

## OLLI: Spring 2014: US of Hollywood: BOB ROBERTS



Chris Roberge's interview with Tim Robbins, writer, director, & star of BOB ROBERTS:  
published in *The Tech*, MIT's online newspaper: 25 September 1992:

"When asked about the origin of the character of Bob Roberts, Robbins refers to his hometown. 'I used to live in Greenwich Village, and I returned there after about an eight-year absence and had seen how my neighborhood had shifted. A lot of the artists and bohemian iconoclasts had just drifted away. I noticed a lot of franchises opening up. I started thinking about what would happen if all of these businessmen picked up guitars. So I wrote him [Roberts] as a businessman folk singer, and as the eighties came his ambition grew, and by the nineties he was running for office.'

"The campaign that Roberts launches shows more than a few similarities to the campaigns of today's candidates, which is somewhat amazing considering that the script was written six years ago. 'Well, there are some strange similarities,' Robbins admits. 'Just the other day Bush, at a campaign stop, was asked what voters could do to help him in November, and he said, I think jokingly, "Vote often." And as you know, Bob Roberts says something similar. It's strange to see. I guess it's good for the movie but I don't know if it's good for the country.'

"Robbins was then asked if he felt that any of today's problems were caused not just by Bush, but by 'the other side.' 'What other side? That's the question. Where was that side during the Clarence Thomas hearings? Where was that side during the war? I don't know if that side exists in Washington. I think there are people who will occasionally say things to make you happy enough so that there's an illusion created that there is another side, but I think that there are an awful lot of similarities between the two parties and not enough philosophical differences in key issues."

"Robbins rejected the idea, often promoted by the Bush administration (particularly by Vice President Quayle), that there is another side to the issues and that it manifests itself too often in television and film. 'I definitely don't buy the whole idea of Hollywood as being a liberal town. I don't buy that at all. Yes, there are fund raisers thrown and there is money raised for what could be called "liberal" causes; I prefer to see them as humanist causes. But as far as the product that comes out of Hollywood is concerned, it's mostly conservative and more often than not reactionary. How many movies have you seen come out of Hollywood that justify violence as a means for solving problems? This certainly can't be a liberal concept.'

"Robbins hopes that most people will understand the concepts behind *Bob Roberts*, although he admits that there may be those who read the film as praising the right-wing rebel. 'I suppose that there are people like that. I hope that they're a minority, but I'm sure that we'll hear. I can't be held responsible for that.' Robbins is more afraid of people misunderstanding the satirical music of the film as being genuine, and as a result

he refuses to release a soundtrack album. 'I don't think that in the context of the film they will [misread the songs]. I think that in the context of the film they work, they're funny, and they're entertaining. Out of context, I don't trust the songs. And I personally don't want to be driving in my car five years from now and hear that bile on the radio.'

"*Bob Roberts*, as an openly political film, is a rarity. Robbins tried to explain this phenomenon. 'Well, if you talk to someone in Hollywood they'll tell you that political films don't work and that they don't get enough box office. We'll see. I think that it's hard to do. In Hollywood, if a "political" film does not succeed with incredible numbers then everyone will point to the film and say, "We're not making any more films like that. That one didn't do well." However, they will not apply that same standard to dumb movies about dogs. I personally put a lot of pressure on myself all along to make this an entertaining film, and if it raises some questions, great. If I were to describe this film to someone as a political film, I don't think that that would be fair to what the film is. It's about more than politics. It's about entertainment and the co-opting of entertainment. I think that it's also about the news media and its superficiality.'

"In fact, the portrayal of television news in *Bob Roberts* is very harsh. 'I asked a network anchor once why they weren't running any stories about the connections between gun running and drug smuggling in the Iran contra affair. He said, "Well, to do that we'd have to do a very in-depth piece and people will turn their televisions off." And what this taught me was that they have really entered into journalism as entertainment. A little while back the major networks started relying on ratings for the nightly news.

"In doing this and entering this market where you have to serve the needs of advertisers and where you have to serve the needs of the public and their patience and their attention span, they have entered into the same arena as sitcoms and game shows. So you can watch the evening news and see how they've got the grabber up front just like a sitcom does. They have the story that's reported in probably never over two minutes. They keep the pace moving just as you would direct a film. And what they've done is to abdicate their responsibility in this democracy, which is to be a vigilant protector of our freedoms. Now, most Americans get their news from these programs. I've read things in *The Nation* or *The Village Voice*... and then I've read those same reports six months or eight months later in the *New York Times*. Why does it take so long for them to report it? Why did it take CBS until September to report that there were 2000 people killed in the Panama invasion? I read about that the week after it happened. Why did it take so long for the major news outlets to report that we were supplying arms or technology to Saddam Hussein when I read about that before the war happened? Something's up.'

"Robbins expressed hope that *Bob Roberts* would generate debate about the issues that he finds so important. 'I don't know if a movie can change anything. But this movie has resulted in people asking questions. I hear reports from the lobbies of theaters about discussions and arguments. This is healthy. This has to be healthy.'"

