Hollywood, Etc.: 'Tootsie' has all the ingredients

by David L. Coddon

Dustin Hoffman's Michael Dorsey became Dorothy Michaels in the hit comedy "Tootsie."

Some slips are showing

Dustin Hoffman in drag.

Can you imagine how the studio board-room stiffs reacted when that little movie project was first served up for consumption?

Little did they know that a quarter-century later, "Tootsie" would stand as not only one of Hoffman's most beloved films, but also as a classic cross-dressing comedy.

Not every critic fell in love with "Tootsie" at first.

Wrote one: "Rather than confront what it sets up, it takes the one joke and runs - till it runs out of steam."

Another called the film "rather homophobic. Much of the supposed humor arises when men are made to unwittingly kiss another man! Shocking!"

But Time's Richard Shickel proved psychic: "It is not just the best comedy of the year; it is popular art on the way to becoming cultural artifact."

"Tootsie," which was directed by Sydney Pollack (who also played Hoffman's exasperated agent in the movie) and co-starred Jessica Lange, Teri Garr, Bill Murray and Dabney Coleman, was lavished with 10 Oscar nominations, though it won only one statuette: Lange, for best supporting actress. More significantly, it thrust the man who previously had portrayed "Ratso" Rizzo into the elite pantheon of actors who'd successfully pulled off cross-dressing roles on screen: "Some Like It Hot's" Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis being the standard bearers.

Hoffman, however, didn't see "Tootsie" as a drag-for-laughs picture. "I was satirizing myself," he said of the premise of a passionate but difficult-to-work-with actor who has trouble getting parts. Beyond that, he and Pollack and co-screenwriter Larry Gelbart agreed that the spine of "Tootsie" was the notion that a man becomes a better man by imitating a woman.

Though "Tootsie" was released in 1982, its 25th anniversary is being celebrated with a new, bonus-feature-packed DVD release. Given what passes for film comedies today, "Tootsie" is a classic.

It's true that some of the early-'80s trappings feel dated (none more so than Stephen Bishop's cloying - make that annoying - soundtrack). And "Tootsie" is, bottom line, a one-joke movie. But Hoffman's performance as Michael Dorsey/Dorothy Michaels remains hilarious, and both an underplaying Murray and overplaying Coleman added to the fun.

When you're through watching "Tootsie" again, carve out some time for the DVD's special features.

The making-of documentary, 70 minutes long, includes interviews with Hoffman, Garr, Lange, Pollack, Coleman and Gelbart, the latter of whom reminds us that cross-dressing was nothing new in '82: "Men in drag go back 3,000 years."

Pollack, it turns out, was keen to direct "Tootsie," but not to appear in it - he hadn't acted in 20 years. Hoffman finally convinced him by sending him roses and a plaintive note signed "Love, Dorothy."

You'll learn, too, that Geena Davis won the bit part of a cast member in the fictional soap opera on which Dorothy Michaels appeared for one reason: She was tall enough that her breasts were just about at the 5-foot-7 Hoffman's eye level.

Oh, and an early draft of "Tootsie" was titled "Shirley." Not as catchy, is it?

Hoffman admits to having great fun throughout. His most amusing anecdote: dressing up in his Dorothy duds during pre-production, strolling into the Russian Tea Room in New York City and trying to fool an unsuspecting buddy - his "Midnight Cowboy" co-star, Jon Voight.

He did, too.

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