

Douglas Thompson

An Interview with Robert Redford

Robert Redford doesn't look like the Sundance Kid anymore but the tall, rangy body is still topped by a full head of marmalade-coloured hair. The grin ripples the creases in his face and is familiar -- and surprising.

The Galahad of American movies has survived a rugged time making 'The Horse Whisperer' his adaptation of British writer Nicholas Evans' novel which seems concreted in the world's bestseller lists. He is the star, director and producer and in all of those roles is running nearly a month behind schedule. Any irritation, upset or anger does not show.

The stalled production clock has nothing to do with accountant's son Redford's attention to detail, his need to get everything the way he wants it -- like his calculated choice of Kristin Scott Thomas as his co-star before her Oscar nomination for 'The English Patient'.

Ironically, it is the environment of which Redford is one of the most high profile champions which has been against him. Floods, thunderstorms, mudslides and howling winds have battered location work in Montana's Boulder Valley. Swarms of mosquitoes and Rocky Mountain midges -- one of the worst bug seasons ever in the area -- have only aggravated the film-makers.

With the pressure on for the film to be ready for release at Christmas -- to qualify for the attention of the 1998 Oscars and the massive holiday audiences worldwide -- the elements have misbehaved with the deadlines.

One summer storm caused the Boulder River to overflow and the gushing water and debris surged into a ranch house specifically built for the film. Across the river a fast sandbagging operation prevented damage to another ranch being used for the movie.

'The big problem is when you start a scene in the sun and you are supposed to end the scene in the sun and there is no sun', said Redford adding: 'Or it is supposed to be cloudy and it's not.'

Redford, used to harsh conditions at his home base 7,000-acre Sundance Ranch in Utah, is even-minded about the frustrations and difficulties. On location assistant Kathy Orloff said: 'He doesn't sleep much but he is not a screamer. He's handling it well.'

A major star for nearly three decades -- he hit the 60 landmark this year (August 18, 1997) -- he is obviously older but sometimes seems wiser than the years might dictate: 'There is no point beating your head silly about something over which you have not control. I'm a great believer in positive thinking.

'Directing my own films has made me more tolerant and patient. I've always been an extremely impatient actor -- you know, not too many takes, don't want to spend too much time on the set. Waiting around used to drive me nuts. Now I'm more understanding about the struggle to make a film.

'It's part of growing up, of maturing. I remember when I arrived in New York from California. I was nineteen and excited beyond belief. I was an art student and an acting student and behaved as most actors did -- meaning that there was no such thing as a good actor as you yourself hadn't shown up yet.

'I'd go and see John Gielgud appearing in "Ages of Man" and I'd say:"Well, it was OK but...." I enjoyed nothing.

'I remember watching television and and resenting that I was watching it. I was annoyed because it was sucking me in and I couldn't resist watching it.

'You have to thank television for audiences having a short attention span. It's only because of what they are used to: not much subtlety, not much restraint, not much time to let things unfold -- as often happens in life -- and everything accelerated in a stylish way with a lot of zing.

'Television tells us only the things it wants to, It still feeds us heroes, it still offers villains. And even though we know better than to always watch it we still trust it.'

Redford is also no fan of some of the 'blockbuster' films of today:' The industry has become more costly, more formulaic. You watch certain films and ask:" Why did that get made? How did they spend that kind of money on that film?"

'And you realise there is an assembly line running through Hollywood . So many personalities and directors making films now bring with them a mentality honed by their work on television.

'Their style is more overt, like sitcoms or the funny paper pages. "OK, folks, this is how the tale can be told in four panels...."

'The Horse Whisperer' is more complex than that. It is the story of the youngster played by Scarlett Johansson who is injured with her horse in an accident. Kristin Scott James as her mother brings in Redford 's mystery cowboy -- the 'Whisperer' -- to help them recover. Romantic entanglements follow but, as with much of Redford 's work, there is secrecy about the production.

The only indication is that the ending of the film is different from the conclusion to the bestseller.

Because of the book's popularity there is a built-in audience for the movie but Redford is also hoping that old-style narrative will also capture audiences:' I have a tremendous respect for storytelling. When I was growing up we didn't have much money. We'd go to a movie on a Saturday and on Wednesday night my parents would walk us over to the library. It was such a big deal to go in and get my own book. That was the most important thing I ever did for it was full of all those larger-than-life things, windows into other possibilities, other realms.'

For all this, Redford is not luvvie precious. He has put his money and movie muscle into environmental projects and also, through his film workshop Sundance Institute and now artistically and commercially (as a launching pad for independent moviemakers) important Sundance Film Festival, but still knows the importance of the box office, of the blockbuster.

He's made plenty of them from 'Butch Cassidy and The Sundance Kid' and 'The Way We Were' to the more recent commercial hits like 'Indecent Proposal' ('a bit of a joyride that didn't require much time', he says) and 'Up Close and Personal' with his mirror, that other stunning movie blonde Michelle Pfeiffer.

With 'The Horse Whisperer' he hopes to achieve the gravitas of his 1980 Oscar-winning debut as a director, 'Ordinary People', as well as the emotional pull of 1992's 'A River Runs Through It' which was the Redford-picked Brad Pitt's breakthrough movie.

And a box office hit for the millennium age. He knows times have changed. The Robert Redford image is God, Truth and The American Way, the Sundance Kid as Superman. He was a movie media darling of the 1970s -- a Senate hopeful in 'The Candidate', a screenwriter in 'The Way We

Were', ace reporter in 'All The President's Men' -- and had the essential U.S. TV Trinity: authority, irony and, of course, super-wattage twinkle.

There was also the teeth and the cascading hair and the penchant -- when artistically necessary -- of going bare chested. Film audiences believed that from Redford they would get lots of hunk and a fair deal. He made 'Up Close and Personal' --a movie by committee -- for its popular potential. For the money which is the antithesis of his image.

He knew exactly what he was doing and that was making a box office movie. The glamorous casting with Pfeiffer was a Hollywood scoop. 'I just thought it was a good, tough love story. A good dynamic of two raw characters. I thought the collision of those two was interesting.'

That is Utah Bob talking. Off in the mountains a Grand Prix drive away from Salt Lake City he really is the Sundance King. He rules the area with benevolence and his influence is immense through the Sundance Film Festival he created in next door Park City which has become one of the world's most important.

Initially, it was his escape from the glamour image. 'Hollywood never wanted me to get away from the stereotype so I dropped out for a time. People look at films in terms of cosmetics. It makes the work itself seem insignificant. All during my career I have been fighting to avoid the glamour.'

Nevertheless, he has learned to play cards with the good-looking Devil. He goes along with the game and in return is allowed to play his own. It began with 'Ordinary People' and has continued with landmarks including 'The Milgrano Beanfield War' and 'Quiz Show.' In return he will appear in movies like 'Up Close and Personal.' Diplomatically, he 'adores' Pfeiffer and love stories. He just isn't about to be specific about which love stories. Honest Bob not talking.

His place in the Hollywood earning hierarchy is not trumpeted but his involvement in a box office targeted film allows him a return of close to \$20 million. Like Demi Moore in 'Indecent Proposal' there is a price. And one to be paid which he does with grace going on a restricted 'sell' of products. Now, the photographers tend to be hand-picked.

Audiences found the cameras got too close in 1989's 'Havana' which was all about scruples and people who didn't have any: 'When the reviews came out a lot was written about how much I had aged but I was playing a card player who had been ravaged by time so I let my age show. We did nothing to hide it. It was part of the character. Look what the reaction was! The only thing the critics could write about it was that I looked old.'

With hindsight that was a kindness. The movie was more weatherbeaten than Redford. There is much grander hope for 'The Horse Whisperer'.

Hollywood machinations are not subtle. Disney who produced 'Up Close and Personal' are partners with Redford and his Wildwood Enterprises in the multi-million dollar film.

In the film Scarlett Johansson and her horse are brutally injured when they are hit by a huge truck.

Kristin Scott James as her magazine editor mother -- supposedly modelled in the novel on Tina Brown of 'The New Yorker' -- is convinced her daughter will only live if the horse does. For that to happen she needs the help, the magic, of a Montana rancher.

Redford is 'The Horse Whisperer'. You can see the advertisements now. Horses, the Big Sky vistas of Montana -- Wyoming will 'double' in some scenes -- and Redford back in cowboy country appears to have the requisite box office ingredients. And don't forget the romance, the way he was. Redford loves a love story.

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