



Higgins, Colin (1941-1988)

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The Australian-American writer, director, and producer Colin Higgins is perhaps best known for his screenplay of the cult classic *Harold and Maude*, the story of a love affair between a 79-year-old woman and a death-obsessed young man, as well as writing and directing the more mainstream comedies *Foul Play* and *9 to 5*.

He also established the Colin Higgins Foundation, which is dedicated to supporting glbtq youth in underserved communities with programs and organizations "that foster and build leadership and empowerment."

The actress Shirley MacLaine once described Higgins, with whom she had both a "creative and personal friendship," as "about five eleven, storybook handsome, with a brown mane of hair so luxuriously rich that on first meeting him I had the impulse to run my fingers through it but hesitated for fear the tresses would come unglued in my hand. A baseless fear. The hair was real."

One of six sons, Higgins was born on July 28, 1941 in Nouméa, New Caledonia, a French territorial island in the South Pacific, to an American father and an Australian mother. He spent most of his early childhood in Hunters Hill, a suburb of Sydney, Australia and attended Saint Ignatius' College, a Catholic school for boys located in Riverview, a nearby suburb located on the Lower North Shore of Sydney.

In 1957, Higgins and his family moved to Redwood City, California, where he attended the local public high school. In 1959, he was awarded a scholarship to attend nearby Stanford University.

He excelled at Stanford his freshman year, and became a well-known figure on campus for his standout performance in a student-written musical comedy. Although he was initially interested in English literature as his major, and thought he might become a writer, his surprising onstage triumph instead drew him toward acting as a possible profession.

As a result, Higgins dropped out of Stanford his sophomore year, and hitchhiked to New York City to take acting classes at the acclaimed Actors Studio. He also found employment as a page at the ABC Television Studios in Manhattan's theater district.

Acting jobs were difficult to find, however. Thus, in 1961 he volunteered for active service in the United



Colin Higgins.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ez3SqeAKYtc>

States Army. He was stationed in Germany for three years and wrote frequently for Stars and Stripes, a newspaper distributed to the U.S. military community abroad.

He was honorably discharged in 1965. Rather than return home immediately, Higgins decided to live in Paris and study at the Sorbonne. Six months later, he went back to Stanford University and took classes in creative writing. He helped pay his college tuition by working as an actor in local professional theatrical productions in and around Stanford and the San Francisco area.

Higgins received his Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Stanford in 1967.

Unable to find a job in the arts, Higgins signed on for a six-month stint as a merchant seaman on a freighter bound for Eastern Asia. He was fired, however, for insubordination, while docked in Guam, and was forced to pay for his own transportation back home.

Without a job and at loose ends, Higgins next decided to hitchhike to Montreal to attend the Montreal World's Fair (commonly known as Expo 67). He was inspired by many of the innovative films presented at the Expo, and determined to become a filmmaker.

Toward that goal, in the fall of 1968 Higgins moved to Los Angeles and entered the UCLA School of Theater, Film and Television. Three years later, he received a Master of Fine Arts degree in screenwriting. His Master's thesis was a 20-minute draft of the script for the film that would eventually become Harold and Maude.

After graduating from UCLA, Higgins went to work for Edward Lewis, a Hollywood producer, and his wife Mildred, as a part-time chauffeur and pool cleaner in exchange for free accommodations in the Lewis's guest house.

One day Higgins showed Lewis the draft of the Harold and Maude script; Lewis was impressed and, in turn, showed the script to Robert Evans, who at the time was head of production at Paramount Pictures. Evans liked the script and Higgins was hired to expand it into a feature-length film.

Higgins originally contracted to direct the film himself, and was assigned to shoot a scene as a test. Paramount executives were not impressed with his work, however, and direction of the film was turned over to Hal Ashby. As a goodwill gesture to help Higgins learn more about the film industry, Ashby made him a co-producer on the film.

Harold and Maude

(1971) is a dark, existential comedy about a death-obsessed young man (played by Bud Cort) and his romantic relationship with a free-spirited, 79-year-old woman named Maude (Ruth Gordon). Ultimately, Maude teaches Harold to "live life to its fullest" and to regard life "as the most precious gift of all."

Although Paramount Pictures was enthusiastic about the film, it was critically panned and commercially

unsuccessful upon its initial release. Over time, however, Harold and Maude became profitable as well as a highly regarded cult classic.

Higgins wrote a novelization of his film script, which was published by Lippincott in 1971. He was also commissioned to adapt Harold and Maude for the stage by the French actor and director Jean-Louis Barrault as a vehicle for his wife, the actress Madeleine Renaud. Higgins worked on the French translation with the screenwriter and actor Jean-Claude Carrière; the two-act stage version ran in Paris for seven years.

During this time, Higgins also wrote the script for the occult television movie *The Devil's Daughter* (1973), which stars Shelley Winters.

In 1974, while back in Paris working on the Harold and Maude stage adaptation, Higgins met the experimental director Peter Brook. Brook commissioned Higgins to adapt for the stage Colin Turnbull's *The Mountain People* (1972), an anthropological study of a displaced Ugandan tribe known as the Ik. Higgins ultimately collaborated with the British dramatist Denis Cannan on the play *The Ik*, which Brook directed.

The play premiered in Paris in 1975, and was later produced in London and toured the United States in 1976 as a bicentennial gift from the French government.

Returning to the United States, Higgins then wrote the script for the Hollywood thriller *Silver Streak* (1976), which combined elements of romance, slapstick comedy, and suspense. Directed by Arthur Hiller, and starring Richard Pryor, Gene Wilder, and Jill Clayburgh, the film was an enormous box office success.

Higgins was able to parlay the success of that film into his directorial debut. Written and directed by Higgins, *Foul Play* (1978) is a continuation of the comedy-thriller genre and an overt homage to the films of director Alfred Hitchcock. It stars Goldie Hawn, Dudley Moore, and the comedian Chevy Chase, in his first film role.

The film was another box office triumph for Higgins. The film was nominated for a 1979 Golden Globe Award for Best Motion Picture--Musical or Comedy, and Higgins himself was nominated for Best Screenplay.

Higgins continued his run of box office successes with the 1980 workplace comedy *9 to 5*, which he directed and co-wrote with Patricia Resnick. The film stars Jane Fonda, out actress Lily Tomlin, and country music singer-songwriter Dolly Parton, in her feature-film debut, as three secretaries who fantasize about wreaking revenge against their sexist, egotistical boss, played by Dabney Coleman.

The film later inspired a short-run television series, as well as the 2009 Broadway musical, with music by Dolly Parton and directed by Joe Mantello.

Higgins again teamed up with Dolly Parton on *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas* (1982), a screen adaptation of the Broadway musical of the same name. The original 1978 Broadway production had been co-directed and choreographed by Tommy Tune.

Higgins co-wrote the film script with the musical's original book writers, Larry L. King and Peter Masterson, with music and lyrics by Carol Hall.

The film also starred Burt Reynolds, Charles Durning, and Jim Nabors, whose homosexuality had been an open secret for decades, but who came out publicly in 2013.

The film was nominated for a 1983 Golden Globe Award for Best Motion Picture--Musical or Comedy.

Higgins next worked with the actress Shirley MacLaine, co-writing the script with her for a five-hour television miniseries *Out on a Limb* (1987), which he co-produced with Stan Margulies. This would prove to be Higgins's final project.

Based on MacLaine's 1983 autobiographical bestseller of the same name, *Out on a Limb* charts the actress's adventures in spirituality and self-discovery, including reincarnation and meditation. MacLaine stars as herself in the television film.

MacLaine wrote about her friendship with Higgins and their experience of turning her memoir into a television miniseries in another autobiographical book, *It's All in the Playing* (1987).

In 1985, while working on *Out on a Limb*, Higgins was diagnosed as HIV-positive.

In order to ensure that a major portion of his estate would go toward the eventual eradication of HIV/AIDS and to help improve the lives of glbtq youth in underserved communities, Higgins established the Colin Higgins Foundation in 1986.

In addition to awarding grants to glbtq programs and organizations "that foster and build leadership and empowerment," the Foundation also annually awards the Colin Higgins Youth Courage Award to "acknowledge remarkable young people who refuse to be silenced by societal norms and demonstrate profound courage in the face of hardship, intolerance and bigotry based on sexual orientation, gender identity and national origin."

Higgins died in his home from complications due to AIDS on August 5, 1988. He is buried in Valhalla Memorial Park Cemetery, in North Hollywood, California

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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.