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## **Costner's 'Vote' combats apathy**

### **All-American character embodies a nation's confusion**

**By Michael Sragow The (Baltimore) Sun**

The late director Sydney Pollack said the ability to relax in front of the camera is a key to great film acting. Nobody chills out for the lens better than Kevin Costner, especially when he's playing a character he calls "the American rascal" in movies like "Bull Durham" and "Tin Cup," "The Upside of Anger" and the new political comedy-drama, "Swing Vote," which was filmed in New Mexico.

When Costner fleshes out a confused man like "Swing Vote's" Bud Johnson — who finds himself, after a lifetime of apathy, casting the deciding vote in a presidential election — he doesn't exaggerate his awkwardness.

"If I wear a mullet, people might notice and say, 'Yeah, that's some terrific choice' — but it would probably draw too much attention to itself," he said over the phone while promoting "Swing Vote." Instead, as a working-class lazybones, he turns getting up in the morning into an essay on sloth, dashed hope and self-amusement.

Performing the act of sleeping (or waking) for the camera must be as difficult as that other thespian challenge, acting drunk. How does Costner do it so effortlessly? Is he just Mr. Natural?

"No, it doesn't come naturally," he says, "because there's nothing natural about it with people so close."

### **Learning to relax**

Costner says he got his first lesson in on-screen relaxation when he was making his hit 1987 thriller, "No Way Out."

"They just put the camera with me and a girl in the back seat of a limo and had me undress her all in one shot," he said. "I was trying to be careful with her while pulling off garter belts and everything that was supposed to come off, and it was an uncomfortable moment. ..."

"I had forgotten the reality of the situation I was in; the limo driver would obviously have been watching me. So I turned and looked off-camera left — I had all the camera people wondering what I was doing — and asked, 'Would you mind putting up the shade?' Two months later we went back and shot a limo driver responding to me, and it was a big laugh in the movie. When I relaxed, I realized I could put all these elements in play. And that's the truth. You relax, and you actually sense more."

"Swing Vote" required him to conjure a different kind of intimacy: a genuine fatherdaughter bond between Costner and Madeline Carroll as Molly, Bud's 12-year-old daughter.

"The script may say Molly wakes Bud up," he said, "but it doesn't say 'smack him really hard on the back!' We were able to trust each other, and that was crucial, because she's my daughter — I have to be able to kiss the top of her head, pull her hair, pat her bottom, do everything that speaks of a relationship that's very familiar."

### All-American story

Neither a left-wing nor a right-wing diatribe, but a comic outcry against public complacency and political manipulation, "Swing Vote" was a hard project to launch because studios considered it too American to play well overseas.

So Costner decided, "I would finance it myself. Halfway through, Disney agreed to distribute it."

Reluctantly pulled into the public eye, Bud can be as naive as Peter Sellers' Chance in "Being There." When asked if he's "pro-life," he doesn't realize that the phrase refers to the abortion debate; he wonders how anyone could be anti-life.

Bud's lack of social awareness marks him as an all-American escapist. But it also provides Costner with a fresh point of attack on the debasement of our social and political life. Costner asks, "Is Bud the enemy just because he drinks beer and is illiterate? There are people who work at great jobs and don't vote. He says we need 'giants,' and that's a very profound word, even if it

comes from Bud."

Costner finds it amusing that reporters interviewing him want to know how Bud will vote — and how Costner will vote in the real election. What's important to Costner is that Bud decides to educate himself and vote intelligently.

As for his next direction with a movie role, it's hard to predict, he says. "Doing the same movie over and over again might be good business, but it's not part of my DNA. I'm sure I'll do another American rascal, very much like Bud, but it won't be the same movie: It won't be 'Swing Vote' or "Bull Durham' or "Tin Cup.' That's a good character for me to revisit: an American that's hard to tame."





**CHRIS PIZZELLO/ THE ASSOCIATED PRESS** "The script may say Molly wakes Bud up, but it doesn't say 'smack him really hard on the back!' " says Kevin Costner of the affectionate on-screen interplay between him and "Swing Vote" co-star Madeline Carroll.

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