

a vote for bob

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Tim Robbins' latest has perfect timing for an imperfect political system

Tim Robbins was pissed off when he wrote the screenplay for *Bob Roberts*. He was frustrated with an apathetic American public, all too willing to let politicians talk down to their lowest common denominator. He was disturbed by a "dangerous" shift to the right in American politics.

So he wrapped up everything he despised about politics, gave it a down-home smile, dressed it in a blue suit and red tie and created Bob Roberts: a folk-singing, ultra-conservative, self-made millionaire campaigning for a Pennsylvania senatorial seat.

He then steered the project through Hollywood, started in the title role and directed it himself. And he did it all in the hope that his satire could scare the audience enough to do one simple thing — vote.

"The system is not working. The reason the system is not working is the politicians aren't representing us; they are representing the money that got them there, the money that paid for their campaigns," says the 33-year-old Robbins. "That's all the more reason for Americans to get out and vote."

And all the more reason to see the film. A compelling satire, directed in pseudo-documentary style, *Bob Roberts* is a true tour-de-force — something Hollywood always claims to produce but rarely does.

And it just might be the flick to make Robbins, if not a household name, at least a coffeehouse one. Perhaps best known for his role as the garter-wearing pitcher in *Bull Durham*, Robbins also earned considerable critical acclaim this summer for his portrayal of the sleazy movie mogul in *The Player*.

Robbins isn't in show business for the fame though; he wants much more. Born into a family of social activists, he remembers his sister's arrest for protesting the Vietnam War when he was 11. He says his parents made him aware of individual responsibility.

Inspired by that responsibility and his frustration with the political system, Robbins began writing *Bob Roberts* in 1986. "I think generally I write best when I'm angry," Robbins says. "I've seen a lot of things happening to America, and this shift to the right, I think it's dangerous."

In spite of his fear of the right, don't call Robbins left. Robbins says he doesn't align himself with one party and has a problem calling himself a "conservative" or a "liberal."

"The result of labels is ultimately a divisive one, something that keeps... a liberal a liberal, a conservative a conservative. There doesn't seem to be any common ground and that's simply not true. I think that there's evidence to this in the rise of Perot," he says. "I don't see how anything is being achieved by putting labels on people."

Robbins, who insists he isn't endorsing a presidential candidate, says it doesn't matter who's in the race. "I have been encouraging people to vote, regardless of who's running for president," he says. "I think it's important for people to vote."

"People tend not to vote because they're disgusted with the process. [But] there is so much more on the ballot than who's running for president. There are local referendums. Do you want a toxic waste dump in your neighborhood? No, I don't. You can vote for it. You can empower your community."

And *Bob Roberts*, a scathing portrayal of the American dream gone awry, may be a way to make voters seek that empowerment. Through the character of Roberts, a



Tim Robbins plays a right-wing rebel running for Senate in the movie *Bob Roberts*.

Republican whose political beliefs fall somewhere between those of Richard Nixon and Adolf Hitler, Robbins exposes the often inane patter of campaign politics.

With the help of an intelligent election team, including his campaign manager Lukas Hart III (Alan Rickman) and public relations director Chet MacGregor (Ray Wise), Roberts turns his nearly fascist folk songs into smash-hit, rallying anthems. They'll stop at nothing to get Roberts elected.

And, of course, getting elected today means destroying the opponent — little challenge for Roberts' henchmen. Pennsylvania incumbent Sen. Brickley Paiste, played by politician/author Gore Vidal, is the target.

Through the character of Paiste, Vidal, who ran unsuccessfully for Congress in 1960 and for the Senate in 1982, offers a stark contrast to Roberts' flamboyance. But Paiste's liberal views and a scandal contrived by Roberts' crafty team seal his failure at the polls. It's symptomatic of politicians today, Robbins says. "[Paiste] is an American tragedy," he says. "Here's an ineffectual liberal who is finally saying something, but it's too late."

In the end, Paiste is no match for Roberts. Through his charismatic interviews, Roberts sells his family-oriented, soldier-in-the-war-on-drugs platform to adults. And he even turns youthful voters on to his selective prejudices and blatant discriminations.

But he does it with a smile and a song. Indeed, part of the fun of *Bob Roberts* is, without question, its music. While often humorous (and always offensively corny), the songs could get an entire party convention singing and dancing in the aisles.

Written by Robbins and his brother David, each tune is laced with a strong ultra-conservative message. There's a guilty pleasure in the tunes, from the opening chords of "What Did the Teacher Tell You," a song about the illegality of school prayer, to "Wall Street Rap," a riotous takeoff of Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues."

But catchy as they are, don't expect to catch the Roberts' songs on MTV's *Buzz Bin*. Despite the commercial nature of show business and its tendency to mass produce every movie soundtrack, Robbins wouldn't consider marketing the music from *Bob Roberts*. He even went so far as to have it written into his contract that there wouldn't be a soundtrack release. "I don't want to hear them," he says. "I don't want to be driving along five years from now and hear any of these songs."

But he may be forced to watch the film on cable perhaps four, 12 or 20 years down the road. Like Robert Redford's '70s political slam, *The Candidate*, *Bob Roberts* may well become a cable TV *Old Faithful* — rolling around every presidential campaign, when voter frustrations again boil to the surface.

Despite his skepticism of the political system, Robbins says hope is not lost. If voters start getting informed, taking initiative and exercising the simplest tool in politics — the voting booth — he believes things could change. But, he says, it won't happen if Americans continue to sit at home, eating nachos and watching the election returns.

"Unfortunately, what happens when they do that is they make themselves impotent in this society."