



Ball, Alan (b. 1957)

by Linda Rapp

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Screenwriter, director, and producer Alan Ball has had great success in both film and television. He came to wide public attention with his Academy Award-winning writing for the film *American Beauty* and followed that triumph with his acclaimed work on the popular television series *Six Feet Under*.

The youngest of four children of Frank and Mary Ball, an aircraft inspector and a homemaker, Alan Ball was born May 13, 1957 in Atlanta, Georgia and grew up in nearby Marietta.

Ball's youth was marred by tragedy. His only sister, Mary Ann, was driving the thirteen-year-old Ball to a piano lesson when they were involved in a car crash. He was not injured, but his sister was killed on her twenty-second birthday. Their father died some six years later from cancer.

In a 2000 interview Mary Ball described her son as "a smart little boy" who had "always written a lot" and was very active in school activities. He was the editor of the school newspaper, a member of numerous clubs, the president of his senior class, and the drum major of the band, in which capacity he choreographed a half-time show.

Despite these genuine accomplishments, Ball said that in his high school years he felt inauthentic, as though he had invented "this persona of myself of really being an overachiever, kind of an All-American guy that really wasn't me."

This feeling of inauthenticity is not uncommon among young glbtq people who are necessarily or pragmatically closeted. They know or intuit that the face they present to the world is not who they really are, and they consequently wonder if the popularity and respect they earn as the result of their accomplishments are really deserved, since they know (or fear) that they would lose status were their secret revealed.

Ball's fine performance in high school earned him admission to the University of Georgia. After his first year he transferred to Florida State University, from which he graduated with a degree in theater in 1980.

Although he had done some acting, Ball aspired to write for the theater. After his graduation, he moved to Sarasota, Florida, where he wrote plays for the General Nonsense Theater Company.

In 1986, believing he had to move to the center of the theater world, he relocated to New York and supported himself with a job as a graphic artist while continuing to write. He founded the Alarm Dog Repertory Theatre company, which produced *Bachelor Holiday*, based on his experience of living in a Brooklyn brownstone apartment with some friends from college. The play received little notice, but his next effort was more successful.

Five Women Wearing the Same Dress (1993) was described by reviewer Steven Uhles as "sharp and biting, [a] play [that] takes a Peyton Place approach to wedding sweetness and light." The play brings together five

bridesmaids who have decided to duck out of a tedious wedding reception. Despite not having much in common except for their dresses and a lack of fondness for the bride, the characters find friendship as they talk about their disparate lives.

It was not until Ball began achieving professional success that he found the courage to come out to his mother. She understood his trepidation about broaching the subject--"He didn't know if I was going to kick him out of the house or what"--and admitted that the announcement made her uncomfortable.

"It took a little getting used to," she said, "but he gave me some books to read, and I understand that God made him like that."

Ball's brothers were immediately supportive when they learned of his homosexuality, but some other relatives were not accepting. "They think he's going to hell," stated Mrs. Ball.

The off-Broadway production of *Five Women* caught the attention of a Hollywood talent scout, who recommended Ball for a job on the writing team of the situation comedy *Grace under Fire*, which starred comedian Brett Butler.

Ball's initial experience of the television industry was not a happy one. He called his one season (1994-1995) with *Grace under Fire* "in a lot of ways . . . the perfect first job to have because nothing will ever be that bad." He was dismayed that "writers were just considered to be expendable and the script was kind of secondary to the persona of the star," unlike the situation to which he was accustomed in the theater, "where writers have a certain amount of respect and control."

Ball subsequently spent three years--1995-1998--writing, and also serving as story editor and producer, for the sitcom *Cybill*, where he encountered "a really volatile working environment" because of another demanding star, Cybill Shepherd. Nevertheless, he stated, "I make jokes about those years being unpleasant, but they taught me so much, and I am a much better writer because of it, and so I really don't regret them at all."

Due to his work on *Cybill* Ball was courted by television production companies to create a new comedy series. Building on the situation in *Bachelor Holiday*--three single male friends as housemates--he launched *Oh Grow Up* in 1999 on ABC.

Although the play had not alluded to the sexual orientation of the men, the television show made it clear that two of the friends were heterosexual and the other gay. Ball saw "more . . . to mine for comedy" in having both gay and straight characters in the show and was pleased to be able to move past "1970s, *Three's Company*-type humor" (alluding to a sitcom in which a straight man made a campy pretense of being gay so that he could share an apartment with two women friends) and present a "responsible and mature" gay character.

Ball was grateful for the support of his concept for the show by the ABC network. "I didn't have to do anything that I felt compromised the integrity of the original idea," he stated. Unfortunately, the show did not do well in the ratings and was dropped after a short run.

Meanwhile, Ball had been working on a film script. *American Beauty* (1999, directed by Sam Mendes) was his cinematic breakthrough. The film won five Academy Awards in 2000, including one to Ball for Best Writing in a Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen. Ball also won a Golden Globe Award for his screenplay.

Of the story of a discontented and dysfunctional suburban family whose lives are spinning out of control

Jeff Millar of the *Houston Chronicle* wrote, "Alan Ball's original screenplay misdirects you into thinking it's a black comedy--that we could never find ourselves doing anything with these pathetic, caricature characters but sneering at them." Although at the end of the picture "the film's heart is still in darkness, what's been added is resonance, harmonics of immense complexity. After we've ingested them, we find ourselves hurting for these people." Millar added that Ball's "work is extraordinary: mercilessly inquisitive, widely observant, emotionally diverse."

Jay Carr of the *Boston Globe* commented that amid the "bleak isolation" and unhappiness pervasive in *American Beauty's* suburban community, "its best-adjusted characters are a homosexual couple who live down the street."

Despite his less than happy experiences in the television industry, Ball returned to it in 2001. This time, however, as creator, executive producer, head writer, and occasionally director, he had much more control over bringing his vision to the screen, and audiences greeted his efforts with great enthusiasm.

Ball's HBO series *Six Feet Under* was a hit from the start of its five-year run. It received numerous honors, including 9 Emmy Awards, one of them to Ball as the Best Director of a Drama Series, and a Golden Globe Award. Ball also won awards for his work as director from the Directors Guild of America and for his work as executive producer from the Producers Guild.

Six Feet Under is the story of another dysfunctional family, the proprietors of Fisher & Sons Funeral Home in suburban Los Angeles. The series begins with the death of paterfamilias Nathaniel Fisher, who does not disappear from the scene but rather returns periodically to observe his widow, two sons, and daughter from beyond the grave. Each subsequent episode except the last also begins with the death of someone whose funeral takes place at Fisher & Sons and whose circumstances afford the family members the opportunity to reflect upon various issues in their own lives. With all the problems and complexities in their relationships, the Fishers never lack food for thought.

The Fisher brother who runs the funeral home, David (played by Michael C. Hall), is gay and in a romantic relationship with an African-American police officer, Keith Charles (played by Matthew St. Patrick). In a 2005 interview Ball stated that as he envisioned the characters for the show, "David was just always gay." Echoing the title of Andrew Tobias's memoir, he said that David "was the brother who was 'the best little boy in the world' who did everything to please everybody, and that's such a classic gay thing."

Ball was pleased to be able to make the story line concerning David and Keith an important one in the series and "felt really proud to be involved with a show that dealt with this gay relationship in such a sophisticated, rich way."

Ball was particularly gratified by the reaction of one viewer, his brother, a Republican "good ol' boy redneck from Georgia," who, at the end of the show's first season, had only one question for him: "Are David and Keith going to get back together?" Ball said that it was obvious that his brother "really want[ed] this interracial same-sex couple to work."

The lovers were not only reunited, but in time became the adoptive parents of two boys. For his sensitive and authentic depiction of gay people Ball won the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation's Stephen Kolzak Award in 2002.

Since the end of the run of *Six Feet Under*, Ball has undertaken several other projects. He optioned the screen rights to Alicia Erian's disturbing novel *Towelhead*, the tale of Jasira, a thirteen-year-old girl. Denied emotional support from either her cruel father or her vindictive divorced mother, she is desperate for affection and thus only too vulnerable to the advances of men intrigued by her burgeoning sexuality. Ball

wrote the screenplay and is directing the film, as yet untitled, which is expected to be released in 2007.

Ball has returned to the theater with *All That I Ever Will Be* (2007). Set in Los Angeles, the play follows the development of a relationship between Omar, an immigrant from the Middle East who has a day job at a chain store and hustles at night, and Dwight, one of his clients, who comes from wealth and squanders much of his money on drugs. Charles Isherwood of the *New York Times* called *All That I Ever Will Be* "a slick entry in the sick-soul-of-society genre, concerning the futile search for connection among characters who crave intimacy even as they build cinder-block walls around their damaged hearts."

Ball also has another television series in the works. *True Blood*, slated to air on HBO in the fall of 2007, will be based on the vampire novels of Charlaine Harris, which are set in Bon Temps, Louisiana, a fictional town outside of Shreveport.

In Harris's books, vampires, thanks to the development of a synthetic product called True Blood, no longer need to prey on humans and so have "come out of the coffin," assert themselves as a visible part of society, and become financially successful, notably as the owners of trendy bars since the working hours fit their necessarily nocturnal habits.

Ball has discouraged comparisons to Anne Rice's New Orleans vampire novels, saying of Harris's work, "It's not Gothic in the way that Rice is. It's contemporary rural America, white trashy, very funny, and real scary."

He added that "vampires are a great metaphor for minority groups that struggle for rights and recognition, but also for Republicans, in that they're vicious and bloodthirsty and will destroy anything that gets in their way."

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