

Tim Robbins Takes On Big Brother

By [Eamon Evans](#) ArtsHub | Wednesday, October 04, 2006

In 2006, 22 years on from 1984, it's tempting to think that George Orwell got it wrong.

The Soviet Union has collapsed. Yes, there are more cameras than ever, but they're mostly used for entertainment, rather than surveillance. The real problem with society today, many would argue, is not Big Brother watching us, so much as us watching *Big Brother*.

For a long time, Tim Robbins thought so too. "I had read the book 20-odd years ago, and quite frankly didn't remember some of the passages," says the politically active film star.

But then he read it again. A writer from the San Francisco Mime Troupe, Michael Gene Sullivan, submitted a script based on the classic novel to the [Actors Gang](#), a highly political LA theatre company Robbins co-founded with fellow University of California theatre students in 1981.

Robbins had drifted from the award-winning troupe for over a decade, but returned in 1999 after realising how much he missed the theatre. He now directs productions every two years.

Wearing his director's hat, Robbins read the Sullivan script, and was immediately "floored by its relevance, its insight, its warnings".

"I unfortunately realized that this book was more vibrant and necessary now than it had ever been," he says.

After two years touring the US and Greece, the Robbins-directed *1984* is headed to Australia, shortly arriving as part of the Melbourne International Arts Festival.

Rather than recreating the book's entire universe – the dystopian detail of Oceania, Eurasia and Eastasia; the difference between goodthink, crimethink and doublethink – the play takes place in real time, and is set wholly inside a cell.

A torture cell, that is. 6079 Smith (first name: Winston) has been caught having anti-government thoughts. He spends the entire production strapped into a chair, with bolts and braces and head-wiring, being interrogated by the thought police and submitted to electric shocks.

The images consciously evoke Guantanamo Bay and Abu Ghraib. For Australians, they may also conjure associated situations, such as the detention of prospective immigrants.

"We now live in a society that sanctions torture, that has set up secret prisons where we keep nameless prisoners from any legal representation," says Robbins. "We have a news media that recently functioned as a propaganda arm of the state. If the terms 'gulag' and 'Pravda' are too close to home we have only ourselves to blame."

Actor P. Adam Walsh, who plays Winston, says the comparisons hardly need to be drawn, they're simply that obvious. "Considering that there are torture camps around the world; that there are people being tortured as you and I speak, our play is really a watered version of reality," he says.

"Orwell wrote *1984* back in 1948", Walsh continues, "but here we are, however many years later, doing exactly the same thing. It's just a different government with a different face, that's got a little bit better at manipulating, a little bit better at control."

"Take some of George Bush's speeches, like 'we're talking about war, but what we're really talking about is freedom' – stuff like that is doublespeak." (A style of government propaganda in

1984 that creates associations between contradictory words: “good is evil”, “truth is falsehood”, etc.)

“If you want a quick way to understand the book’s relevance”, argues Robbins, “just read the ‘war is peace’ section”.

Orwell wrote of an “economy existing by and for continuous warfare” – one where countries “not only cannot conquer one another but would gain no advantage by doing so”. Tell fearful citizens certain that certain policies are needed to “win”, and they’ll obey them, whatever the cost.

President Bush’s “war on terror” (where “you are either with us or against us”) is a war without very clear objectives, and potentially without an end.

“Why are we in it?” asks Walsh. “Because there’s a big vested interest on the part of certain corporations.”

Scriptwriter Sullivan agrees. “With a crumbling infrastructure, a startling and growing gap between the rich and everyone else, governmental cronyism, corporate looting and privatization of public wealth, there is a need to distract citizens from corruption at the top.”

The distraction *du jour* is terrorism. “Right now, the big fear going on in the world today is terrorism,” says Walsh. “It’s a faceless juggernaut, it’s a thing that can strike at any time. It’s also a form of control. People with money want control, and how do you control people? By making them afraid: by keeping them in the dark about things and telling them half-truths. I think it’s hard to be objective when someone’s paying you to not be.”

“We have a news media that recently functioned as a propaganda arm of the state,” agreed Robbins recently. “Clinton lied about a blowjob and got impeached by the media and Congress. Bush got us into the Iraq war based on lies that he knew were lies...yet no-one in the media is calling for impeachment.”

“I’m sure there are some people out there reporting the truth in the way it needs to be reported, but I think a lot of people aren’t,” says Walsh.

“A lot of people are afraid of being blackballed, of losing their jobs, of having it reflect on their family or children. There’s just a fear. I’m probably already on someone’s governmental blackball list for doing this play. I’m kind of surprised we (the Actors Gang) are still around.”

Nevertheless, the accomplished Walsh (a prolific actor and director in his own right), believes in the power of theatre to advocate change and present alternative realities.

"Theatre, if done right, can reach people," he says. "I think it definitely has a voice, it definitely has a say. And I think we have a responsibility as artists, as people, to address what’s going on in the world today, because something’s got to change.”

“That’s why we’re doing this play: to get some dialogue going." After four or five shows in Australia, around 5,000 people will be in a position to talk - if they're inclined. But will audiences be engaged? Is there a risk of proverbial dead-horse beating, even if the issue is a serious, significant one?

Walsh thinks the story will hold the attention of audiences, irrespective of personal politics.

“We’re telling a story of a man who’s been shut down because he wants to love, he wants to be free, he wants to speak his mind, and tell the truth and know the truth,” he says. “It’s a story, and hopefully you tell it to some person and that person will be moved to think.”

“If you can get people thinking, that can only be a good thing.”

After its Melbourne run, the production will visit the [Hong Kong Arts Festival](#).

'George Orwell's 1984' runs from Thursday 12 October to Sun 15 October at the Arts Centre, State Theatre, as part of the 2006 Melbourne International Arts Festival.

To book, phone Ticketmaster on 1300 136 166 or visit www.ticketmaster.com.au