

BOB ROBERTS

by
Gore Vidal

I can think of only five films that deal at all realistically with American politics. In chronological order, *Citizen Kane*, *The Best Man*, *The Candidate*, *Tanner*, *Bob Roberts*. Each in its different way holds up a mirror to the not always lovely body politic, unlike Frank Capra, say, whose Messrs. Smith and Deeds, despite their announced destinations, end up with hands on heart, reciting pledges of allegiance to what our most patriotic unindicted vice-president, Spiro Agnew, used reverently to refer to as, "The greatest nation in the country."

As a boy, I remember when one of Capra's "political" films had a gala opening in my hometown of Washington DC. Most of Congress was invited. Most of Congress had a hard time keeping a straight face; and there was laughter in the wrong places, the nightmare of every filmmaker. There are laughs only in the right places in Tim Robbins' *Bob Roberts*; also, sudden gasps of recognition (particularly in Washington) as a familiar landscape is suddenly revealed from an unfamiliar angle, something no conventional filmmaker will ever dare do. But Robbins is not conventional. He wrote, directed, and acted in *Bob Roberts*. He also composed the lyrics for the songs that his eponymous hero sings; and he is still artistic director of the Los Angeles theatre company that he^{co-}founded in 1982 (X?). "You know," Robert Altman said, with some wonder, "I think he's our Orson Welles."

With *Citizen Kane*, Welles tried to make an artificially realistic portrait of a rich publisher with an eye on the presidency. Welles stylized in the most "natural" way his narrative. Dialogue overlaps, as in life. Not all "i's" dotted, nor "t's" crossed. Robbins does the

same in today's idiom--not March of Time newsreel but the television documentary, cutting back and forth between classic camera storytelling and television's quick cuts. Short cuts. Cold cuts. Yes, he shows Altman's influence as well as that of Welles.

Like Altman, he has a sharp eye and ear for what is not in the text. For this sort of hunter-director, an actor's mistaken turn or garbled line can prove to be the purest gold: Reality, the hardest thing in the world to make up. There is also something nicely symbolic in the fact that Robbins had been the protagonist in Altman's *The Player*, temporarily the final word on Hollywood, that most tradition-bound of industries; then, when Robbins won "best actor" prize at Cannes, he was sufficiently viable to turn a sketch that he had written and played on *Saturday Night Live* into a feature length film.

What began as a funny sketch of a lovable sort of folk singer whose right wing views are expressed through lyrics so carefully crafted that they can be taken, on the surface, as standard expressions of liberal sentiment--times are achangin'--until the idle ear realizes that the familiar "changin'" has been significantly modified to "changin' back." These are songs of pure reaction to Them, the enemy of the new poor, the religion-mad, the dispossessed by Them. As the sketch developed in stages to a full portrait, the Them translates to white zealots for whom, in the character of Bob Roberts, their messiah has arrived. A nice touch is that Bob proves to be a financial wizard of Millken proportions; he travels in a trailer from which he plays in all the world's markets, starting with the Nikkei in Tokyo. He is creating a fortune with which he intends to buy the presidency. But first he must win a lesser office. He decides to be a senator from Pennsylvania. But first he must defeat the aging liberal incumbent, stoutly played by me (Tim was also the caterer for the cast).

I arrived in Pittsburgh from London. After a night's restless sleep, I did all the scenes, as written, the next day. We also talked about the story. Was it really credible? Most

senators spend most of their time on the telephone, or at fund-raisers, trying to raise money to pay for their campaigns. A California senator must raise ten thousand dollars a week each week of his six-year term in order to be re-elected. Even wealthy senators like Rockefeller and Kennedy beg for money. Was Bob Roberts too much an anomaly? If so, was it a problem? Happily for the film, if not our great republic, soon after the film was shot the plot was validated by Ross Perot, a rich man who was willing, quite openly, to use his own hundreds of millions to buy the presidency--for all of us, of course. The film had proved prophetic.

As there is nothing that Bob will not do to win, there are a number of first-rate surprises as the campaign takes off. The senator is duly smeared. The smear misfires; then catches fire. Then Bob Roberts is shot... See the picture. I will say the ending is disturbing in its non-ambiguity. In effect, Robbins holds up a mirror not to the character that he plays so much as to the audience he is playing on. A fun house mirror? We don't know yet.

Technically, the film is well-served by the Canadian cinematographer (JB). The cutting (Lisa Churgi) from hand-held TV camera to straight-forward cinematography gives a sense of immediacy and reality--it's as if there really is such a campaign going on and we're watching it on the evening news as described, with incandescent idiocy, by anchorpersons played by the likes of Susan Sarandon, and (PB). It is a nice device to see, first a campaign as reported by television at its most shallow--if that is not a redundancy--and then the actual campaign as it unfolds backstage, as it were, in all its liveliness and life-likeness.

With a small budget, Robbins had to work fast with actors who were pretty much giving him their time. The scenes of Senator Paiste were done in one day and one morning. Luckily, I had once run for the Senate so there was nothing I did not know about stump speeches, cake-judging contests, and the vagaries of TV reportage.

After I'd completed my part, as written, Tim said, "Stay on tomorrow morning. We'll show the Senator after he's defeated, you know, commenting on what's happened." So I stayed. Without permission from the money men (daring thing to do--if it hadn't worked, Tim would have had to pay for the scene himself), a corner was found in a Pittsburgh public building and the dejected Senator Paiste is asked questions by a tele-journalist. enacted by Tim who squatted down beside the camera. I made only one contribution to this cinema verité: "Don't tell me in advance what you're going to ask me. That way the audience will see the Senator actually thinking on air, trying to answer the questions." I've worked with a couple ^{of} dozen directors as a writer and (very occasionally) actor but, except for Fellini, I've never encountered one who was willing to do such a high wire act without a net of written words.

The resulting film gave not only pleasure but, also, thought to those who watched it. Question. Is there a Bob Roberts in real life lurking in the wings of the Republic? Yes, Virginia, there always is and always will be until... What Robbins has done, with much wit, is to remind us that our first dictator, should things ever get that bad, will not be an imperious psycho like the ranting Hitler or the strutting Mussolini but a folksy ah-shucks kind of guy or gal like...who? Pat Boone? Tammy Wynette? Or--Barry *Manilow*?