

## **THE BIG INTERVIEW:**

### **ROBERT REDFORD**

There are certain people in the world who, when they walk into a room, make the air crackle in anticipation. Robert Redford, the Sundance Kid, has just walked into a suite at the plush Dorchester Hotel in a pair of Levis and a blue shirt exposing most of his chest. Clearly he has had little exposure to the British weather.

Redford, along with fellow cast members Michael Peña and Andrew Garfield, are in town to talk about their new film *Lions For Lambs* which had its World Premiere in London of all places, but more on that in a minute.

It has been seven years now since Redford's last directorial role for *The Legend of Bagger Vance* starring Will Smith, Matt Damon and the beautiful Charlize Theron and it would be a radical understatement to say that the world has moved on a little since then.

*Lions For Lambs* is a provocative story set into three loosely linked narratives: the first between toothy US Senator Jasper Irving, played unnervingly well by Tom Cruise, as he offers an exclusive story on new US foreign military strategy to political journalist Janine Roth (Meryl Streep). Yet Cruise's character, as is made clear rather quickly, is turned into a rhetoric machine with a warped moral outlook honed after years of working in US politics. It seems obvious after only a couple of minutes that Redford is portraying him as a villain in a shiny veneer, and in fact he does not deny this: "The point of that character (Senator Irving), the thing that would make him dangerous is that he would just be a better dressed up version of what we have now. The idea was to present him as someone that could be popular, attractive, articulate, tough-minded, strong and dangerous, but if you made him a moustache twirling villain he wouldn't be".

The two following narratives involve Redford himself as out-of-touch Professor Stephen Malley, a war veteran who tries to help his star students find a comfortable and rewarding life on the career ladder, but is thwarted by the very values which he has inculcated in them: "His job is to inspire young people to aspire to greater things and then they go do whatever that is". Yet this goes horribly wrong when Ernest Rodriguez and Arian Finch (Michael Peña and Derek Luke), two of the brightest in Malley's class, having fought their way up from poor circumstances, develop a strong enough idealism to fight for their country – the very thing Redford's character wants them to avoid based on his own experiences. Todd Hayes, on the other hand, is a completely disaffected, though intelligent and engaging student, who is encouraged to a more idealistic point of view through the eyes of Rodriguez and Finch, whose stories are intertwined throughout the film.

This brings us nicely back to the message of the film and the staging of the World Premiere in London. Surely it must be a message to the US Administration, a critique of all that has gone wrong?

"It would have been very easy to really just talk about this administration, talk about this President and so forth, but to me that would have been shallow, there's a deeper way to look at it, that we all have some responsibility all of us, the public, students, media, we should look at

this in a much deeper way. Every character in the film has to have a point of view that's acceptable...until it turns back the other way".

"But aren't you worried that with the three of you (Redford, Cruise, Streep) having apparent Democratic sympathies that people will see it more as a PR coup wrapped in a PR coup story?"

"Yes, I just assumed that would happen. I can only speak for America, but considering where we are and all the bloggers, I mean all the bloggers are already out there, the right-wing bloggers are out there condemning the film, they haven't even seen it, they just assume it's a left-wing film. You just accept that".

There is a slight pause.

"I've been an activist but not to the extreme of Michael Moore or some other people or you know not out there slashing away, I've been focused more on the environment, I have very strong feelings about that. I wouldn't have been interested in making a film that just smashed the Administration, smashed Bush. That would have been too easy".

Back in the Seventies, a number of films came out addressing big political issues such as All The President's Men and The Candidate. Could one ripple of effect from the War on Terror be a return to such times?

"I don't think you can ever really return to the times before. It's a little easier now in my country to be critical of the administration because the administration has tanked in terms of its popularity, (it) makes it a little easier whereas five years ago, four years ago you were labelled as unpatriotic if you said anything against what the administration was doing but now with the exposure of the truth to a lot of things it's easier so there are going to be a lot of films about Iraq, but that did not interest me, I was not interested in making a film about the Iraq war because I knew that would be well covered by films and documentaries. And I think it will. This film was not ever intended to be something about the war it's about something different that contains the war as a kind of element".

So what is the point of the film then, I hear you all ask?

"(It is) how to look at a situation through the eyes of where education is today, where our politics are today, where our political administration is today, where the media is today. It's meant to look at the broader situation through those eyes. What is the role of the citizen today? So the film attempts to bring the issues up and have a debate going on so the audience or the public can just look at it and say well how do you feel about it?"

The cynical amongst you may look at the timing of the film and the rhetoric used as Tom Cruise enlightens us as to the Republican mindset. You may also consider why a staunch Republican was not used, especially as Cruise does look more like Senator John Edwards (though he refuses to state which politicians he based his character on). On the other hand, quite a large portion of the film is unrelated to events abroad, but looks, as Redford said, at the role of the citizens including us students. Has there always been apathy towards politics in young people?

“Yes, starting with me, I couldn’t care less when I was a kid. I grew up in Los Angeles and Richard Nixon was my State Senator and he was so boring and I thought if that’s what politics is I don’t want to be part of it...I was asked to leave school because I was a very bad student and I wanted to come to Europe...to experience other cultures and other histories. So when I came to Europe...I was challenged politically and I didn’t have a clue, they would ask me questions (about the Algerian war) and I was humiliated...that I didn’t know anything about my own country’s politics. And so that challenge made me start to learn about it but from this base of the world. I realised that that point of view was very different from the point of view I had been raised with. So when I came back to America a year and a half later I was much more focused on my own country, culturally and politically. I realised that we were really blessed and so I’d be very critical if we began to trash those blessings”.

Finally, we move on to talk about Al Gore and the environment. Redford has been an environmental activist for many years, even bringing Soviet and US scientists to his Sundance ranch in Utah to discuss global warming. He had discovered that both sides were essentially discussing the same environmental issues after being invited to a Soviet conference whilst over there on a film and of course it made more sense to bring them together. The result was a conference called ‘Greenhouse Glasnost’ and a report that showed the startling effects that greenhouse emissions were causing.

“This is a serious issue it’s 1989, it must be addressed now. I thought there you have it, it’s indisputable, how can our government deny that when you have the scientists of the two most polluting countries in the world at that time agreeing on something. So I was so proud of it but we made the mistake of sending it to George Bush Senior, he says thank you, it goes into one of the lower drawers. So it never got out, but even had it gotten out, it was too early, Kyoto hadn’t come yet and when it came we didn’t join. Only now in the last year and it’s because of two things: Wall Street realised there was money to be made by going green and two it finally came to roost, the health issues were becoming clear and so those two things created a tipping point, and that tipping point came about a year and a half ago and then Gore came in right at the right time with that film, because he was able to get funding for a film that I don’t think he could have gotten five or ten years ago.

Should Gore have run again for President?

“Why would he, unless he felt a call to duty? He’s making a lot of money; he’s having a belle époque. He suffered enormously, partly his own fault, I mean he didn’t run a good campaign, but I don’t think that Bush won, I never believed he actually won. I think there was stuff that went on. But whatever it was Gore was treated very badly and part of it was his fault that he presented himself wooden, stiff and George Bush went in like a regular old guy, a guy you could drink with. I don’t know if that’s what you want for your President, but I mean...because our country is very focused on cosmetics, it’s like what makes you feel good you know.

“I would have to imagine that if he got a huge call then it sits with him what’s the most important do you want to be a hero to your country? Do you want to be the guy on the white horse that rides in by popular demand or do you want to be happy and rich?”

And Redford himself?

Would I have gone into it (the political scene)? No way, no I'm much better doing what I'm doing. I'm not good at compromise".

Who would he like to see in the White House in 2009?

"Just somebody different from what we've got. I don't get involved on the national stage, at the moment there's not anyone terribly inspiring".

Perhaps then Lions For Lambs is an attempt to provide that inspiration to students, or to the politically disaffected. It is a film that will surely divide the nation both in the US as well as here at home and, by adding a bit of controversy to the mix, get people talking about the important issues of the day. So then...what do *you* think?

*Ben Lamy*