TRANSCRIPT

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

A PINEWOOD DIALOGUE WITH **TIM ROBBINS**

The versatile, often outspoken actor Tim Robbins made his debut as a director and writer with the prescient and impressive political satire *Bob Roberts*, a mock documentary in which he plays a right-wing, folk-singing Senate candidate who embodies the greed and self-interest of the 1980s. With its sharp views of media manipulation, corruption, and the role of money in politics, the film is as timely today as it ever was. Robbins spoke at the Museum about his career, his family's love of music, and American politics just before heading to Cannes for the premiere of *Mystic River*.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Bob Roberts*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (May 19, 2003):

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome back Tim Robbins. (Applause)

ROBBINS: Thanks.

SCHWARTZ: Well, how does it feel for you, watching it [*Bob Roberts*] today as somebody who's been attacked so recently for speaking their mind? What feelings come up when you're sitting there watching this film?

ROBBINS: I was thinking, it's always—you always see something and you say, "I could've done that and I could've done…" But no, it was great, because I haven't seen it with an audience since it came out. So that was really—it was cool.

SCHWARTZ: Just to jump back, because when I watch this film, I keep thinking how fresh it is and how up-to-date it is, but just to jump back to the time it was made, this was made—the first appearance of *Bob Roberts* was on a *Saturday Night Live* short film, is that right?

ROBBINS: Yeah, it was—I did a short film. Back then, he was just a businessman. (Laughs) And as I kept writing it, his ambitions grew, and he became a politician. (Laughter) But it was originally written—I came back, actually, to do a movie called *Five Corners*, here in New York; I hadn't been back home—I grew up here, in Greenwich Village, and hadn't been back for about six or seven years, and I had noticed such a gentrification that happened in my old neighborhood and a lot of… Where there were old first generation immigrants with stores, now there were David's Cookies and so I kind of was revolted by that. So I started writing this character of a yuppie folksinger.

SCHWARTZ: Judging from the credits, where there're so many Robbins—members, I guess, of the Robbins family—you seem to have kind of a musical background.

ROBBINS: Yeah, my dad was a folksinger, actually, yeah. He was in a group called The Highwaymen. I saw a lot of those old folk concerts, so that stuff was really in our blood. And me and my brother wrote the songs, paying homage to his past. He's [Gil Roberts] the preacher in the church, my dad. And my sister Gabrielle is the one that sings outside the hospital, "Prevailing Tides", and… (Laughter) Yeah.

SCHWARTZ: And what was it like making the film at this time, you had a major studio—you had Miramax [Films], but Paramount [Pictures] involved. So it's a major studio film. The culture wars are going on, I mean, this is…

ROBBINS: Well, it wasn't at the…

SCHWARTZ: …at the time that you made this.

ROBBINS: Well, when I made it, it was Working Title [Films]; it was actually an English company that gave me the money to do it. No American company would give me…

SCHWARTZ: Okay, so you went out and made it.

ROBBINS: Yeah, and so the reason why Miramax and Paramount became involved is because we got it into Directors' Fortnight at Cannes [Film Festival] and showed it there, and it became such a big hit there. And so there was a—people were interested, bidding on it in Cannes. And that's how it got sold to Miramax and Paramount.

SCHWARTZ: And was that during—if it was released in '92, I guess, was it—it was sort of in the midst of the election season.

ROBBINS: Yeah, it was before the election. So it came out in September and the election that Clinton won was in November of that year. So it became a part of the landscape, the political landscape of the time.

SCHWARTZ: Yeah. And what was the climate—it's just amazing, the sort of cultural situation today, when you really… If you speak out in opposition to what the president is doing, you're—you know, it seems unpatriotic by a lot of people.

ROBBINS: Well, I was really…

SCHWARTZ: But so what kind of response…

ROBBINS: I was happy to hear that line in there—I'd forgotten about that line in the television interview that Lynne Thigpen is doing, early on in the film, where she says, "Well, are you saying that to criticize the president is unpatriotic?" (SCHWARTZ: Laughs) So I guess that's been around for a long time.

SCHWARTZ: Yeah. Now, you did feel—we were talking before the screening about this, but—you did feel like this film might have an impact in the election, for example. I mean, the film is not—it's a comedy, but there was a real intention to be doing something politically with it.

ROBBINS: Well, I thought it was necessary to bring up Iran-Contra, which somehow just got swept under the rug. And I guess you could substitute Enron right now for that. Seems we never really…

SCHWARTZ: In case anybody remembers that.

ROBBINS: Yeah. I mean, no one went to jail for that.

SCHWARTZ: And just talk about sort of, I guess, writing this and creating the characters—particularly the sort of liberal characters of Gore Vidal's Brickley Paiste, and then Giancarlo Esposito's characters [Bugs Raplin], who are saying things that we presume you agree with, but in some ways you make Brickley Paiste, the kind of liberal that gets attacked so easily as being an old fashioned liberal.

ROBBINS: Yeah, and Bugs is kind of extremist, so… You know, I think that just part of… I mean, I think you have to be accurate in the way you portray those people, as well. And I didn't want to have a knight in shining armor on a horse; I just didn't think it would work, because there really are no people like that. But Gore brought a lot of that to the movie. And there was one—that scene where he's got his tie off was an unscheduled scene; we shot it one day when we were on a location, and we just basically took two hours out of the schedule and I asked if I could interview him after he was defeated by Bob Roberts. So a lot of that is just Gore just bringing his knowledge and his perspective of the political scene.

SCHWARTZ: And in terms of what films you had in mind, some… Robert Altman did a sort of fake documentary, *Tanner '88*, which had a mix of documentary and fiction techniques; and *The Player* was made around this time. Was Robert Altman particularly an influence in what you…

ROBBINS: Well, he's always been an influence on me. One of the films that kind of changed the way I look at films was *Nashville*. I love the multi-layered storytelling in that. I guess the biggest influence on this film was [D. A.] Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back*, which I ripped off a couple of scenes from.

SCHWARTZ: Freewheeling Bob Roberts. (Laughs)

ROBBINS: Yeah. The video of the "Wall Street Rap" is from that, and the scene where he's in the back of the bus and he's typing, and Clarissa is playing the guitar—it's a scene in Pennebaker's film where Joan Baez is playing the guitar and he's typing, [Bob] Dylan is typing. That was a major influence on this film.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Well, a question about working with actors. And this is your first feature film as a director. So if you could talk about… And an amazing cast. I mean, it's just amazing the people who pop up in this film.

ROBBINS: Having been an actor myself, I love actors. I just love them. I respect everything they do. And so that when I get a chance to work with them and draw things out of them, I don't know specifically what it is, but it's—I have a deep love for them. The sets are usually very protected and very welcoming for actors. I don't like directors that play trips to try to get performances out of you, and manipulate you and, do emotional stuff.

I learned a great deal from working with the Actors' Gang in Los Angeles and writing and directing for them. And one of the things that we started working on about three years after we started was a workshop process that has no negativity in it. It revolves around coming onstage in an emotion. And that's all it takes, as long as you're in an emotion. What it eliminates is that thing where you do scene study and everyone criticizes it at the end; there's no criticism allowed. Actors know if it works or if it doesn't work. You don't have to sit around and have a postmortem where everyone talks about what didn't work. You know what I mean? That's ultimately destructive. So we try to create an environment when we're working together in the Actors' Gang that's purely positive and purely supportive.

SCHWARTZ: And of course, you're interested in the idea of politics as performance. The idea that politicians are acting all the time, too.

ROBBINS: Yeah. Some of them are pretty good, too. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Was this a hard film to get financed?

ROBBINS: Oh, yeah, it was. It took about five years to get the money for it, yeah. First of all, I hadn't directed before, but… It was actually Mark Johnson and Barry Levinson kind of provided the final push for it to happen, and their endorsement of it and involvement in it really helped it happen. It's really hard when you're trying to convince someone to give you a couple million dollars to do something that's in your head, you know? And I put it in the script as much as I could but, this kind of film, a lot develops on the set, so they had to trust. And I think it was helpful that I had *The Player* coming out.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay. Well, is there improvisation? I mean this was in the documentary style.

ROBBINS: There was some, there was some. Sometimes I just had, like, a framework. And then I can't remember, because it's all—a lot of it was written at the last minute kind of things; we'd talk about it and then I'd script something the night before. I probably wouldn't be able to work with a major studio because of that process. I really love rewriting at the last minute. And that makes them really nervous. But it really helps because you're in the moment, in the creative moment on the film, and you know what's working, and you can get… So I oftentimes at the end of the day, after dailies, I'll go home and rewrite this scene for the next day—which the actors kind of hate, actually. Usually you do a master, and then you move in for a two shot and then get the close-ups. But because it's a documentary, it can only be one shot, so what we would do is we would oftentimes just rehearse the scene and where the camera is. And there's a lot of shots that are done in one. And so it was more… The theatrical training of the actors really came in handy, because they could hit marks, but also develop their performance as the rehearsal went, and then it would be there for the film.

SCHWARTZ: And just in terms of—you're obviously satirizing some of the characters, but they're sort of playing them straight, in a way—so is there anything about working, getting…

ROBBINS: Well, there's an expression, "Play the lie," which is for actors, which is a real important thing; you know, that you're never lying, you're always telling the truth. So play the lie. The lie is the truth.

SCHWARTZ: We should mention that he's going to Cannes in two days for the premiere of *Mystic River*, Clint Eastwood's film.

ROBBINS: Yeah, it's a good one, yeah. Clint Eastwood is the best. The best.

SCHWARTZ: Mm-hm. As a director.

ROBBINS: Well, as a person, too. He's really, really a decent human being. It's such a great lesson, because, you know, I have a picture of Jimmy Stewart in my office. It's mainly there because he's one of my favorite actors of all time, but also mainly because he was a Republican, and I want him there to remind me that that kind of stuff doesn't matter when you're talking about this kind of thing, with creative process. I think people too often make judgments about *all Republicans*, in a way that's really not going to get us anywhere, you know? There's an awful lot of Republicans that contacted me after the Baseball Hall of Fame controversy [in April 2003, a 15th-anniversary celebration of the movie *Bill Durham* at the Baseball Hall of Fame was cancelled by the Hall of Fame's president Dale Petroskey because of antiwar comments made by Robbins], in support, basically saying, "I don't agree with your politics, but you have a right to express them." And we have to remember that when we're trying to create unity, it's really important not to make judgments on people simply because they're Republicans, or Libertarians, or Green Party, or Democrats, just as… For me, it's really more about how you treat people and what kind of person you are.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Oh, how much shooting did you do? What was the shooting ratio like? Did you shoot a lot more than you used?

ROBBINS: Not much, no. We didn't have much money, we didn't have much stock, so we had to make it work. And so we would do about… Some of the one shots, we'd do more takes with because it was all we had, but never over four or five takes, which is more than I did with Clint Eastwood, who only does two takes. And it really—you get in this really incredible mode of discipline and focus when you're working with him.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question): Okay, so if you could say anything about working on [*The*] *Shawshank Redemption*, which was a very influential film.

ROBBINS: At the time, we didn't have any idea it would become what it's become culturally, and emotionally, and spiritually for people. It was done in Ohio, in Mansfield, Ohio. It was a great script, one of the best I've—*the* best I've ever read. It was—took place—we shot it in the summer, in a working prison, and it was a great experience. Morgan [Freeman] has become a really good friend, and I really—I'm really moved by the fact that so many people view that film as important; it really makes me feel great to have been part of that.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Oh, how much rehearsal do you do? On this film in particular, are you asking?

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes.

ROBBINS: This film [*Bob Roberts*], we would do—it would depend on the scene, but for that scene that goes all the way down the hall, the beauty pageant and around there, we had to do about six rehearsals—without [cinematographer Jean Lépine] holding the camera, because that was, that was so difficult. It was a heavy camera, too; this wasn't one of those lightweight things. So we had to save that for the actual shooting. And then we, I think, shot it maybe four times.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) How much of your experience on *Tapeheads* came through when you were directing?

ROBBINS: Oh, not much. Not much. It's hard for me to remember that film, because I was really groggy when I was doing it, and then the last week of shooting, I went to see a doctor, and it turned out I had mononucleosis while I was shooting that film. (Laughter) I couldn't understand why my attitude was so bad and I had no energy, you know? I was like… (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: There are so many people who just say Hollywood actors should not be political. You mentioned Michael Moore, he got a lot of criticism—tons of criticism for making a political statements.

ROBBINS: That's—I wonder what people would think if they said that doctors shouldn't be political, or bakers shouldn't be political, or auto mechanics shouldn't be political. It's just—it's ridiculous. We're all citizens, we all have a right. I think what upsets them is that we might have some access to the media, and that when we do, oftentimes,they are uncomfortable with that. And I can understand why. But that doesn't mean we don't have the right to it.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Is it difficult to maintain creative control today as a director?

ROBBINS: I've been really lucky, because I've had this other career, so I've been able to say no. But it is difficult for some. I learned a really important lesson early on about… A director I worked with, we were at dailies, and it was the third day of shooting, and we were at dailies and I heard this commotion behind me. I look over and I see the director has taken the producer up, lifted him up, and has got him pressed against the wall, and he says, "You ever talk to any of my actors again, I'll fucking kill you," in front of everybody. And I realized—this was his first movie—and from that point on, he was left alone. Now, he was taking a chance there. I mean he could've been fired. But what he did was he set the limit. He said, "I'm going to make my movie or you can fire me; either one is good." And I think that that's a really good mindset to have, to be able to believe in what you're doing and have confidence in what you're doing, and then to be able to fight like a junkyard dog to get it.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question): Do you give actors a lot of leeway or do you have strong control on the set?

ROBBINS: I think that what you're looking for is someone who will bring ideas in, and I don't think strict control on a set is a good idea, because it keeps creativity from happening, if they think that they have to fulfill your vision of what it is. You're there to guide and to catch people if they fall or to try to guide people towards a more—to refine a performance—but not to create it. You can't create it. They have to bring it. And you want people that are confident and believe in what they're doing and can bring you stuff that challenges you. If they're not comfortable saying a line, I have no problem rewriting it.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay, *Cradle Will Rock*, which is about the whole WPA theater, what was the inspiration for you to make that film?

ROBBINS: The inspiration was hearing the story about what happened that night, when they defied the ban against them and performed this play. It was just such an amazing story about creative freedom, expression, and people risking their jobs, and their livelihood, and perhaps their lives, because I think two weeks before that incident of *Cradle Will Rock* happened, there were some riots, labor riots in Chicago, where the cops killed like sixteen people. So there were cops in the theater, and they were armed. And so I think it was a really amazing kind of testament to the individual, that one woman who stood up and started the ball rolling—that for me is really what freedom is all about. So when I heard that story, I started doing research about the time, and then all those other stories started finding their way into the script.

SCHWARTZ: Just talk a little bit about your screenwriting, because you've written all the films you directed. Just tell us—what is that process like for you?

ROBBINS: That's the lonely part, you know? And then when you're finished with the script, you don't want anyone… I usually show it to my wife and I don't want her to say anything negative. All I want to hear is, "It's brilliant."

SCHWARTZ: And what do you hear? (Laughs)

ROBBINS: Well, first, she says, "It's brilliant, but…" (Laughter) But that one, *Cradle*, happened over a long period of time, because I kept researching. But *Dead Man Walking* came really fast. The adaptation was a lot easier to do than the invention of the whole thing.

SCHWARTZ: Okay, well *Dead Man Walking*, which showed both sides of the story and was so even-handed, but so personal at the same time, I think you said, was that in the—was that what the book [*Dead Man Walking*] was like or was that what you brought to it?

ROBBINS: Well, the book—yes, because the book has this revelation that Helen [Prejean] has when she realizes that she was not thinking about the parents. And that, for me, was the key in the book—her stumbling, her good intentions, but her total lack of knowledge of the overall picture, and how that developed with her experience. For me, that's when—when I was reading the book—that was the movie, because it was about her fallibility in this horrendous situation. So it was really essential

to give dignity to the people that had lost their loved ones.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) You saw Sister Helen Prejean recently speak and say that this film is right on the mark. She was shocked that you called her when you read her book.

ROBBINS: Well, actually, Susan [Sarandon] found the book and forced me to read it. And I'm glad she did. Yeah, she's [Sister Helen Prejean] told me that. She goes all around the country and talks, and she shows the film first. She says that for her, the film is really a gift, because it "tills the soil," as she puts it, for her to begin a discussion with people about it. It's been really—she says she has sensed a "sea change" in America about it. And poll numbers have gone, from when it came out, about 85% for to about 60% now. So something's going on. People are thinking a little bit more about it, maybe.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay, so a question about advice for screenwriters, and is screenwriting as hard for you as it is for Nicolas Cage in *Adaptation*? (Laughter)

ROBBINS: Yes, it's like a nightmare. I love that film, because I've been through the process, and it's… You know, you read it and you go, "Oh, my God, this is *so bad*." But the great thing is, since computers—because I started writing scripts, plays and stuff, on typewriters, and you'd have to retype the whole damn thing—now you can just move scenes around. It's just—it really was—what a revelation that was, to just be able to delete it and then insert it somewhere else.

I think the key is to get it done. Just to go, get the story out there, get the whole thing done, knowing that you're going rewrite it. You can't ever—no one can write a script from beginning to end and it's all there. And I've rewritten my things so many times. *Cradle Will Rock*, I must've rewritten fifteen times, fifteen different drafts. It's just part of the process. And if you are lucky enough, at the end, when you have a thing you can read, if you can get five friends and read through it, you'll discover a lot of things about what works and what doesn't, and you'll be able to start adapting the truth you've found into the script.

And also, you have to be able to be ruthless with your own stuff, and be able to delete or throw out stuff that you originally thought was great. The great thing, also, about computers is that you can put that stuff that you delete into a separate file. (Laughter) And you should save it, because sometimes later, after you've finished that third draft, you go into that little file and you'll find something, a real gem that you thought sucked, but now would really work well. So we used to cut and paste, when we were working on plays, because we didn't have time to rewrite the whole thing. You know, the subconscious will come up with things that make no sense, and that sometimes don't work, but there's a reason it came. So it's good sometimes just to store that stuff away. And also, when you finish your draft, leave it alone for a couple months. Just let it lay. Don't think it's going to do anything right away. And then it'll… All that stuff that's in there will be gestating in you, as well.

SCHWARTZ: Thank you, and good luck with *Mystic River* and Cannes. (Applause)

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