

## ENTERTAINMENTS

# DUSTIN'S "TOOTSIE"

Currently packing them in at the Odeon is Dustin Hoffman's 'Tootsie', a fascinating comedy about the role of women in society. In an extended column *Sentinel* film critic MARK HAGEN talks to Dustin Hoffman about his role in 'Tootsie', how it affected him and what its implications might be for us. Now read on...

Waiting for Dustin Hoffman is like waiting for Hearts to get promotion; a long haul but worth it in the end. Two and a half hours sitting next to a pile of congealing quiche in the Columbia Pictures Conference Centre crawls past but eventually your humble scribe is ushered into the presence of the man himself who is whiling away the time by signing copies of 'Midnight Cowboy' and working out where to take Jake, his son, for lunch.

The purpose of Dustin's visit is to promote his new film *Tootsie* which surprised everybody in the States by taking off so rapidly that it promptly became Columbia's biggest grossing picture of all time, overtaking even Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters*. On the face of it *Tootsie* is just an unassuming little film with little box office potential were it not for the fact that Dustin Hoffman plays a woman. Actually that's not strictly accurate. Hoffman plays unemployed actor Michael Dorsey who, in a last desperate bid to get work, impersonates a woman and lands a short term contract in a popular soap opera. Matters take a turn for the worse, however, when *Dorothy Michaels* becomes a huge success with millions of American women who see her as a heroine for our times. Her contract is extended and Michael begins to see a lifetime of shaving his legs stretching out before him. To make matters worse he falls in love with his leading lady a role in which *Jessica Lange* won an Oscar, at the same time as her father falls in love, with him, believing Dorothy to be a real woman. Trust me; I know it sounds complicated but it does make a kind of sense.

At one point during *Tootsie* Michael Dorsey tells his agent that he can be anything; you might be forgiven for thinking the same about Dustin Hoffman. Now in his mid forties he started his stage career in 1961 with a walk on part in a play by Gertrude Stein, *Yes Is For A Very Young Man*. That quickly led to more and better parts, amongst them a hunchbacked homosexual in *Harry, Noon and Night* and the leading role in the zany farce *Eh?*. This latter part brought him to the attention of director Mike Nichols who immediately tested him for the title role in *The Graduate*. By all accounts Hoffman thought the test was a disaster but Nichols was sufficiently impressed to give him the part. *The Graduate* was, of course, a huge success, gained Hoffman an Oscar nomination and firmly established him as a major star, a position underlined by his next part, the pathetic hustler Rizzo in John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy*. That too gave Hoffman an Academy nomination and from that point he's never looked back. *Midnight Cowboy* led to parts in such distinguished pictures as *Little Big Man* (in which he played a 121 year old

Indian), *Papillon* alongside Steve McQueen, *Straw Dogs*, the title role in *Lenny* which gave him his third nomination, *All The President's Men* with Robert Redford and *Marathon Man* with Laurence Olivier to name but a handful. His last film was *Kramer vs. Kramer*, an emotional piece about the struggle between a divorced couple to retain custody of their son. His co-star in that picture was the then emerging Meryl Streep and they both won Oscars for their roles in what was undoubtedly a superior piece of work.

All of this looks set to be eclipsed by *Tootsie* though, and it seems certain that Michael Dorsey/Dorothy Michaels will become Hoffman's most popular screen incarnation since Benjamin Braddock in *The Graduate*. All this of course means Big Money and so Columbia have flown Hoffman from New York and me from Edinburgh to engage in a little mutual promotion. I'm surprised to find that he's even shorter than he appears on the screen and he seems surprised to find yet another journalist to talk to. We both manage to get over this hurdle and battle commences;

**Tell me Dustin, what was the inspiration for *Tootsie*?**

*Tootsie* was inspired by *Kramer vs. Kramer*. After it was over I was talking with Murray Schisgal who's the co-writer on *Tootsie* and he said 'How did you like making *Kramer*?'. I said 'Well, it was wonderful to work with a director who let me collaborate as much as Benton did and I wish I could do that more' and he said 'Let's think of something and start working on it.' I couldn't stop thinking about the feminine side of being a man that was in *Kramer* and suddenly he asked me what has become a really magical question which was really the genesis of *Tootsie*: 'If you were a woman, what kind of woman would you be?'. I had never asked myself that question. We all say to ourselves 'What's it like to be a woman, what's it like to be a man?' but I had never thought if I had really turned out to be a woman today, 1983, I'd be the same age. Would I be in the same profession, would I still have the same kind of aggression, the same kind of fears, the same kind of humour and that really started it off.

**How do you account for its success? Is it purely the novelty value of seeing Dustin Hoffman in a dress or does it have a message for an audience?**

I don't know. I'm the last person to guess what makes films blockbusters like this has become and *E.T.* has. You can begin to figure it out afterwards and it's very easy for all of us to be philosophers and psychologists, but if *E.T.* had been a disaster we'd all have exactly the right reasons why it failed. In fact when they finished it I think it was fourth on the studio's lists. They had very

good reasons why it was not going to succeed on a mass level and if *Tootsie* had failed as it is they would have had a lot of valid reasons why it missed. The fact that it is a success on the level that it is I can only guess at. There's a Times article which interviews Sydney Pollack and he says he thinks it speaks to people's unconscious in terms of what it really means to be a woman, what it really means to be a man. Things we've been unconsciously questioning all our lives or at last in the twentieth century because after all attitudes about what is masculine, what is feminine are cyclical, they change. Today we have much less of a Victorian attitude towards what a woman can or can't do and what a woman feels like, but during the days of our parents it was quite different.

**Do you think it's fair to say that *Tootsie* says to women 'You should be more aggressive, more masculine' because when Dorothy fights back against sexual harassment it's Michael Dorsey coming through?**

Yes, it's Michael reacting and that's a decision I made in playing the role because I thought I couldn't be a woman, I don't know what it's like to be a woman; I can only be myself and that's all I do anyway. Everytime I do a part I find an external thing; in other words you kind of paint a character and then you are yourself behind the character, just like a writer is when he's writing a novel. The same is true in this case and I guess that's what the women like. When Michael is pretending to be a woman and he throws a guy out of a cab because he's stolen it from him, the women love that because they would love to do that. I think they're maybe a minute or a half away from doing it and there's no reason why they shouldn't. I arrived here on the day of the London Marathon and you saw a woman come within twenty minutes of the fastest man — why hasn't that happened before? The only thing that you can surmise is that it's psychological, just like when Roger Bannister was the first man to run a mile in under four minutes. When he did that, suddenly everyone started running it and I think it's only a moment in time before a woman is running equally fast as a man in a marathon. I don't think it has anything to do with musculature, I think it's psychological.

**Did making the film change you at all?**

Yes, in the sense that the minute Murray Schisgal said to me 3 1/2 years ago 'If you were a woman, what would you be like? Once I started thinking about that I began to change to some degree, if thinking alters you in any way. I've not stopped thinking about men and women in this kind of intense way for the



"Dorothy Michaels" sends a special greeting to all *Sentinel* readers.

last 3 1/2 years. The film's been over for six months and I'm still thinking about it as though we were still doing research on the film. I talked to women as well as men and asked them questions I'd never asked before and got answers that I'd never heard before. They altered me. A woman said to me 'Do you know what it feels like to dance backwards? That's what it's like to be a woman.' Wow... what a metaphor. Another woman

**"Do you know what it feels like to dance backwards? That's what it's like to be a woman"**

said to me 'Did you realise that up till a hundred years ago for a woman to have a child it meant that she had a 50/50 chance of surviving, of living herself.' I never thought of that. I said 'do you mean that when a man and a woman looked at each other and said I want to go to bed with you what that woman was thinking about is 'If I go to bed with you and make love with you, I might not be alive in nine months'. That's incredible. That



Dustin Hoffman and director/co-star Sydney Pollack on the set of "Tootsie".

think that would happen, I really don't.

**Finally Dustin, was it harder for you to play a woman or a 121 year old Indian?**

Well, the 121 year old Indian was only three days and that was six hours of make up every day. I remember the first day I started to faint because I was totally enclosed in that stuff and I couldn't find the voice on that character unless I screamed literally for two hours in a room to get my voice rasping, so I would say that was more difficult. Aside from the make up of Dorothy Michaels, and finding the voice, once we got that right it was very easy for me to play that character. I love playing that character... (assumed Dorothy's voice) I thought she was very close to me and I think that she still is, and I'll always have her next to my heart (laughs).

**"If men could give birth we wouldn't be at the point of annihilation that we are now"**

**"If you were a woman, what kind of woman would you be?"**

has to alter you?

**Do you think we would all benefit if we underwent a similar 'sex change'.**

Of course. The world would benefit if we could put ourselves in each other's shoes, not just in terms of sex, but ethnic change, any kind of change. If you could put on the shoes of an arthritic old person right now, you'd benefit. In my heart of hearts I know that if men could give birth we wouldn't be at the point of annihilation that we are now. I don't see how any human being could so flippantly talk of 'limited warfare' if they knew what it was like to carry a child at the expense of their own life and then to give birth and survive that experience and to breast feed that human being every 2-3 hours round the clock and then to change it and dress it and care for it and nurture it for 17, 18 years of its life for, at the snap of a finger, it to end up in a Falkland grave or somewhere. I don't