



Keenan, Joe (b. 1958)

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Joe Keenan has won numerous awards for his work as a writer and producer for the hit television show *Frasier*. He is also the author of three richly comic gay-themed novels. These madcap works brilliantly find humor in the frenetic lives of gay and straight urban dwellers, gently satirizing the mores of contemporary life.

Joe Keenan's interest in writing began early. As a boy he composed short plays that he was able to have performed at a summer camp. During his years at a boys' Jesuit high school in Boston he wrote plays and songs, often with a certain campiness. Among his efforts was a song-and-dance rendition of *Oedipus Rex* with a song entitled "Hey There, You with the Scars in Your Eyes."

Keenan won a scholarship to Columbia University, where he planned to major in English. The required curriculum interested him less than elective writing classes and participation in theatrical productions, however, and so he dropped out in his third year.

Although Keenan had not completed his undergraduate studies, he was accepted by New York University to pursue a master's degree in musical theater.

On a summer break at home in Boston, Keenan decided to work on a short story. He was inspired, he said, by the fact that he was able to write daily letters of six or seven pages to his partner, Gerry Bernardi, even though he "had nothing to say because [his] life was so boring."

By the end of the summer Keenan's short story had turned into the first several chapters of a novel. He continued working on the book during semester breaks and had written about half of it by the time that he graduated in 1986. After receiving encouragement from a friend in publishing, he completed the novel, *Blue Heaven*, which was released in 1988.

Keenan sought to emulate the style of P. G. Wodehouse. "I greatly admired his rigorous plotting and his comedy of escalating chaos," he said.

Both of these elements are evident in *Blue Heaven* and Keenan's subsequent novels, which recount the convoluted misadventures from which an endearing though sometimes exasperating trio must extricate themselves: struggling playwright and lyricist Philip Cavanaugh, who serves as narrator; his former lover harebrained Gilbert Selwyn, a would-be writer ("He wants desperately to be a world-famous, flamboyant, provocative novelist and will do anything to achieve this goal short of putting words on paper"); and their straight friend Claire Simmons, Philip's collaborator who also functions as a kind of ethical compass.

Keenan's novels bear some resemblance to Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City* series, especially in their zany characters and surprising turns of plot. But Keenan's characters, though memorable, lack the deep humanity of Maupin's, and his series is less sharply observant of social history and, ultimately, less serious, than *Tales of the City*. Oblivious to weighty issues such as AIDS and sexual politics, the Keenan series is self-

consciously escapist fare.

In *Blue Heaven*, the plot is set in motion by Gilbert's plans to marry a wealthy duchess's daughter in order to reap lucrative wedding gifts. The plot grows ever more complicated when the Mafia makes an appearance, the love affair between "Philly" and "Gilley" is rekindled, and the duchess is unmasked. Peopled by outrageous (and stereotypical) characters, the novel is redeemed by its breakneck pace and good (though sometimes malicious) humor.

The second novel in the series, *Putting on the Ritz* (1991), has the characters romping through the world of New York's high society as they investigate rival business tycoons. Described in a *Publishers Weekly* review as a "clever and campy comedy of morals and manners" and "a refreshingly improbable detective story," *Putting on the Ritz* caricatures such familiar figures as Donald and Ivana Trump, while also further delineating the complex relationship of Philip and Gilbert, who are at once rivals and friends. Despite Philip's falling for a beautiful man, his most enduring relationship will always be with Gilbert. *Putting on the Ritz* won a Lambda Literary Award in the category of Humor.

While at NYU, Keenan collaborated on various writing projects with fellow student Brad Ross. One of their projects, a musical comedy, *The Times* (book and lyrics by Keenan, music by Ross) won the Richard Rodgers Development Award of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters in 1991. After the play was produced in 1993 at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, Keenan received the coveted Kleban Award for his lyrics. A revised version of the show was presented for a limited run in New York in 2005, but it has not been commercially produced.

The light-hearted and campy antics in *Blue Heaven* caught the attention of James Burrows and Glen and Les Charles, the creators of the sitcom *Cheers*. They invited Keenan to join them in creating a new sitcom for their production company. The resulting pilot, *Gloria Vane*, starring JoBeth Williams, about a 1930s movie star, was sumptuously produced in 1993, but the network declined to put the series into production.

About the same time, Keenan was asked to be one of six screenwriters who would each contribute a scene to Rory Kelly's romantic comedy *Sleep With Me* (1994). Keenan's scene features a hilarious riff on the homoerotic subtext of the 1986 film *Top Gun*.

Despite the failure of *Gloria Vane*, in 1994 Keenan was invited to join the writing staff of *Frasier*, a spinoff of *Cheers* that had debuted the previous year. During his six-season tenure on the series, he rose through the ranks from executive story editor to co-producer, supervising producer, co-executive producer, and, finally, executive producer. He left *Frasier* in 2001 to create an ill-fated series, *Alice and Bram*, which aired to poor reviews and ratings in 2002 and was promptly canceled. But Keenan returned to *Frasier* in 2005 for its eleventh and final season.

Although television writing is a highly collaborative process and the premise and characters of *Frasier* had been well established by the time Keenan joined the series, he nevertheless had great success in putting his own stamp on the show. Of his role in shaping the situation comedy, Keenan said, "I certainly did push the show towards exploring comical, farcical gay themes. I think more than anything, my contribution to that show was to import farce storytelling into it."

The first episode of *Frasier* that Keenan wrote, "The Matchmaker," is a comedy of errors in which Frasier attempts to arrange a date between his associate Roz and one of their male coworkers, only to discover at the end of the story that the coworker is gay and believed that the date was to be with Frasier.

"The Matchmaker" was honored with a GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) Media Award for Outstanding Comedy Episode in 1995. Keenan also earned an Emmy nomination for writing the episode,

as well as the 1995 Writers Guild of America Award for Episodic Comedy.

The accolades for Keenan's work on *Frasier* continued. In all, he received five Emmy nominations for his writing, with one win; and six nominations for producing, with four wins.

Because of their fondness for opera, theater, fine wine, and decorating, Doctors Frasier and Niles Crane were often called the gayest characters then seen on American television, despite the fact that both consistently pursued romantic relationships with women--albeit usually disastrously. For his part, Keenan described the Crane brothers as "metrosexuals a good five or six years before the term was coined."

Although *Frasier* was a light-hearted series, it occasionally broached serious subjects. One of Keenan's funniest--but biting satiric--episodes was "Dr. Nora" (1999), which features Frasier's involvement with a woman who has applied for a job as a call-in psychiatrist at KACL.

The episode savagely caricatures right-wing radio psychiatrists like Dr. Laura Schlessinger, who was much in the news at the time for her homophobic comments (notoriously describing gay men and lesbians as "biological errors"). Played by Christine Baranski, Dr. Nora, for all her self-righteous pronouncements, turns out to have questionable credentials and a lot of baggage: not only is her doctorate in physical education rather than psychiatry, but in addition she has had two failed marriages, an affair with a married man, and a bitter estrangement from her mother. The parallels with Dr. Laura could hardly have been missed.

Keenan's most recent writing for television is for *Out of Practice*, a situation comedy about a family--including a lesbian daughter--all of whose members are doctors (though the younger son feels that he receives a lack of respect because his doctorate is a Ph.D. rather than an M.D.). The show, which debuted in the fall of 2005, received favorable critical comment but only moderate ratings and was put on hiatus in January 2006, though it has since returned. In addition to writing for it, Keenan also serves as executive producer of the series.

Keenan now has three books in his Cavanaugh and Selwyn series. Because Keenan had little time for his novel-writing while working on *Frasier*, it was not until 2006 that Cavanaugh and Selwyn's next adventure, *My Lucky Star*, appeared.

Like the other books in the series, it is characterized by, in the words of reviewer Kaite Mediatore Stover, "witty banter, zany plot twists, and colorful, likable characters (even the dastardly villains)." And like the earlier books in the series, the new novel is a "smart drawing-room comedy crossed liberally with farce," but the setting of *My Lucky Star* is Los Angeles rather than New York.

In addition to Philip, Gilbert, and Claire, the novel features a legendary Hollywood diva, her action-film-star son, and her has-been actress sister, all caught up in a convoluted plot involving a (plagiarized) screenplay, a tell-all memoir, and prostitution. Although Keenan retains the light tone of the previous books, in *My Lucky Star* he raises the issue of homophobia since the macho actor is a closeted gay man. He also adds more explicit sex than the earlier novels contained.

Despite the presence of an increasing number of glbtq characters on television--some of them thanks to Keenan--he stated in 2005 that "it would be a box-office disaster" for a male action-film star to come out. Offering a bit of hope, he added, "I suspect the situation will eventually change, people will be more accepting, but that's the way it is for now."

Keenan lives in Studio City, California with his life partner of over twenty years, Gerry Bernardi, to whom he attributes his success, saying, "[he] manages our lives well enough so that I don't have to do anything but write."

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