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October 2- 8, 2003

## CITYSPACE

### Square Root



## Robert Downey is shooting a documentary about Rittenhouse Square.

by Mary F. Patel

**Senior Moment: Robert Downey Sr. takes in a cinematic view of Rittenhouse Square.** Photo By: Michael T. Regan

So why would notorious writer/director Robert Downey spend this summer filming a documentary about Rittenhouse Square?

Downey got to know the park through his friend, Max Raab, a Rittenhouse Square resident, director/producer of the Philly documentary *STRUT!* (about the Mummers) and producer of the movie *A Clockwork Orange*.

"I've known him since 1966," said Downey over lunch at a restaurant near his Manhattan home. "He's a great film connoisseur and he asked me to come in and help him with the editing of *STRUT!* I had a great experience and he said, 'I want to do another film and I'd like you to direct it.' And I said, 'But I've never really directed a documentary,' and he said, 'You did good work with *STRUT!*' So I said OK and I came down. And I sat in the park one day and saw what he saw."

Traveling through great urban resources like Rittenhouse Square daily, Philadelphians can take the wonderful parts of the city for granted. Maybe an outsider's vision helps us appreciate the real beauty of our city.

Downey wants to capture the pulse of the park. For him the Square holds a theatrical charm. "The park is full is characters," he said. "I could see what's going on there, it's beautiful and the people are interesting. You keep your eyes open, you see a lot of stuff you don't see when you're just walking through. There's a lot of music and the park is kept up by the people who live there. That's why it's so well taken care of. It's like Jane Jacobs said, the lady who wrote the books on urban renewal, 'Rittenhouse Square is the best park in the United States.'"

Downey said the Square is better than Central Park. "Do you notice that the benches are not directly across from each other? You don't have to be stuck with somebody across from you. And there are people in that park who really find a refuge for their lives in there. Just to sit and read and have a place. We call Rittenhouse Square our set."

The impromptu concerts there are one of the aspects that fascinate the filmmaker. "There's an 11-year-old violinist we love, a guy with a Brazilian instrument with one string, a lady who was playing a cello who broke into jazz," he said. "It's happening and it's only going to happen once. You can't say, 'Do it again.' We set up all over the place. When we're not interviewing, we have time on our hands so we just wait. We don't even know what we're doing except having a good time. We dolly around on a wheelchair with a camera and look around."

Downey makes certain that the people he films agree to be in the movie, and he found that they're happy to talk about their lives and feelings for the park. "You study them 20 feet away with a long lens and they don't know it. And then you ask for a release, and they're very happy with themselves. Or we wouldn't be interested."

Even normally skeptical Philadelphians give their consent, he said.

"Everyone seems pleased with the idea of a documentary about Rittenhouse Square. It's a place where people can be diverse and also be alone. We notice a lot of people are very peaceful and feel safe. Here [in New York], especially during David Dinkins, you go to a park, you may never come out."

Downey found a rich resource in stories about the residents who live near the Square. "A man passed on and there was a dedication to him in the park and Ralph Lauren sent \$10,000 worth of plants and flowers. And a French lady retired from Scotts Co., and got thousands of dollars' worth of grass to plant in the Square. That's what she wanted for her retirement," continued Downey, referring to Hadia Lefavre who lives on the Square. "She asked that they put it in



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interview, and usually I don't like talking-head interviews where it's  
the story, and then she said, "and therefore I am the Grass Lady."

connected with many of the city's residents. Though a New Yorker,  
he's in this city who have been helping him find interesting subjects for

his lens. "Somebody gave me a tip that Sister Mary Scullion is always in the park and she helps a lot of homeless. I  
called her last night. Chuck Barris is one of my best friends, and his sister, [Ricki Wagman], is Sister Mary's friend.  
Chuck's father has a bench in the park -- you know, it's all kind of related. I hear this nun is wild!"

Will this documentary be nationally released?

"I don't know," he said, "Max is the producer. We shot maybe 40 percent of it."

*Mary Patel writes City Paper's Political Notebook column.*



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