



Allen, Chad (b. 1974)

by Linda Rapp

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Chad Allen gained fame for his sensitive portrayal of an autistic child on a hit television show, but unlike many child stars, he has successfully made the transition from child actor to adult actor. He has also come out as a gay man and become a vocal advocate for glbtq rights.

Chad Allen Lazzari and his twin sister, Charity, were born in Cerritos, California on June 5, 1974 and grew up in the neighboring city of Long Beach. Their mother entered the winsome children in twin contests, and when they had success, considered getting them into show business. Her daughter did not enjoy working before the camera, but her son was a natural and made his first professional appearance in a McDonald's commercial at the age of four.

When Allen was six he won a role in the pilot episode for a television series, but the show was not picked up. Two years later he was cast as Tommy Westphall, an autistic child, on the hit drama series *St. Elsewhere* (1983-1986, 1988). Allen later said that his mother explained that "autistic kids lived in their own world, and I understood that."

Allen's performance as Tommy Westphall was extraordinarily affecting and nuanced. It quickly established him as a child actor of unusual sensitivity and talent, one who could hold his own in a strong ensemble cast.

The youthful Allen had guest roles on almost a dozen series in the 1980s and played recurring characters on *Webster* (1985-1986), *Our House* (1986-1988), and *My Two Dads* (1989-1990). He also appeared in a number of made-for-television movies.

The handsome young Allen also became a teen idol. He was frequently featured in magazines for young people and was mobbed whenever he went out in public. Though he initially enjoyed the celebrity, he came to resent the discrepancy between the idealized image of him in the magazines and the reality of who he really was. "I was in teen magazines all the time and in reality, what was I? A 13-year-old who's as fucked up as every other 13-year-old across the country."

At sixteen, after four years of being educated by tutors while working on television programs, Allen quit show business to go to high school and "be a normal teenager." He attended a Catholic high school where some of his teachers were gay priests. One, he said, "was very open and helpful to students who were openly gay."

Allen was accepted as a student at New York University but at the same time was offered a regular role on the television show *Dr. Quinn: Medicine Woman* (1992-1998). He chose to go back to acting and spent six years on the highly successful series, making the transition from child star to accomplished adult actor and from teen idol to versatile character actor.

In 1996 the *Globe* tabloid published a photo of Allen kissing another young man at a pool party. He feared that the outing might spell the end of his acting career, or at least his tenure on the wholesome and family-

oriented *Dr. Quinn: Medicine Woman*, but his coworkers were supportive of him. Allen, who described himself as "not political" at that time, did not then comment on his sexual orientation.

The tabloid story did not attract a great deal of general attention, but Allen did begin receiving letters from gay fans, many of whom told him their own stories. He was particularly touched by messages from young people, a large number of them closeted and apprehensive.

Allen replied to their letters but did not come out publicly until 2001, when he gave an interview to *The Advocate* in conjunction with National Coming Out Day.

In coming out, Allen was candid in talking about his past, which included drug and alcohol abuse and participation in circuit parties. By then, however, he had entered a recovery program and was taking his life in positive new directions.

Allen subsequently appeared in numerous theater productions and several films, including Ramin Niami's *Paris* (2003) and Rafal Zielinski's *Downtown: A Street Tale* (2004).

In 2006, Allen starred in Jim Hanon's *The End of the Spear*, which is based on the true stories of five evangelical Christian missionaries who were killed by the Waodani people in the Amazon region of Ecuador and of Steve Saint, the son of one of the slain men, who eventually returned to the area and befriended the Waodani. Allen portrays both Saint and his father in the film.

When Allen told the producers that he was concerned that the Saint family might object to having a gay man play their relatives, he was surprised to learn that Saint himself had already approved the casting after being shown a 2003 article in *The Advocate* in which Allen talked about the importance of doing good works and serving others.

Allen recalled, "Steve Saint said that the same things that I talked about in *The Advocate* were the same things he fought his whole life for, and it would be wrong for them not to ask me to do it," adding, "That's an amazing story, right?"

Although Allen has continued to demonstrate his versatility by playing a variety of roles, he was eager to bring more gay characters to the stage and screen. In 2001 he produced the Los Angeles premiere of Terrence McNally's *Corpus Christi*, and two years later he joined with producer Christopher Racster and actor Robert Gant (best known for *Queer as Folk*) to form a production company, Mythgarden.

"Our company is entirely dedicated to turning the page on gay and lesbian storytelling in film, television, and theater. We believe that it's time that our stories can be told fully: good relationships, real relationships, honest characters, in all of the genres of storytelling--fantasy, fiction, fairy tales, great mysteries, adventure films, and honest drama," he stated.

Allen has been involved in projects with the three recently-formed glbtq television networks, Logo, Q Television, and here! TV. His work for the last includes a starring role as gay detective Donald Strachey in *Third Man Out* (2005) and *Shock to the System* (2006), based on novels by Richard Stevenson. Allen is hopeful that more of the books in the Strachey series will also be turned into movies.

Allen was delighted to present the "really powerful, loving gay relationship" between Strachey and his partner, Timothy Callahan. He also relished the opportunity to play a love scene with another man (albeit, as it turned out, a straight one).

Another film that focuses on gay issues is *Save Me* (2007, directed by Robert Clary), which was first shown at the Sundance Film Festival. Allen plays a young gay man, Mark, who turns to drugs and sex to compensate for the emotional emptiness of his life. When he overdoses, his family puts him into an "ex-gay"

Christian ministry run by a woman (played by Judith Light) whose beloved gay son died of a drug overdose when he was seventeen.

At the ministry center Mark befriends and then falls in love with another man in the program, Scott (played by openly gay actor Robert Gant). As a result, both men must question the attitudes of society in general and religion in particular toward glbtq people in order to discover and embrace their true identities and experience the healing redemptive power of love.

Save Me has been hailed for its sensitive depiction of both gay men and evangelical Christians. Instead of portraying Light's character as a one-dimensional oppressor, the film presents her as a sincere and complex person who wants to help gay men and believes that "curing" them of their homosexuality will bring them happiness, although by the end of the story, she finds her own attitudes challenged.

Off-screen Allen has worked for many charitable organizations, including the American Cancer Society, the American Diabetes Association, and the Autistic Children's Foundation, but his special focus has been on glbtq causes. He has supported the Gay & Lesbian Victory Fund (which assists glbtq candidates for political office) and AIDS projects in Los Angeles and Arizona. He joined with Olympic champion Greg Louganis to call attention to the problem of depression among glbtq youth, who are at particular risk for suicide. Allen has also volunteered with the Trevor Project, whose hotline (866.4.U.Trevor) has saved many glbtq young people so desperate that they were considering taking their own lives. He has recently accepted an honorary position on the board of the Matthew Shepard Foundation.

Allen appeared on the *Larry King Live* show in February 2004 to speak in support of same-sex marriage. He expressed indignation that George W. Bush favored an amendment that would "turn the Constitution around and make it a document of exclusion and tell me that I'm a second-class citizen."

Although conservative speakers voiced strong opposition to equality in marriage laws, Allen remained optimistic and said that he expected eventually to be able to marry. "I think that this country has a great tradition of ultimately doing the right thing," he commented.

Allen stated in a 2002 interview that he knows of many people in the entertainment industry who have remained in the closet and that he has "absolute respect for those individuals and their decisions." He, however, has chosen another route.

"It's important, I believe, to stand up and say 'I'm gay' because people get hurt for doing that," he stated. "And until that's not the case any more, I and hopefully a hell of a lot more people will continue to do so."

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