

THE TALENTED MR. REDFORD

WITH A NEW FILM AND A NEW PERSPECTIVE, HOLLYWOOD ICON ROBERT REDFORD SITS DOWN WITH NOVELIST AND RACONTEUR JAY MCINERNEY TO TALK CAREER, SUNDANCE, POLITICS AND THE ASSASSINATION OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JEFF VESPA



Tweed coat, Redford's own. Linen sport shirt, Brioni (\$395). Neiman Marcus, Tysons Galleria; neimanmarcus.com. Leather belt, Dolce & Gabbana (\$345). Saks Fifth Avenue, Mazza Gallerie; saks.com

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hen I met Robert Redford in a photo studio in Manhattan's Chelsea district, he was bathed in sunlight from a big south-facing window. Redford has long been the golden boy of American cinema, and since 1980's Oscar-winning *Ordinary People*, he's carved out a second career as a director (not to mention a third as the founder of the Sundance Film Festival, and a fourth as an environmentalist). His latest effort, *The Conspirator*, focuses on the trial of John Wilkes Booth's coconspirators following the Abraham Lincoln assassination: It tells the story of Union war hero Frederick Aiken (James McAvoy), who becomes the reluctant defense lawyer for Mary Surratt (Robin Wright), the mother of one of the conspirators and herself one of the accused.

JAY MCINERNEY: How did you find this movie?

ROBERT REDFORD: Joe Ricketts [who founded The American Film Company, which produced *The Conspirator*] decided he'd like to make movies about American history. This was his first one. The script, by James D. Solomon, had been around for 18 years. When I first got it, I thought, Lincoln, that territory's been well covered. But then I read it and I realized it's a story no one knows about—the story of Mary Surratt and Booth's coconspirators. What appealed to me was that this was the story that had not been told, hidden in an event that everybody knows. Lincoln's assassination by Booth and so forth, the world knows about that, but not about the conspirators because [Edwin] Stanton, the secretary of war, had succeeded with what he had set out to do: bury them right away.

JM: So you didn't know the story of the conspirators?

RR: No. But to me, the core of the whole piece was the relationship between Mary Surratt and Frederick Aiken. I thought it had the ingredients, the character arcs that are always appealing. So like in *All the President's Men*, rather than focusing on the general picture, Nixon—what was it about these two guys? Tell their story against the backdrop of the Watergate story everyone knew; the chemistry, the emotional part came from their differences. One guy was a Jew; the other guy was a WASP. One guy was a liberal; the other guy was a Republican. One guy was considered a good writer, and the other guy was considered not so good. They didn't like each other, but they had to work together. And I said, chemically, I like the outcome of that. So this story had the same thing: Aiken's a war hero, reluctant to defend Mary Surratt, and she's a Southerner and a Catholic who knows the deck is stacked against her. Their relationship against this backdrop of what was going on in the country, with America so shaky—anything could happen. With Lincoln assassinated, the South was revitalized, and Stanton knew that and shut the whole thing down.

JM: Did you think of the aftermath of 9/11 at all while working on this project?

RR: I thought about it. And the first thing I thought was, Uh-oh, the great thing about this is also the dangerous thing. So I thought, Well, those are parallels the audience is going to have to find out. I can't speak to them.

JM: I couldn't help thinking of it right away. The subversion of the judicial process and the Constitution...

RR: Ever since the Constitution was created, there have been attempts to rearrange it, going back to [former US Senator Joseph] McCarthy. There have been these constant attempts, including during the last administration: You have [former Attorney General Alberto] Gonzales, [former Vice President

Dick] Cheney, [former Justice Department official] John Yoo, all these guys trying to reinterpret the Constitution. And yet it's the most solid thing we've had, in my mind.

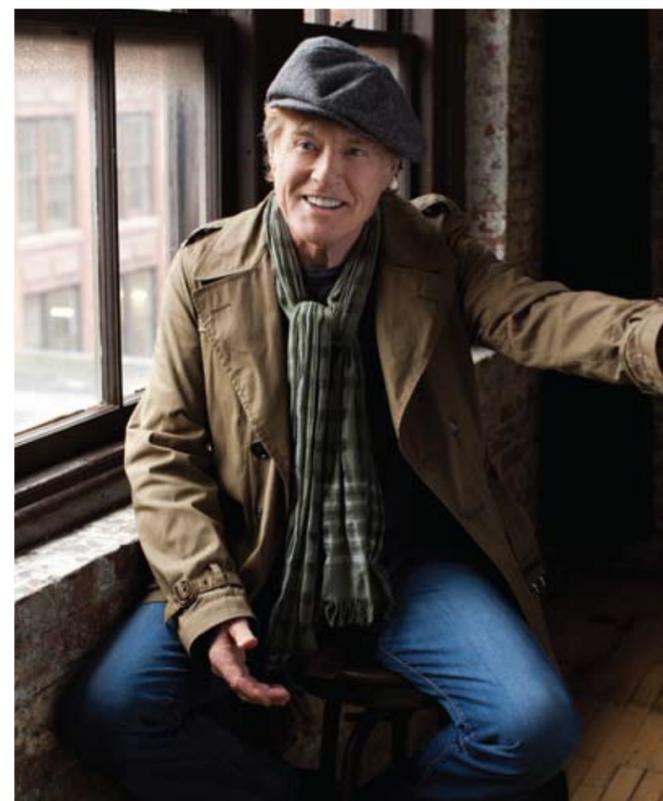
JM: I thought it was surprising and amusing, given your history with *All the President's Men*, that Aiken later became the city editor of *The Washington Post*. We have that little fact to cheer us up at the end of the movie.

RR: It's true. Not much is known about his life, but that part is true.

“The Conspirator was the story that had not been told, hidden in an event that everybody knows.”

JM: You founded the Sundance Institute in 1981. What do you think the state of independent film is at this moment? Do you think it's better or worse than it was in '81?

RR: Well, in '81 it virtually didn't exist. That's why I went after that category, since there was nothing there. Then in the first years, there were no films that sold at the festival. There was only one theater, and it maybe had 30 films. Maybe a couple hundred people would show up. We struggled along until *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*. That was the first thing that sold. That gave us



Double-breasted trench coat, **Burberry Brit** (\$795). 1155 Connecticut Ave.; burberry.com. Jeans, **AG Adriano Goldschmied** (\$168). agjeans.com. Shirt, scarf and hat, *Redford's own*



Cotton blazer, **Ermenegildo Zegna** (\$1,995). *Tyson's Galleria*; zegna.com. Shirt, **Alfred Dunhill** (\$165). dunhill.com

Styling by Ise White for artistsbytimothypriano.com
Grooming by Alejandra for Temp Tu
Set design by Charlie Welch for Jed Root

enough notoriety to keep going. Then globalization occurred—borders were dissolved around the world, which enabled us to have an international presence, to bring in films from other

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countries. I could start pushing documentaries, which I've always liked. [But] it has always been tough. In the beginning, the studios didn't pay much attention because there was no return. Then when films like *Sex, Lies, and Videotape*, *The Brothers McMullen* and *Hoop Dreams* started coming to our festival, people said, “Wait a minute,

maybe there is something here,” so the merchants started to come. Then actors were tired of getting blown up in these big spectacles—they wanted to go back to movies with better roles, even though the money wasn't that great. So the actors came to the festival; when they came, the paparazzi came. And then fashion came. The next thing [we knew], we had Paris Hilton, which had nothing to do with anything. So I said, Wait a second, hold the phone—what is going on?

Last year something interesting happened: 14 films sold. That's double the usual amount, and that happened in one year. Ironically, it [coincided with] the economy tanking. The economic crash was actually good for us because all the ambush marketers and all the glitz and the fashion houses, they couldn't afford to come. So it opened up the space for people to see us for what we had been all along. And then more independent films were bought—this year it was 52 films. That is such a quantity jump. I can't say exactly what is happening—maybe time will tell—but I know it looks like there's a greater chance for independent film. Like last year, for example, we had *Blue Valentine*, *The Kids Are All Right* and *Winter's Bone*. Those films crossed over into the mainstream this year because they were Oscar-nominated. Something is occurring; I just don't know quite what.

JM: The other thing I wanted to ask you is whether you keep up with the daily business of Washington—whether you still have political contacts there, whether you're still engaged.

RR: I just think it is really fruitless. A Congress that should involve cooperation on behalf of the public interest is actually a war zone. We have two parties that should find some common ground or work together, and it is actually war. And if you lose, it all smacks of a war that no matter what this side does, that side is going to attack. One side is only interested in winning the game, but I think their game is not about ideas, substance or representing people. And the other side is confused; it doesn't know how to tell a story it's already got. And they don't work together. I just think it's hopeless, so to answer your question, I'm not getting involved. I believe in the power of grassroots to move the system, and I engage on that level to push bills and action, as well as at the committee level in Congress.

JM: On a cheerier note, I believe *The Conspirator* had its premiere in DC.

RR: Yes, it premiered at Ford's Theatre on April 10—and it opened on the 15th, the anniversary of President Lincoln's death. **CF**

THE MAN IN BRIEF

Robert Redford's screen career now spans six decades and both sides of the camera. Here, a short list of the actor/director's undeniably remarkable body of work and far-reaching influence

1969: Achieves breakthrough as The Sundance Kid to Paul Newman's Butch Cassidy in the movie's titular roles

1972-74: String of critical successes (*Jeremiah Johnson*, *The Candidate*, *The Way We Were*) culminates in Oscar nomination for role in *The Sting*, again alongside Newman

1974-75: Reaps benefits of his rapidly rising profile—*The Great Gatsby*, *The Great Waldo Pepper* and *3 Days of the Condor* all box-office hits



The Sting



The Way We Were



The Sting



The Candidate

1976: *All the President's Men* examines Watergate, gobbles up eight Oscar nods

1978: Chairs inaugural Utah/US Film Festival, formed to shed light on independent film in America

1980: Turns directorial debut, *Ordinary People*, into date with Oscar; legend cemented

1984: Role of Roy Hobbs in *The Natural* reignites Hollywood's, little boys' love affairs with our national pastime

1991: Utah/US Film Festival officially renamed Sundance Film Festival

1992-94: Directs *A River Runs Through It* and *Quiz Show*—which garner more plaudits, a combined seven Oscar noms (including one for Redford, for *Quiz Show*)

1998: *The Horse Whisperer* cleans up at box office, melds Redford's double-threat talents

2010: Ten purchased Sundance Film Festival movies snag a combined 15 Oscar nods

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF THE EVERETT COLLECTION