



Hayes, Sean (b. 1970)

by Linda Rapp

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Sean Hayes (right) with Eric McCormack in an NBC publicity photograph for the final season of *Will and Grace* in 2006.

Actor Sean Hayes gained renown and awards for his role as a gay character on the hit comedy series *Will & Grace* (1998-2006), but while the show was on the air he declined to comment on his own sexual orientation, sharing the fear of many performers before him that it might harm his career. He did not come out publicly as a gay man until 2010.

Hayes grew up in difficult circumstances. The youngest of five children, born June 6, 1970 in Chicago, he spent his youth in the suburb of Glen Ellyn. His mother, the director of a food bank, struggled to support the family while his father was only intermittently present in their lives and finally abandoned them completely before Hayes reached his teens.

Hayes took an early interest in both music and acting. At age five, he talked his mother into letting him try out for a television commercial. A local talent agent signed up all five of the Hayes siblings, and such auditions became a part of their family life. "Looking back," Hayes told Ari Karpel of *The Advocate*, "it was probably for some extra money."

In high school Hayes participated in theater and gymnastics. He also discovered that he could ingratiate himself to his classmates by amusing them with physical humor, his signature move being tripping.

Nevertheless, he rarely socialized with classmates outside of school; instead, his companions were the characters on the television shows—sitcoms and sketch comedy in particular—that he loved to watch.

Hayes had studied piano from a young age and dreamed of a career as a classical pianist. After graduating from high school in 1988 he enrolled at Illinois State University but quit when he was three classes short of earning his degree because, he told Cindy Pearlman of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, "I just said, 'I can't do it. Either you can play piano or you can't. No one cares if you have a diploma in it.'"

Hayes returned to Chicago, where he was hired as the musical director of the Pheasant Run Theater. He found, however, that he yearned to be on stage instead of leading the orchestra, and so he headed to Hollywood in 1995.

He won a starring role in Bruce Schwartz's made-for-television movie *A&P* (1996), but his face—if not his name—became familiar to viewers who saw him in widely aired commercials for major companies. The attractive young actor was frequently paired with equally comely young women in spots that used plot-lines with the possibility of heterosexual romance to entice consumers to buy a variety of products, including snack food, soft drinks, and cat litter.

Hayes landed a starring role in Tommy O'Haver's indie film *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss* (1998), in which he played a photographer who longs for romance with a male model whom he has hired to pose in still photos re-imaging classic cinematic love scenes with gay male couples. In black-and-white dream sequences, Billy

imagines himself and Gabriel, the object of his desire, living out famous romantic interludes in movies, all of which—as it could not have been otherwise at the time—had originally involved heterosexual couples.

Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss premiered at the Sundance Film Festival to enthusiastic reviews. It caught the attention of the gay press, but in interviews Hayes declined to comment on his own sexual orientation.

The film also piqued the interest of openly gay writer Max Mutchnick and his business partner David Kohan who were in the process of developing a sitcom entitled *Will & Grace*. The co-creators called Hayes at Sundance to ask him to come to Los Angeles to read for the role of the male lead, a gay character.

Hayes declined to do so. As he explained to Amy Longsdorf of the Bergen County, New Jersey *Record*, "I didn't have money to fly home to L.A. just for an audition because, at that point, I'd been to 10,000 auditions, and I figured, 'It doesn't matter if I miss another one.'"

Straight actor Eric McCormack was soon cast as Will, but the role of Jack, his flamboyant friend, was still open when Hayes returned to California. He won the part and joined a cast that also included Debra Messing as Grace, Will's straight best friend and roommate, and Megan Mullally as Grace's friend Karen.

Will & Grace debuted in September 1998. Warren Littlefield, then president of NBC Entertainment, later recalled that some in management "were a little freaked out [by the gay theme]. They said it would drive advertisers away," but, he told Gail Shister of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "it was our best comedy pilot of the year. I knew we had a hit show."

Predictably, some conservative groups immediately decried the presence of openly gay characters on television.

Some in the LGBTQ community were initially concerned about the perpetuation of stereotypes of gay men, particularly with respect to Hayes's over-the-top interior-decorator character, Jack. The more staid lawyer Will, who lacked for romantic attachments, on the other hand, seemed to some not to convey a sufficiently strong gay image.

As the show found its feet, however, the writers addressed important issues such as homophobia, gay parenting, and marriage equality while maintaining the sure sense of comedy that Littlefield had seen from the start. During its eight-year run, *Will & Grace* won seven GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) Media Awards for its affirming message.

The show was enthusiastically greeted by both the public and the critics. Among other honors, it received 49 Emmy Award nominations, with 12 wins. Hayes was nominated for Best Supporting Actor every year from 2000 to 2006, and he took home the prize in 2000.

Hayes's success in television led to movie roles, including a voice-over in Lawrence Guterman's animated feature *Cats & Dogs* (2001) and John Gray's made-for-television biopic *Martin and Lewis* (2002), in which he had a co-starring role portraying comedian Jerry Lewis.

Upon learning of the latter project, Lewis was incensed and demanded that executive producers Craig Zadan and Neil Meron call him, but they delayed doing so because, Meron told Joanne Weintraub of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, "we were terrified."

Once Lewis had read the script, however, he became entirely supportive and mentored Hayes, whose performance he praised in the highest possible terms.

Hayes remained in the cast of *Will & Grace* until its series finale in 2006. Like many sitcoms, the show had somewhat run out of steam and had declined from its once lofty position in the ratings. Many viewers also thought that the plots had become increasingly outlandish and that the secondary characters Karen and Jack had come to so dominate the series that the initial premise had been compromised. But, having engaged the hearts of many viewers who had come to care about the characters, *Will & Grace* retained loyal fans to the end.

Throughout the run of *Will & Grace*, Hayes was consistently evasive about his sexual orientation, fearing, as many had before him, that being stereotyped would reduce his professional opportunities. He never resorted to appearing in public on sham dates with women to give the impression that he was in a heterosexual relationship; he merely kept his private life a closed book.

Hayes—or at least his character, Jack—had nevertheless become a gay cultural icon. "Some gay men would thank me for making it easier to come out to their parents," he stated to Walt Belcher of the *Tampa Tribune*. "That blows my mind because it means we were educating America, and that wasn't our intention. We just wanted to be funny. But we were making it easier for some parents of gays to adjust because they had seen us on TV."

In the years since Will and Jack first appeared on the small screen, opportunities for viewers to see other gay and lesbian characters and glbtq participants in reality shows have increased. The public's reception of *Will & Grace* can be seen as one of the catalysts of this change.

After *Will & Grace* left the air, Hayes and business partner Todd Milliner established a production company, Hazy Mills, to develop television shows. Hayes has also appeared as a guest star on television series such as *30 Rock* and in films, including Rob Reiner's *The Bucket List* (2007).

Hayes has also gone to Broadway in a 2010 revival of the musical *Promises, Promises* (book by Neil Simon, music by Burt Bacharach, lyrics by Hal David). The project took shape after Hayes took part in a 2008 reading and sing-through of the show that was attended by both Simon and David.

David reported Simon's enthusiastic response to the performance: "Do you know why it took over 40 years to revive this show? Because it took over 40 years to find Sean Hayes."

In something of a non-event that surprised virtually no one, in April 2010 Hayes acknowledged publicly his homosexuality. He stated to Karpel of *The Advocate*, "I spend time with a special someone in my life" but declined to give further particulars beyond "It's fantastic."

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About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtc.com.