

Program note for **Pinewood Dialogue with Tim Robbins** and the screening of **Bob Roberts**
May 19, 2003

BOB ROBERTS

A Paramount/Miramax release (U.S.) of a Polygram and Working Title production in association with Barry Levinson and Mark Johnson and Live Entertainment (Manifesto foreign sales). Produced by Forrest Murray. Executive producers, Ronna Wallace, Paul Webster, Tim Bevan. Directed, written by Tim Robbins.

Principal cast: Tim Robbins (as Bob Roberts), Giancarlo Esposito Chet MacGregor, Ray Wise (Bugs Raplin), Brian Murray (Terry Manchester), Gore Vidal (Senator Brickley Paiste), Rebecca Jenkins (Delores Perrigrew), Harry J. Lennix (Franklin Dockett), John Ottavino (Clark Anderson), Robert Stanton (Bart Mackleroneey), Kelly Willis (Clarissa Flan).

Feature films written and directed by Tim Robbins

<i>Cradle Will Rock</i>	1999
<i>Dead Man Walking</i>	1995
<i>Bob Roberts</i>	1992

Selected feature films starring Tim Robbins

<i>The Truth About Charlie</i>	2002
<i>Mission to Mars</i>	2000
<i>High Fidelity</i>	2000
<i>The Hudsucker Proxy</i>	1994
<i>The Shawshank Redemption</i>	1994
<i>Short Cuts</i>	1993
<i>Bob Roberts</i>	1992
<i>The Player</i>	1992
<i>Cadillac Man</i>	1990
<i>Bull Durham</i>	1988

Review by Todd McCarthy, *Variety*, May 13, 1992:

A sort of political *This is Spinal Tap*, *Bob Roberts* is both a stimulating social satire and, for thinking people, a depressing commentary on the devolution of the American political system. Caustic docudrama about a wealthy crypto-fascist folk singer who runs for the U.S. Senate displays the impressive multiple talents of Tim Robbins as director, writer, actor, singer and songwriter. Unusual distribution collaboration of Paramount and Miramax guarantees that plenty of muscle will be put behind the domestic release, and paralleling of the actual fall election campaign is another plus. But film's form and content both mitigate against more than moderate B.O. breakout.

Despite its fresh observations, the picture has plenty of antecedents, from *A Face in the Crowd* and *Privilege to The Candidate* and *Tanner '88*. Most of the points about the manipulation and idiocy of the media, the importance of superficial appearances and pious down-home values in elections, and government lies and conspiracies have been made before, but Robbins is relentless and uncompromising in pursuit of his ideas about the depths of cynicism, corruption and deceit involved in public life today.

Robbins plays a very plausible character, a self-assured, highly successful singer who attempts to ride his popularity into public office. Castigated as yuppie scum by his detractors, Roberts has secured his niche as an anti-1960s folk artist who blames the country's ills on liberals and the social programs of the Great Society.

Roberts' aim is to unseat longtime Pennsylvania Sen. Brickley Paiste. In a brilliant bit of casting, this man of refined sensibility and elegant reason is portrayed by Gore Vidal, and the fact that Vidal himself is known to stand for most of the values his opponent is attacking adds immeasurably to the angst of the situation.

Entire film is framed as a British TV documentary being prepared on Roberts' campaign. Docu team not only charts Roberts' progress in the weeks leading up to the 1990 election, being held against the backdrop of the Desert Shield buildup, but depicts the inane TV coverage of the race -- including sexual slander of Sen. Paiste and charges brought against Roberts' campaign adviser and former CIA operative Lukas Hart III (the always incisive Alan Rickman).

Dogging Roberts' heels on the campaign trail is one Bugs Raplin, a disheveled black journalist for an underground rag called "Troubled Times." Passionately yelling his allegations that Roberts' fortune is tied up in drug money, funds siphoned from public housing projects, the savings-and-loan scandal and the like, Bugs is the kind of unrepresentable kook the establishment can easily dismiss, but he ultimately becomes involved in Roberts' political and personal fate in a surprising and tragic way.

Many of the absurd trappings of the campaign process are here: the sound bites, appearances at beauty pageants, empty slogans, twisted ideological meanings, mad schedules, technological overload, officious managers, as well as the unusual element of Roberts' singing gigs. Tunes penned by David Robbins and Tim Robbins effectively convey the candidate's reactionary attitudes, and the latter performs them with easy authority.

At least for some viewers, one problem will be spending all this time with someone the filmmakers clearly intend to be loathsome and representative of an unsavory component in American politics. That the film so successfully states many truths about current conditions makes it a sorrowful spectacle indeed.

Another drawback is that the documentary format, which is re-created somewhat erratically, exposes only public, rather than private, moments, resulting in a relatively one-dimensional experience, one that runs a bit long on that. While all the points are legitimate and sharply scored, most of them are relatively familiar, and there is an element of preaching to the converted that will make the picture a favorite of liberals and a turn-off to others.

Still, political filmmaking in America is rare enough, so Robbins' work is a very welcome addition to the landscape of a crazy, unpredictable election year. Although Roberts seems based on no recognizable politician, there are eerie reverberations of H. Ross Perot in multimillionaire Roberts' self-financed campaign and self-characterization as a rebel outsider intent on shaking up Washington.

Robbins is spookily dead-on projecting the candidate's bland confidence and homogenized middle-American personality. Since they aren't playing full-blooded characters, performers down the line must quickly assert impressions, and most successfully do so.

Perhaps taking a cue from *The Player*, Robbins has cast a healthy number of well-known thespians to enact cameos, most numerously as cute, superficial and dumb TV newscasters. Largest of these roles goes to Rickman, who is ferociously good in a part that mostly has him issuing heated denials of major misdeeds.

Technical team has created a kind of elevated TV look that doesn't precisely match how TV documentaries look but creates a good enough impression.

The Pinewood Dialogues, an ongoing series of discussions with key creative figures in film, television, and digital media, are made possible with a generous grant from the Pinewood Foundation.

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