



Berlanti, Greg (b. 1972)

by Craig Kaczorowski

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2012 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

The openly gay writer-director-producer Greg Berlanti has had a prolific career in television, successfully incorporating realistic and non-sensationalized glbtq characters and storylines into prime time network shows.

Joseph Weisberg, writing in the *New York Times*, noted that Berlanti's "desire to use television to help people grow and change seems like the animating force behind his shows."

Berlanti's career in television began with the groundbreaking teen soap opera *Dawson's Creek*, in which Berlanti and the show's creator, Kevin Williamson, introduced the first romantic kiss between two gay male characters on network television. He has also served as creator, writer, director, or producer on such hour-long dramas as *Everwood*, *Jack & Bobby*, *Dirty Sexy Money*, *Eli Stone*, and *Brothers & Sisters*.

He has also written and directed feature-length films, beginning with the semi-autobiographical *The Broken Hearts Club: A Romantic Comedy*, about a group of gay friends in West Hollywood, which he both wrote and directed at the age of 26. He also directed *Life As We Know It*, a more conventional, heterosexual romantic comedy. Recently, he produced and co-wrote the script for *Green Lantern*, a film version of the popular DC Comics superhero series of the same name.

The only son of an Irish-Italian family, Greg Berlanti was born on May 24, 1972 to Eugene Berlanti and the former Barbara Moller, in Rye, New York.

Indications that he would eventually have a career in writing and directing first surfaced when Berlanti was still a child. In his youth, he used to design and build puppets and even had a small business performing puppet shows at local children's birthday parties.

A day or two before each party, Berlanti would "sit and design a story based on the little facts of the birthday boy or girl's life." He remembered as a child beginning each story by staring at a blank sheet of loose-leaf paper and thinking, "I hate this . . . stupid party . . . I'm never gonna think of anything." But then, eventually, a "small idea" would come to him, which would lead to the next idea, and the next, and in a few hours he had a full story. At which point, Berlanti recalled, he would think to himself, "I love this! I'm a genius!"

In his early adolescence, Berlanti realized he was gay and sought out, surreptitiously, whatever bits of gay culture he could find. He recalled, in an interview given much later in his life, sneaking home copies of *The Village Voice* from a local delicatessen when he was about 13 years old after discovering that the alternative New York weekly newspaper contained gay-themed articles.

Later, when he worked part-time at a local video store after school, he would watch films starring Montgomery Clift and Rock Hudson just to see other gay people.



Greg Berlanti at Comic Con in 2010.

Image by Wikimedia Commons contributor rwoan. Creative Commons Attribution-Sharealike Generic 2.0 license.

Berlanti attended Rye High School and later studied acting and playwriting at Northwestern University. At Northwestern, he was a member of the Delta Tau Delta fraternity.

He graduated from Northwestern in 1994 with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Theater.

Soon after graduating, Berlanti moved to Los Angeles with the expectation of landing a writing job in either television or film. Ultimately, however, he found employment in a string of temporary office jobs and in his off-hours wrote a series of scripts, all of which were roundly rejected.

Although he lived in the Beachwood Canyon area of Los Angeles, beneath the iconic "Hollywood" sign, Berlanti thought he had "never been further from Hollywood" in his whole life.

It was also around this time that he came out to his parents. In the summer of 1996, his parents were in San Francisco on vacation and Berlanti travelled up to join them. He recalled one night sitting in his parents' hotel room, watching the opening ceremonies of the Summer Olympics on television. Suddenly, and without planning to, he turned off the television set and told his parents he was gay. They were quite taken aback by this unexpected announcement, and "the next year was bumpy for us," Berlanti explained in an interview.

However, his parents eventually accepted his sexuality. In fact, when his first film, the gay-themed *The Broken Hearts Club*, premiered in New York City in 2000, his parents hosted a party at a gay club to celebrate the event, and invited not only their son's friends, but their own friends as well.

Berlanti's career frustrations abruptly changed in 1998. He had recently finished a draft of the script that would eventually become *The Broken Hearts Club*. He showed the script to an old college friend, who, coincidentally, happened to know the writer-producer Kevin Williamson, and, unbeknownst to Berlanti, shared the script with him.

At the time, Williamson was at the height of his career, following the tremendous success of the savvy and smartly self-referential horror movie *Scream* (1995), which Williamson wrote, and its equally successful sequel, *Scream 2* (1997). Williamson also wrote the script for the thriller *I Know What You Did Last Summer* (1997), another commercial success.

In early 1998, *Dawson's Creek*, television series created by Williamson, premiered. Williamson was serving as executive producer on the show, which chronicled the complicated love lives of a group of teenagers in a small coastal town in North Carolina. It became an immediate critical and popular hit.

After reading his *Broken Hearts Club* script, Williamson offered Berlanti a job as one of the staff writers on *Dawson's Creek*. Berlanti flourished in the job and was later promoted to co-executive producer when Williamson left to pursue other career opportunities at the end of the show's second season.

In both his roles as writer and producer, Berlanti was instrumental in expanding the character of Jack McPhee (played by Kerr Smith), a teenager coming to terms with his homosexuality in a small town. Williamson had introduced McPhee in the show's first season, but Berlanti made him central to the series.

"I wanted to really chronicle what it's like to be a gay kid in high school," Berlanti explained in an interview, "and give him a boyfriend and let him have his first kiss."

It took over a year for Berlanti and Williamson to convince network executives to allow Jack to kiss his boyfriend Ethan (Adam Kaufman) on the show. The landmark event was finally allowed, during the show's third season, in an episode titled "True Love" (first aired May 24, 2000). It was, remarkably, the first

romantic kiss between two gay male characters ever aired on network television in the United States.

In 1999, Berlanti took a short break from his duties on *Dawson's Creek* to direct *The Broken Hearts Club: A Romantic Comedy*, based on his own script. The film centers on Dennis (Timothy Olyphant), a young gay man who yearns for the stability of a committed romantic relationship, and his group of friends who live in and around the predominantly gay Los Angeles enclave of West Hollywood (the cast also includes Zach Braff, Dean Cain, Justin Theroux, Andrew Keegan, and John Mahoney, among others).

Dave Kehr, in his review for the *New York Times*, noted Berlanti's experience on *Dawson's Creek*, and observed that the film "reflects a benign television personality," and "plays almost like a pilot for a potential series," with its cast of "immediately identifiable and likable characters," its way of "weaving in and out of several different subplots," and "its cozy sense of family and belonging."

The Broken Hearts Club was first shown at the 2000 Sundance Film Festival. It went on to win the 2001 GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) Media Award for Outstanding Film.

After completing the film, Berlanti returned to *Dawson's Creek* and remained as co-executive producer on the show until 2001, when he left to create and produce the television drama *Everwood*.

Everwood concerns a recently-widowed Manhattan neurosurgeon who moves, with his two young children, to the fictional small town of Everwood, Colorado. It aired on the WB Network (the same network that aired *Dawson's Creek*) from 2002 to 2006, but was not renewed for future production when the WB and UPN networks merged to form the CW Television Network in 2006.

Berlanti next co-created, with the novelist and comic book writer Brad Meltzer and the television director Thomas Schlamme, the television drama *Jack & Bobby*, which ran for only 22 episodes, from September 2004 until May 2005.

The show focuses on two brothers, Jack and Bobby McCallister, one of whom grows up to be the President of the United States. Present-day scenes featuring the two teenage brothers are interspersed with mid-twenty-first century commentators who reflect, documentary-style, on Jack and Bobby's lives and careers.

The show tackled such glbtq issues as gay-teen suicide and won a GLAAD Media Award in 2004 for Outstanding Individual Episode--Series Without a Regular Gay Character, for the episode titled "Lost Boys," which featured the brothers' openly gay uncle Jimmy (Tom Cavanagh).

From 2007 to 2009, Berlanti served as co-executive producer, with the writer Craig Wright, of the primetime network soap opera, *Dirty Sexy Money*. The show, about the fictional Darling family, one of the wealthiest families in New York, featured the transgender actor Candis Cayne as the mistress to a married New York Attorney General (William Baldwin). Cayne was the first transgender person to have a recurring role on an American network television series.

In 2008, Berlanti created and produced the legal drama *Eli Stone*, which ran from January 2008 until July 2009.

A huge fan of the openly gay singer George Michael, Berlanti persuaded the singer to appear in several episodes of the show as himself. Additionally, each episode of the show's first season was named after one of Michael's songs.

Berlanti also served as executive producer from 2006 to 2011 of the award-winning television series *Brothers & Sisters*.

The show, created by the gay playwright Jon Robin Baitz, centers on a politically diverse California family and prominently features several gay characters, including an openly gay attorney (Matthew Rhys), his life partner (out actor Luke Macfarlane), and his uncle (Ron Rifkin), who eventually comes out as a gay man and later in the series learns he has been infected with the HIV virus.

In addition to Macfarlane, other out actors, such as Denis O'Hare and Richard Chamberlain, had recurring roles on the series.

The show won the GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Television Drama Series from 2007 to 2010.

In 2010, Berlanti created the science fiction comedy drama *No Ordinary Family*. The show, about a family whose members discover they have special powers, garnered mostly favorable reviews, but was cancelled after only one season due to low ratings.

Also in 2010, Berlanti directed his second feature-length film, *Life As We Know It*, from a script by Ian Deitchman and Kristin Rusk Robinson. A rather conventional, and heterosexual, romantic comedy, the film, which stars Josh Duhamel and Katherine Heigl, received generally negative reviews for its "formulaic plot and poorly written script."

The following year, Berlanti produced and co-wrote the script for *Green Lantern* (2011), a film version of the popular DC Comics superhero series of the same name.

Explaining his interest in the film, Berlanti observed in an interview, "The thing I always really identified with about comic books--and only years later realized it had to do with my sexuality--was that they were outsiders but could look and seem like they were 'normal,' but yet they harbored this secret."

He continued, "I think that's what drew me to them and what's so emotionally evocative about them for me--that burden of feeling different. Also, so many times they're not of this world and yet they're forced to protect that world--something they're really not even totally a part of."

Berlanti has several more feature film and television series in production.

He continues to reside in Los Angeles, with his partner, the television writer Brian Young.

"It's been one of the easier, nicer parts of my life," Berlanti said of his relationship. "I'm grateful for the opportunity to just be together, whether it's going for dinner or hiking or whatever."

Bibliography

Ayers, Dennis. "Interview with Greg Berlanti." *AfterElton.com* (March 1, 2007): <http://www.afterelton.com/archive/elton/people/2007/3/berlanti.html>

Keith, Bill. "Being Berlanti." *Out* (April 2008): www.out.com/entertainment/2008/04/06/being-berlanti

Kinser, Jeremy. "Flash of Genius." *The Advocate* (September 13, 2010): www.advocate.com/printArticle.aspx?id=139816

Knight, Jr., Richard. "Greg Berlanti: Gay Director Looks at His 'Life'—and His Life." *Windy City Times* (October 6, 2010): www.windycitymediagroup.com/gay/lesbian/news/ARTICLE.php?AID=28923

Weisberg, Joseph. "The Making of a President." *The New York Times* (September 12, 2004): 2, 80.

About the Author

Craig Kaczorowski writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.