the village VOICE

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features

Robert Altman and Cynthia Nixon talk about *Tanner*

My Fake Candidate

by **Joy Press**
September 28th, 2004 10:25 AM

The players: Cynthia Nixon and Michael Murphy (photo: Stuart Ramson)

In his 1988 television miniseries *Tanner '88*, Robert Altman conjured up a scarily plausible Democratic presidential candidate named Jack Tanner. Played by Michael Murphy, an Altman regular who'd previously appeared as a candidate's advance man in *Nashville*, Tanner was a *Zelig*-style figment who mingled with actual presidential aspirants and political pundits on the 1988 primary trail. Blandly honorable but politically wishy-washy, Tanner was a man "constantly being overtaken by events," seemingly unable to connect with the electorate or find a rousing campaign theme. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

Despite its dated look (the quaint '80s fashion faux pas, the fog of chain smoke), *Tanner '88* felt painfully prescient when the Sundance Channel revived it earlier this year during the Democratic primary season. Prescient not so much for its exposure of the spin technique and duplicity required to achieve public office in this country (that was effectively satirized as far back as *The Candidate* in 1972), but for its pseudo-documentary style, blending fact and fiction more than a decade before *K Street* and *The Office*. As you might have guessed from the ads plastered all over New York City buses, Sundance asked Altman and Garry Trudeau, who co-wrote the original series, to resurrect the characters for a new four-part series, *Tanner on Tanner*, set in the present. (It airs every Tuesday in October at 9 p.m.)

The timing—a few weeks before the election and coinciding with the presidential debates—suggests a political agenda. But Altman's contrarian impulses have steered him in an unexpected direction. Instead of focusing on the failed candidate Tanner (now a college professor brimming with darkly funny insights into the political realm), the series fixes its digital-camera gaze on devoted daughter Alex Tanner, once again played by Cynthia Nixon. In the original series, she was her father's most radical adviser, an impossibly earnest college girl (Nixon herself was fresh out of Barnard College). Now Alex has grown up into an impossibly earnest lefty filmmaker struggling to make a documentary about her dad entitled *My Candidate*.

"Our whole comment is not as much about politics as about this glut of documentary filmmakers right now," Altman offers. "We disguised our attack—people thought we were going one place but we were actually going another!" In *Tanner on Tanner*, aspiring documentarians swarm all over the place. There's even a student filmmaker dogging Alex's every step, making a movie about the making of *My Candidate*. "Everybody's a filmmaker—that's what our film's about!" Altman crows. "Pick up a camera and you're a filmmaker!"

Altman says one of his favorite scenes in *Tanner on Tanner* takes place during the Democratic convention: Alex Tanner goes to interview Ron Reagan Jr. and runs into Alexandra Kerry, who just so

happens to be making a documentary about her dad's campaign. For real. Cynthia Nixon sees this collision of Alexes as "the centerpiece" of the series. "It's like the ultimate meeting of reality and fiction," she says, a few days after winning the Emmy for her role as Miranda on *Sex and the City* (and a few days before the tabloids outed her). When asked if she offered Alex Kerry any advice based on her experience as a (fictional) candidate's daughter, Nixon laughs. "Well, as Ron Reagan Jr. tells me in the episode, 'Of course, you don't really know what it's like—your dad *lost*.' "

If there's a critique being mounted by *Tanner on Tanner*—and in typical Altman style, it is understated to the point of near obscurity, engulfed in a polyphonic spree of overlapping conversations and intersecting tangents—maybe it's the idea of the documentary craze as surrogate for activism and struggle: a sublimated or sidetracked expression of idealism in a reactionary time. If radicals can't actually achieve change in any meaningful way, what's left for them to do with their good intentions? Well, you can make a documentary. Or worse, you can go see a doc that'll confirm your own opinions and sense of being sane in a world gone crazy—hence the blockbuster box office numbers for *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

In *Tanner on Tanner*, Alex solemnly informs an interviewer from *Us Weekly* that her documentary is "a deconstruction of the campaign process from my father's perspective." But it's Altman and Trudeau who do the deconstructing, harshly dismantling the illusions that Alex still harbors about the political world and her father's role in it. "You sympathize with Alex because her heart's so much in the right place," explains Nixon. "But she also has such a sense of self-importance and kind of a misguided liberal do-gooder personality." Nixon says that Altman wanted to take the Alex character down a few pegs. "Bob said something hilarious to me. He said, 'It's so great, every episode ends with you destroyed!' " In one of the miniseries' more excruciating scenes, Alex strains to explain her documentary at an indie film festival; you see the horror on her flushing face as patron saint of indie filmmakers Robert Redford critiques her self-indulgent effort.

The twist in the original series was that, after an emotional encounter with some poor constituents, Tanner transformed from career politician into champion of the American underdog. Unfortunately this new focus on social justice "meant, of course, that we'd lose," as Tanner recalled in one of the retrospective monologues that prefaced the updated version of *Tanner '88* shown earlier this year. Despite this cynicism, the original series had a streak of optimism. *Tanner on Tanner*, in contrast, feels distinctly mournful; the upbeat campaign ditty that ran all through the original series ("Pick the proper candidate/You can change the course of fate") this time takes on a kind of pathos. Pessimism is something Altman cops to, admitting that he feels much less sanguine about the political process these days.

"With the first series, I guess I got in as far as I want to get inside the political process," he says. "This time round, we were mainly looking at ourselves as filmmakers and looking at our flaws rather than someone else's." But he's quick to point out that he didn't put words in the mouths of the many politicians and celebs who have cameos (including Mario Cuomo, Madeleine Albright, and Martin Scorsese). "We didn't give them a script. We said talk about what you want. And we were careful not to edit that in a manipulative way, as opposed to the Michael Moore film, or films of that ilk. We are all Democrats, and that's the politics of our subjects. But I don't think it's propaganda."

At a dire moment like this one, documentary filmmaking seems like a soft target, and Altman's assault on Alex, the "liberal do-gooder," could be seen as an odd intervention at a time when there's no shortage of liberal-bashing. Still, *Tanner on Tanner* gives Alex and her fellow Dems plenty of chances to unleash their rage on Dubya. "When you look at the insanity in Iraq right now . . . that's when you realize the extraordinary amount of harm that a single person sitting in the Oval Office can inflict on the world," Alex tells her own camera. "OK, so George Bush is not getting semen stains on the carpet, but you're telling me he's brought honor to his office?" In his entertaining and deliberately unfocused way, Altman once again uses a jumble of fiction and fact to evoke the American malaise.