

ENTERTAINMENT

Altman works magic in charming 'Cookie's Fortune'

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Sentinel-Voice

In a small town in the heart of Mississippi, a black man is accused of murdering a white woman and the murdered woman's scheming niece keeps the truth of the murder to herself.

Elements of some bleak social commentary on racism and an unfair justice system?

Possibly, but not this time. Instead, these are ingredients of *Cookie's Fortune*, a lighthearted film by noted director Robert Altman.

Cookie's Fortune is an enjoyable, Southern-fried comedy of errors.

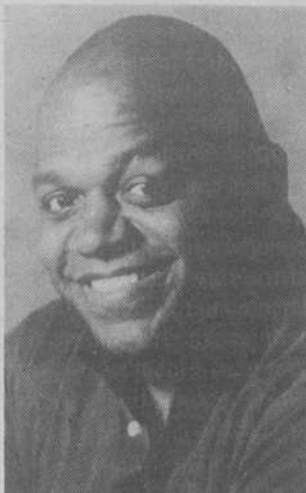
Welcome to Holly Springs, Miss. It's Good Friday and the good folks of this Dixie town are preparing for Easter.

Two of the good folks include Willis Richland (Charles S. Dutton) and Jewel Mae "Cookie" Orcutt (Patricia Neal). Willis is a handyman and Cookie's best friend.

He's worried about Cookie, who since the death of her husband, has started faltering.

When Willis goes grocery shopping for catfish for their Easter dinner, Cookie shoots herself. Hours later, Camille Dixon (Glenn Close), Cookie's conniving niece, discovers the lifeless body of her aunt.

Camille is so worried that locals will look down upon her for her aunt's suicide that



CHARLES DUTTON

she decides to make Cookie's death appear to be a murder.

Since Willis lives with Cookie and his fingerprints are on the gun, the local police bring him in for questioning.

The murder investigation brings other colorful characters into the mix including Cora Dixon Duvall (Julianne Moore), Camille's passive, mentally challenged sister, Emma Duvall (Liv Tyler), Cora's rebellious daughter, Jason Brown, a dim-witted deputy sheriff (Chris O'Donnell), Otis, a by-the-book police investigator (Courtney B. Vance), Lester Boyle (Ned Beatty), the good-natured sheriff, and Deputy Wanda (Niecy Nash), a lovelorn police officer.

In *Cookie's Fortune*, Altman, who also co-wrote the movie, once again manifests his enviable ability to create a sense of place through the characters and the story.

Holly Springs' inhabitants exhibit a Southern style of quirkiness which is part Faulkner, part Jeff Foxworthy.

Furthermore, the story takes its time to unfold, allowing the characterization and storytelling to take root.

Charles S. Dutton gives a standout performance.

He infuses Willis with dignity, removing the stereotype of the bumbling African-American servant unconditionally devoted to his employer.

Willis is intelligent. His witticisms are as smooth and easy as the Wild Turkey bourbon he likes.

Unlike Cookie's relatives, he notices that she's failing and is determined to show her that he cares, be it cleaning old guns, making catfish enchiladas or just talking to her.

Willis isn't a saint, but he has a good heart.

When short on cash, he borrows a pint of Wild Turkey Bourbon from Theo's Place, returning it once he has the funds.

Neal brings the character of Cookie to life by thinking, talking and moving like an old, feisty woman. But her "fire" is diminished due to the loss of one she dearly loved.

Unfortunately, her screen time is brief because of the nature of the story. However, Neal is so authentic and
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CARIBBEAN KINGS

Junior Stevens (above), lead man and drummer for the group Bonafide, grooves during the 4th Annual Caribbean Music Festival at the Rainbow Library recently. Stan Rankin-T (right), won over the crowd with a rousing rendition of "Natural Man."



Sentinel-Voice photos by Kimberly Edwards

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