

ROBERT DOWNEY: CONVERSATION WITH AN ABSURDIST BY STEVEN HELLER

P.O.V. 2

For over 30 years, Robert Downey has helped define the vanguard of independent filmmaking and American absurdist comedy, writing and directing corrosively observant social satires. He is perhaps best known for his films *Putney Swope* (1969), an attack on the predominantly white advertising industry, *Pound* (1970), featuring humans as dogs in a city plagued by a serial killer, and *Greaser's Palace* (1972), about a hipster Jesus searching for truth in the Wild West. Downey also directed Joseph Papp's production of *Sticks and Bones* for television. His most recent film is *Hugo Pool* (1997).

How did you get your start in movies?

I was an off-off-off-Broadway playwright, and I used to put on plays at the Charles Theater on Avenue B in New York City at midnight on weekends after the films were over. At the time, a friend of mine said, "You know, if we get a camera, we can make a movie out of the next thing you write. Then you don't have to think about getting a theater."

So you had no movie experience?

None. But I got a good education at the Bleecker Street Cinema. I was there more than Jonathan Demme, I think.

Were your plays at that time satiric? comic? absurd?

All of the above.

Similar to your films?

I think so, yeah. In one of the plays, the actors were missiles in underground silos waiting to launch. They'd have discussions with each other like, "I don't want to go, my parts are fucked up." While another one said, "I can't wait to go."

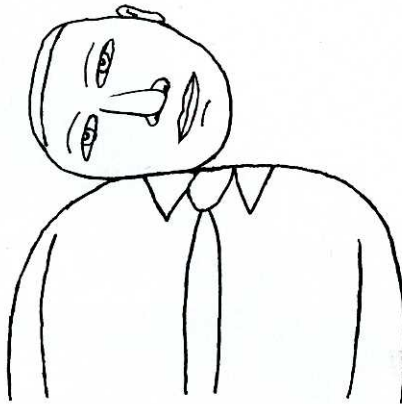
What was your first film?

It was about a Civil War soldier who

wakes up a hundred years later in New York. It was called *Ball's Bluff*, but it ended up in a film called *No More Excuses* that was five separate vignettes. I took *Ball's Bluff* and mixed it with four other shorts like in a cement mixer and when it came out, well, it was like a [William S.] Burroughs thing.

I recall that the poster for *No More Excuses* featured a weird photo of chimpanzees. What was that about?

That segment was about a priest who ends up in bed with a monkey and a woman, while the Monkees' theme song—"Hey hey we're the Monkees"—played in the background. Another segment was a



satire about assassination: I did a sequence about President Garfield, who all these would-be assassins missed—finally somebody plugged him in the ladies room at the Washington Railroad station as he was taking a shortcut.

You also did a movie called *Chafed Elbows*...

It was about a guy who marries his mother and they go on welfare and have a child. Makes sense now, doesn't it? Back then it was kind of weird.

I was 14 when I saw it at the Gate Theater. I had never seen anything as shockingly absurd.

Then it was moved from there to the Bleecker and put together with [Kenneth Anger's] *Scorpio Rising*. There was a guy

who programmed the Bleecker named Marshall Lewis who put *Scorpio* and *Chafed* on a double bill, which ran a long time. It was great for me, because an hour film couldn't be placed anywhere. But Marshall made it happen. And he did something else that I've never forgotten. One day he said, "C'mon back of the screen, I want to show you something." So we were in back of the screen looking through at the audience—the screen is just little holes, you know. And he said, "Take a look at your film now," so I saw some people smiling, other people asleep, people making out. It was very educational and I never forgot that.

When you made your early films, Vietnam protest was beginning and the culture was socially and politically shifting to the left. Were you very politically active then?

Yeah, somewhat. But I didn't notice the '60s, as it was later portrayed, while it was happening.

Nonetheless, once your film *Putney Swope* was released – that brilliant satire on the stupidity of Madison Avenue and the racial inequalities inherent in the profession – did you have any idea that you were reaching a counterculture audience?

No, not at all. The weirdest thing that's ever happened to me regarding who watches these things is, I was at Temple University in 1972 doing a *Putney Swope* lecture, and a guy came up to me after the screening, there were about four or five kids around, and he said, "Mr. Downey"—which scared me anyway, I wasn't that old, I was in my 30s—"I want to thank you for getting me into advertising." And that's when I said, wait a minute, I don't know what I'm doing, people can read things any way they want. For this guy to want to go into advertising after seeing *Putney* was ludicrous.

You had made these underground films which acquired a cult following, then all of a sudden *Putney Swope* appears in first-run movie theaters, announced with an ad that reads:

Scott Menthin

"Up Madison Avenue."

By the way, when finished, *Putney* was turned down by everybody. The only reason it took off was because of Don Rugoff, who owned a number of big New York theaters. He came to a screening one night, and was late; I was at the door, and he was trying to push the door open, and I said, "You can't come in, you're late, whoever you are." And he said, "I'm going to take your movie, if it is your movie." And I said, you're full of shit, or something like that. And he said, "Let me in there and don't be such a prick." So I let him in, he went down front, and he starts turning around looking at other people looking at the movie. And at the end of the thing, he came up to the guy who put up the money and said, "I'm taking the movie, you're opening in two weeks." And he says to me, "C'mon over and check the ad." I went over to his office, and the ad was better than the movie, it said "Up Madison Avenue," and I said, it's great. Rugoff said, "OK, now we hit the street," and he starts showing it to anybody. He made that film. He spent money on advertising it, he had fun with it.

Where did the idea for *Putney Swope* come from?

I was making experimental commercials at a place called Filmex, and there was a black guy there who was doing what I was doing. One day, he said to me, "I saw your paycheck, you're getting more money than I am." So I said we should go see the boss. We went into his office, and I said a line that ended up in *Putney*: "I'm making twice as much as this guy, give him a raise or give me less, but we should be getting the same." And without even looking at the guy, he said to me, "If I give him a raise, I've got to give you a raise, and it's going to cost me money." And I said, "No, I don't want a raise." But he said no. So in that repartee there was a film about black guys in advertising. In my scene, the white guy goes in and asks Putney Swope, the black man who runs the agency, for a raise and is told, "If I give you a raise, I have to give everybody else a raise, and I'm going to be right back where we started."

Did other experiments done while at

Filmex find their way into *Putney Swope*?

No, but one of them went into the film with the Civil War soldier [*Ball's Bluff*]; it was about Preparation H: "Use Preparation H and you can kiss your hemorrhoids goodbye." And the people who made that product said, We're going to take it to festivals but you can't put that on the air. I did another one with the actress Donna Mills, who was 16 then. We did a spot for Albelene face cream. So we had her come in on a Saturday, with a little three-man crew, and she's in a coffin with make-up that makes her 120 years old, and every time she wipes, she's ten years younger, until she's finally in the coffin in a miniskirt and the voiceover says, "Albelene, the look-younger cream, good for diaper rash, too." Then we cut to a shot of my little son [Robert Downey, Jr.], naked. Actually, the client almost went for that.

For a satire on advertising and race relations, you use fascinating stereotypes of the blacks who work at the once white-owned agency. I mean, now it would be the equivalent of rappers and gangstas. You even had a Black Panther and a Black Muslim as agency execs. Very funny stuff.

Well, Putney thinks he's a Black Panther, to try to ingratiate himself with the real ones. But I have to tell you, I had to see it about a year ago because they were making a new print at the lab for a video thing or something, and I was bored by half of it.

After *Putney Swope*, you wrote and directed *Pound*, an absurdist film that casts people as dogs in a city terrified by a rogue killer. How did *Pound* happen?

A guy named Floyd Peterson, who did commercials and trailers for movie companies, said he'd give me \$500 a week to write whatever I wanted.

Pound is slicker in terms of production—it was in color whereas *Putney* was in black-and-white. But, like *Putney*, it was hysterically funny. I remember the scene with the TV weatherman where he's giving the

forecast while playing the maracas. I still think that's one of the funniest things I've seen.

When I took *Pound* to United Artists, the executive of production there said, with a straight face, after seeing the film, "I thought this was going to be animated." Now where do we go from there? And the other guy, who's head of distribution, says in a punishing way, "We're going to put you on a double bill with [Fellini's] *Satyricon*." I couldn't wait. So they opened it in New York, it ran about eight weeks, and then it did go out with *Satyricon*, and I was ecstatic.

Your next film was *Greaser's Palace*, a story about a Jesus-like guy in a zoot suit (played by Allan Arbus) plunked down in a Western town. You were getting even more abstract as you went along. This movie was before *Nashville*, but there was a *Nashville*-simultaneity-quality to it.

The movie is about a lot of people trying to seek an answer in the middle of nowhere. But Arbus, the Christ figure or whatever, has such a great walk you think he knows where he's going, even though he says, I'm on my way to Jerusalem to be a singer, dancer, actor, whatever he's talking about. He found a way into that to make it believable for himself.

Did you say to him when you gave him the role, "You are Christ?"

No, because I never call him that.

Why the zoot suit?

I just thought it was an interesting way to dress since it was of a different time. He just parachutes in from out of time, walking around trying to get to Jerusalem.

How do you make a funny film?

Alan Arkin once said the best thing about my work is when the actors don't know it's

Continued on page 188

Steven Heller's recent books are *Design Literacy* (continued) and *Sex Appeal: The Art of Allure in Graphic Design and Advertising* (Allworth Press). He is co-author of the forthcoming *Wedding Bell Blues: America's Romance with Holy Matrimony* (Chronicle Books).

Robert Downey

Continued from page 9

funny, but there it is. And sure enough, when I've gone through past films, that's the stuff that tickles me the most, that stuff when they're deadly earnest.

You cite Fellini as an influence.

I love him as well as Truffaut, Godard, and, of course, Preston Sturges.

What has been more important for you, being a filmmaker or being a writer?

A writer. Filmmaking to me, the actual act of shooting the film, is not as tough as writing it.

And is writing a film tougher than writing a play?

Well, I finally figured out screenplays. It's an unnatural act, if you really analyze it. When I've had films with no main focused character, it doesn't matter how good the writing is, an audience after a while just can't focus on what's in the center. Because there is none. It's this character, that one. And I finally figured it out so that I now have one leading character, and he or she is in a hurry. That helps the writing.

In a hurry? What does being in a hurry do for the character?

Well, they don't stay and talk a lot, or if they do, you know they want to go somewhere. Or they don't want to go but the other person wants to go, so this person's anxious. And then later you can take all that out. I guess it's like method writing. But it gives it an energy, and if someone's in a hurry, everybody who they run into is in their way, too.

How do you make a character real?

In the thing I'm working on now, a script I'm almost done with (I hope) for now, is about a guy who you wouldn't think is in a hurry, but when he moves, he's in a hurry. He just lost his wife and he can't even face it, so he's always going somewhere and it's all bullshit. You wouldn't think that a guy who lost somebody, who sleeps on the floor, mopes, is suicidal, is moving around, but when he goes out, it's to prove he's alive. So he's in a hurry to find out if he can live alone.

From the way you're describing it, it sounds like this is much more serious than your satires.

Well, it's got some serious relief in it. We've had two readings, and it's been so helpful just to hear the visuals come back from the narrator and then the actors.

"To hear the visuals," that's an interesting concept.

What I like to do is get a guy with a music stand, and he reads the visuals and he's in black and all the actors are in black except the main actor, and so it's like a kind of a chorus kind of thing. And if you're looking at people in black, you start to

think, OK, cut to this, cut to that. And then you hear some dialogue, and it's really like watching a movie live.

Are the actors reading or acting?

Well, some of them act, like the last reading we had someone got up and chased Ann Magnuson around because she took her top off. And Phillip Seymour Hoffman showed me that a part that I had written for somebody older than him, we just had him read it. It turns out that it is his part because it shouldn't be who it is. He gives it a little tension.

Putney Swope certainly changed social attitudes. Do you think films can and should change attitudes?

They should change something, if it works, and I don't know how, or which ones. To hear that you as a young man went to see these films, that's great. I didn't know who was going, who goes and who doesn't. You just don't know. Maybe the film didn't do well but 4,000 people saw it, and those 4,000 were affected one way or another.

Off the Page

Continued from page 11

encourages interaction. A cabaret setting is generally better than a straight theater venue. Try not to make it too hard to get to and choose a night and time of year when not too much else is going on. Tuesdays are generally good nights (personal growth night). Monday's are also a good choice because theaters are generally dark and more actors might be available if you live in a town that is short on acting talent.

PUBLICITY & INVITATIONS. Make a thorough list of persons to invite. Mix it up evenly between friends and industry people. Write a brief press release including a blurb about the screenplay, your bio and the names of the actors who'll be reading. Fax or mail these out in advance and absolutely follow up with telephone calls. Don't count on a piece of paper cracking the haze of white noise that surrounds the lives of people in this business. If someone makes a verbal promise on the phone that they will attend the reading, you have a reasonable, 50/50 chance they'll show up. If you can't stomach this kind of phone work, hire someone to do it. Otherwise, don't bother to give the reading—it will be a huge waste of time and an insult to the actors if you have an empty house. Ask people to confirm their reservations. Keep a very accurate list of who confirms and who actually attends.

COST. High end—soup to nuts, if you pay for absolutely everything, including venue rental, casting director, duplication, travel and meals for the actors, postage, printing, phone, messengers, script editor, plus a phone surrogate or PR person—as much as \$2500. But if you're creative, have talented and supportive friends, and are willing to work like mad for a month, there's no limit on how low you can go. Just finding a free space for the reading and doing your own script edit and PR work will cut the cost in half.

REHEARSAL/STAGING/DIRECTING. One rehearsal is enough.