

TIM ROBBINS: VISIONARY GANG LEADER

BY DAVID C. NICHOLS

PHOTOS: GABRIEL GOLDBERG

MAKEUP BY JAMIE GREENBERG

SINCE LAST FALL, the Actors' Gang has operated from its new Ivy Substation location with a wallop. Following the remounted *Tartuffe* (transferred from the company's former El Centro venue) and a newly envisioned staging of *Blood! Love Madness!*, Gang co-founder and artistic director Tim Robbins goes for the jugular with the world premiere of a new adaptation of *1984*.

George Orwell's visionary novel about a totalitarian future, adapted for the stage by San Francisco Mime Troupe veteran Michael Gene Sullivan, takes a stark, theatrical view of Winston Smith's descent into unquestioning love for Big Brother. As incarcerated Winston (played by associate artistic director Brent Hinkley) moves through his tortuous re-programming, *1984* draws Orwell's themes into current pertinence.

That attracted Academy Award-winner Robbins to the project, as he told me during a January rehearsal. "I wanted to do it when I first read it," says Robbins, his intensity registering even in jet-lag mode. "It has a lot to say. We don't think about the relevance. We think about the reality of the truth. The audience, though, will get it."

Indeed, Orwell's fictional Oceania, a nation where everyone is, literally, under surveillance, where news stories are "rectified" to maintain the illusion of infallible leadership, has chilling familiarity.



Robbins concurs. "You know how, when you're reading a good play and there's the knock-out punch? For me it was the conclusion of the Emmanuel Goldstein 'War is Peace' chapter. I got the book and I re-read it. You remember 'Big Brother is Watching,' you remember that there are telescreens that can see everything you do. But we tend to forget the other specifics. And those are where the meaning of the book is. As if we haven't retained what's most important. That's why it's important to do it again."

Robbins emphasizes "the concept of doublethink. That we can hold two separate realities in our heads at the same time, and use them as we need to use them, two separate truths. It's scary how true that is."

He shakes his head knowingly. "That we can live so easily with liars as our leaders and to forgive those lies...unless those



VJ FOSTER, ROBBINS AND BRENT HINKLEY

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of a tremendously sophisticated propaganda, and one that is working." Robbins concludes, "And that completely relates to 1984."

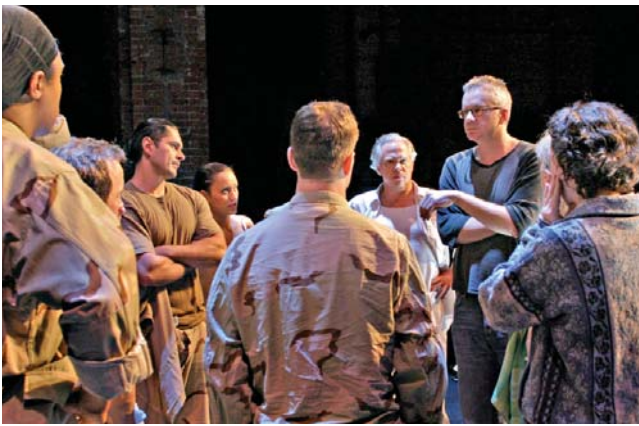
Robbins speaks from experience. "I gave this speech about intimidation, at the National Press Club in 2003," he recalls, "when the war was happening. I talked about the idea of what a bully is. A bully's got nothing. That's why they're so proactive and so quick to attack. At the time, I was thinking, 'I'm an actor. My wife [Susan Sarandon] is an actress. We came out against the war and you'd think we'd brought a tank onto the White House lawn.'" Robbins laughs with a sardonic edge, as he says, "Look, we have an opinion. We have access to the media. But, we're just a couple of people so why the crazy, unrelenting response? Because we're telling the truth. So they put out these things about cancellations of appearances, intimations of threats."

"The thing that drove me absolutely crazy wasn't the Republicans, it was the politically expedient Democrats that said now's not the time for a debate, we have to be united, we're fighting terrorists." Robbins' eyes narrow. "This is the absolute time for a debate."

He first became aware of this doublethink "when Susan and I did that thing at the Oscars. The entire house was filled with people with red ribbons, faux-activism. We were talking about people...incarcerated for nine months, in the hot sun, because they had tested positive for HIV. Clinton during the campaign had promised to close it down. Three months into his presidency, he hadn't done a thing. No one was writing about it. So we did that bit at the Oscars and within a week, the detainment had been closed down." Robbins gets very serious: "I got all the press, the clippings, and no one said what we said. The press said that we thought that Haitians with AIDS should be able to come to the country. All these misquotes of what we said. That's a pretty intense reality. I said something on television and no one heard it."

He pauses, then continues. "I always go on the personal

PHOTO: MICHAEL DANIEL



ROBBINS REHEARSING THE CAST OF *EMBEDDED*

lies happen to be something sexual, and then we go crazy. A guy who's lying about a sexual affair to save his marriage? Wouldn't any dude? But this became a brushfire that became a forest fire."

Robbins burrows into his topic. "Now, a president has lied to us about weapons of mass destruction, he's lied to us about Iraq's links to Al-Qaeda. He's lied to us about intelligence regarding yellowcake uranium that Saddam was seeking to get a nuclear bomb. He's lied to us about so many things. It should be repeated ad nauseum, as Clinton's lie was. But it isn't." Robbins admits, "That's my breaking point—where I know what the reality is. The reality is that the president has broken the law and spied on the American people, and that is an impeachable offense. Certainly if one matter is an impeachable offense, the other matter is an impeachable offense."

Robbins pauses, looking down at set designer Sibyl Wickersheimer's half-completed Expressionistic cellblock. "We are living in a society that can create these separate realities simultaneously. Citizens seem to be able to do it on a regular basis." His timbre darkens. "And the survival of the duplicity in government depends on this. And this government—and I mean both Republican and Democrat—has to create a reality through which they can continue crimes, continue to roll back environmental protections, work place rights, educational programs."

"The fact that those same people who are screwed on a regular basis will then vote for people that are screwing them, is indicative

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level. As an actor I have to, I have to understand human beings. We go on television and then at the cocktail parties, there’s someone in the press, who chose not to report about it, saying, ‘Yeah, we knew about that,’ or denying that they knew about it. So, on a personal level, who’s going to be the angriest about that situation? That person from the press, we did his job for him. So he has to get to us. Did they report that the thing closed down? No. The story did not become ‘Activism leads to results.’ It becomes ‘Crazy Liberals, they want everyone with AIDS in Haiti to be taken care of in American hospitals.’ Insane.”

And then, there was the Harvard business. “I was Harvard’s Hasty Pudding Man of the Year,” Robbins recalls. “I was there, it was an honor and I did it for fun. I did the tour of the campus in the daytime and students kept coming up, saying supportive things. That was my day at Harvard. We get to the drag show that night and it was funny. The future leaders of America are dressed in drag. It’s a hoot. The curtains close and when they open, there are these five guys, in huge platform shoes and big wigs, with signs with different movie titles I’ve done, *Mission to Mars*, the films that weren’t tremendous. And they chant, ‘NO MORE BAD MOVIES.’ Funny.” He laughs at the memory. “I’m honored by Harvard and what do the headlines say? ‘Student Protestors Interrupt Hasty Pudding Ceremony.’ Wherever I go, I get the feeling there are tens of thousands of people who did not support this war. Yet, the message the media sent was that even at Harvard at this innocuous event, protestors. The press took out of context something that was so clearly part of the innocuous event.”

What is most remarkable about our interview is how Robbins focuses beyond the technical din, no less concentrated here than he will be in a few hours, when Hinkley and fellow cast members Keythe Farley, V.J. Foster, Steven M. Porter, Brian Finney and Kaile Hollister arrive for the runthrough.

With Robbins steering things from the front row, the benign chaos of a show two weeks before opening gives way to absolute concentration. Where minutes before, Porter was stalking the stairs in *King Kong* imitation and Foster wolfed down his dinner while Wickersheimer explained a new element on the center stage pit, an uncanny group ethic is on display. It supports Robbins’ assertion that “the company’s healthier than it’s ever been. It has an infrastructure now. We’ve had an intern program that’s been effective since 2001. Before that we were...”

He pauses. “We had a transitional period that needed to happen. We weren’t able to conduct an audit. If you can’t conduct an audit, you’re not a functioning non-profit. The important thing is that it allows for a level playing field for the veteran artist and the new artist. I think you should have a person that can pay the bills and is a responsible adult... and you need a person, or a couple of people, who can determine

artistic direction. Beyond that, everyone must have the opportunity to be in, be involved with every production.

“We’ve always had an issue... what’s a member of the Actors’ Gang, and what isn’t? I think we came to the solution: You’re a member of the Actors’ Gang if you’re inside this building. If you’re here, unless you leave, you’re always welcome to come back. But you can’t say, ‘I have more rights because I’ve been here for a longer time.’ It doesn’t work. The idea of anarchy... if you get rid of rules, you have to be responsible. It doesn’t work with selfish people. Neither does theatre. The best actors are generous actors.”

Robbins pauses to answer a tech question, then goes on. “This is a theatre. It’s not a dining room, it’s not a discotheque. It’s for the work. It’s a sacred place, and if you can’t treat it that way, why are you here? And what I think people come to realize is that the work we’re doing, it’s hard work. There’s a discipline in workshops and in productions, and if you’re not completely committed to the emotion, you can’t be on stage. It’s pretty rigorous training. My favorite thing to do is the workshops because they’re just wide open.”

Warming up to his subject, Robbins explains, “In workshop, we work in the commedia because it’s a very simple structure and characters. You wear these masks and it’s all about the truth of the emotion. The respect you have to show for the mask—and some of the masks we use have been around for 40 years—is telling. They’re as much performers as you are, and I’ve seen it happen again and again, where a mask will transform the entire body. So we start with that and, eventually, this movement starts to happen. Out of nothing, out of organic discovery, out of just emotion and there’s a story happening. It’s remarkable.”

So is the Gang’s outreach. The acclaimed death-row docudrama *The Exonerated* is currently touring nationally. Robbins’ *Embedded*, the last play before 1984 he directed for the Gang. “It’s being done in France, directed by Georges Bigot, who directed *Seagull* here. He’s got this company of young actors, starting March 10, in Basque country.” The glee in Robbins’ eyes enters his voice. “It’s being done in Chicago, too. It’s incendiary, it’s rude, as satire should be. It should insult the powerful. If you look at a satirical play or television show, and you’re okay with it, it’s not satire. It’s parody; it’s comedy, not satire.”

Robbins adds, “When we were doing *Embedded* in New York, we had the most amazing talkbacks after that show. Not one good review and the Public Theatre said, ‘We’re going to close the play.’ I said, ‘No, you’re not. I have a contract. We’re going to keep it open.’ We had already sold out the previews. We didn’t have to paper one house. So we knew that word of mouth was going to carry it. I said, ‘Give me two weeks and we’ll be selling out,’ and we did, for four months after that, in the big theatre at the Public.



"War journalists that came back, saw the play and at the discussions would say, 'There's more truth about this war on this stage than you've seen in *The New York Times*.'" The other group that responded was "military families," Robbins relates. "Women who had husbands over there in the Gulf, soldiers, veterans, they got it in a big way."

As Robbins says, "We approach theatre from a populist point of view. We approach it from entertainment. You should be able to involve a first-time theatregoer in your play, and you have to go emotionally to a respect of the people you're telling the story about. We had two veterans acting in *Embedded* who took us through military drills, kept us honest and informed us with a real love and respect for who they were as people. As I said on the first day of rehearsals, this is not going to be disrespectful to the people who are serving this country. Forget about them being objects of satire, they're not going to be. But, the people that avoided service in Vietnam and put our kids in harm's way, they are our targets."

Even more ambitious is Robbins' other ongoing project: "A play based on the *Dead Man Walking* screenplay. Sister Helen Prejean wanted me to do it and I did a reading in New York. That led to my ambivalent feelings about the idea that New York legitimizes theatre. I don't believe in the arbiters of taste in that way. Sometimes they'll get it right but more often than not, I

don't get their taste," he says, with a grin.

"That's the polite way to put it. So, I said to Sister Helen, why don't we go the opposite way? Where do plays wind up? In colleges and high schools." At this point, Robbins cannot hide his palpable excitement. "I went out to universities and high schools, and said, 'You can do this play, I'll give you the rights, if you can convince another department to offer a course on the death penalty and include Sister Helen's book in the syllabus. We started in Jesuit schools. Last year we had 38 across the country, this year, we have another 40 or so. Courses, syllabuses, all determined by these wonderful acting teachers across the country. We don't want people necessarily to be against the death penalty. That's not the point of this, it wasn't the point of the movie. The point is to discuss, talk about it. I've gotten letters from students, teachers, incredible momentum. It's just major."

So are Tim Robbins and the Actors' Gang, and it's not just Big Brother who is watching where they go next.

1984

Plays Thurs.-Sat., 8 pm; Sun., 2 pm; ends April 8
Tickets: \$25

The Actors' Gang at Ivy Substation
9070 Venice Blvd., Culver City
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