robert Redford's *Ordinary People* (1980), the Reagan '80s was a fertile period for boomers-in-crisis movies, but none were as pointed as *Lost in America*. Brooks and Julie Hagerty star as a couple who quit their jobs, sell all their possessions and travel the country in a Winnebago after he is passed over for a promotion at work. Brooks has little interest in the predictable reasons for the crisis, focusing instead on what happens afterwards. The central pair are still mired in bourgeois navel-gazing even as they try to shake off the shackles of yuppie consumption, and Brooks' genius is in the balance he strikes between mockery and understanding. He took on Reagan's America the only way he knew how – by looking inward.



### Defending Your Life (1991)



A high-concept fantasy romance in the vein of Powell and Pressburger's *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946), *Defending Your Life* stars Brooks as a man who dies and arrives in the afterworld – the purgatorial Judgment City – to find himself standing trial and having to justify his life in order to pass on to heaven. The picture sees the meticulous world-building of *Real Life* expanded to a grander scale, with Brooks turning the afterlife into an elaborate bureaucracy populated by humorless jobsworths. *Defending Your Life* is also the only one of Brooks' pictures to chronicle the process of falling in love, making it uncharacteristically touching.

### Mother (1996)

Brooks plays a divorced writer who moves in with his mother (Debbie Reynolds.) The premise may have been ripe for a barrage of generation clash gags, but the comedy is typically sophisticated and, at its best, ambitious in the way Brooks ascribes a complex, Freudian dimension to his onscreen persona's romantic difficulties. Brooks plays a frustrated artist in all but two of his films and while the specific roles are all different – screenwriter, novelist, editor – the idea that links them all is lack of recognition, which, given how frequently Brooks' work is overlooked, blurs the line between the man and the persona.



### The Muse (1999)

Brooks plays a Hollywood screenwriter who hires a professional muse (Sharon Stone) to help revive his flailing career. *The Muse* had the potential to be Brooks' version of Robert Altman's *The Player* (1992) but, with its knockabout tone and elaborate high-jinks, it ends up closer to Barry Levinson's amiable but lightweight *What Just Happened* (2008). *The Muse* does include some great one-liners and sharp observations on contemporary Hollywood, but the real satirical highpoint is the picture's inspired third act twist: Though admittedly a little silly, its execution betrays a bitter sense of nihilism about the industry, implicating the audience as a willing participant in Hollywood's faith in its own myths.

### Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World (2005)

The conceit sees Albert Brooks playing 'Albert Brooks', on a mission from the U.S. government to go to India and Pakistan to find out what makes Muslims laugh. Pitched somewhere between *Ishtar* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, it's a terrific takedown of American exceptionalism in the years following 9/11, but the real highlight is when Brooks turns his excoriating satirical bite on himself. Riffing on his complicated relationship with his precarious star status and revisiting some of the uncomfortable interactions of *Real Life*, Brooks is as unsparing on himself as he is on his country. He went on to capitalise on his increasing sense of political malaise with his 2012 novel *2030*, a dystopian vision of an America reeling from a devastating earthquake.





FIND US ONLINE  
[www.badlands-collective.com](http://www.badlands-collective.com)  
@badlandsfilm

THE BADLANDS COLLECTIVE  
IS

PHILIP CONCANNON @phil\_on\_film  
IAN MANTGANI @mant\_a\_tangi  
CRAIG WILLIAMS @craigfilm

THANKS  
PAUL VICKERY  
JONATHAN FOSTER  
HELEN YOUNG  
DAVID JENKINS  
ADAM WOODWARD  
EDGAR WRIGHT  
PARK CIRCUS FILMS  
TIME OUT LONDON  
SCOTT TOBIAS  
NATHAN RABIN  
TONY PALEY