



King, Michael Patrick (b. 1954)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Writer, director, and producer Michael Patrick King has been creatively involved in such television series as the ground-breaking, gay-themed *Will & Grace*, and the glbtq-friendly shows *Sex and the City* and *The Comeback*, among others.

He was born on September 14, 1954, the only son among four children of a working-class, Irish-American family in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Among various other jobs, his father delivered coal, and his mother ran a Krispy Kreme donut shop.

In a 2011 interview, King noted that he knew from an early age that he was "going to go into show business." Toward that goal, after graduating from a Scranton public high school, he applied to New York City's Juilliard School, one of the premier performing arts conservatories in the country.

Unfortunately, his family could not afford Juilliard's high tuition, and King instead attended the more affordable Mercyhurst University, a Catholic liberal arts college in Erie, Pennsylvania.

Mercyhurst had a small theater program at the time, which King later learned to appreciate, explaining that he received invaluable personal attention from the faculty and was allowed to explore and grow his talent at his own pace.

However, he left college after three years without graduating, driven, he said, by a desire to move to New York and "make it as an actor." In New York, King worked multiple jobs, such as waiting on tables and unloading buses at night, while studying acting during the day at the famed Lee Strasberg Theatre Institute.

In addition to studying acting, King joined a comedy improvisation troupe called *The Broadway Local*, which performed in small clubs and theaters. He also wrote several one-act plays, including "Work Out," about a mother and daughter fighting over their personal problems during an aerobics class, which was staged by the Circle Repertory Company.

King also did stand-up comedy, performing in the same comedy club circuit as such soon-to-be stars Ray Ramona and Jon Stewart. As a closeted gay man, King sometimes found the audiences at the comedy clubs hostile, and the world of stand-up comedy intimidating, especially "the struggle of being onstage and not knowing what [the audience is] going to say about you."



Michael Patrick King.
Video capture from a
YouTube video.

In 1989, King landed his first television job as a sketch writer, with Jon Stewart, for A&E Network's *Caroline's Comedy Hour* (1989-1995), hosted by the comedian Carol Leifer.

King worked on that show for several months and then left to write and produce Comedy Channel's *The Sweet Life* (1989-1990), another comedy sketch show.

In the summer of 1990, King was persuaded to move to Los Angeles by his friend Cynthia Stevenson to write for her new television series *My Talk Show* (1990-1991).

The syndicated series focused on a small-town Wisconsin housewife who hosts a television talk show out of her own living room. Unfortunately for King, Stevenson unexpectedly quit the show on his first day at work, and appeared in only the first three episodes. She was replaced by Stephanie Hodge. The show lasted one season.

King next went to work as a staff writer for the CBS comedy *Good Sports* (1991). The series starred the real-life couple Farrah Fawcett and Ryan O'Neal as squabbling sportscasters for a cable sports network. Although it received some positive reviews, *Good Sports* was canceled after airing only 15 episodes. King was again out of a job.

He then joined the writing staff of the hit CBS comedy *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998) at the start of that show's fifth season. The title character, portrayed by Candice Bergen, is the host of a fictional news program; King once described the character as "an opinionated woman with 'balls.'" The show also featured Lily Tomlin in a recurring role.

King worked on *Murphy Brown* from 1991 to 1993, writing ten episodes for the series. Although he constantly worried that his work "was not going to be good enough," King credits the show's producer, Diane English, for creating a "utopia" where "everyone was powerful."

He left at the end of his second year on the series, however. He later explained his decision, saying "I didn't want to do what everyone does--I didn't want to say on a show for ten years and work my way up."

Instead, King went to work on another CBS comedy, *Good Advice* (1993-1994), about a marriage counselor. King explained that he was brought on to "fix" the show. Although it garnered generally good reviews, the show was canceled at the end of the 1994 television season. He then worked on several new shows that ultimately did not get produced.

In 1996, King joined the staff as executive producer on yet another CBS comedy, *Cybill* (1995-1998), starring Cybill Shepherd. He produced seven episodes, and wrote one, but working on the show proved not to be a "good experience" for King and he was fired within the year.

"Don't take anything for the money," he later said about his experience on the show.

After being fired, King decided to take a break from his career in television, and traveled extensively throughout Europe instead.

Upon his return, King was invited by openly gay writer and producer Darren Star to join him in the creation of a new show for HBO called *Sex and the City* (1998-2004). Star had previously produced such successful television series as *Beverly Hills, 90210*, and *Melrose Place*.

While living and working in New York, Star had become a fan of writer Candace Bushnell's weekly columns for the *New York Observer*, about her own dating experiences and those of her friends as single young women living in Manhattan, which were later anthologized in the 1996 book *Sex and the City*. Star thought the columns would make an interesting premise for a television show. What intrigued him, Star later recalled, "was the idea of a single woman in her thirties writing about relationships and using that column as a tool of self-discovery about her own life, sometimes even unbeknownst to herself."

In an interview, King said that Star had asked him to help make the show "funny."

"[Candace] Bushnell's version of those girls," King explained, "was really wicked and really sharp and accurate, but that couldn't be on television every week. We had to make them rounder and sillier and comic."

The two men wrote and produced the first twelve episodes of the show in early 1998, which were scheduled to air on HBO later that summer.

While awaiting the future--both critically and with the network--of *Sex and the City*, King joined the first-season staff as a consulting producer of a new gay-themed television show on NBC called *Will & Grace* (1998-2006).

Co-created by openly gay writer Max Mutchnick and his writing partner David Kohan, *Will & Grace* centered on the relationship between gay lawyer Will Truman (Eric McCormack) and his best friend, straight interior designer Grace Adler (Debra Messing). Serving as a comedic parody of the show's central relationship, the series also featured the self-centered gay character Jack McFarland (Sean Hayes) and the self-obsessed straight, married Karen Walker (Megan Mullally).

King described the style of the show's writing as "new millennium Noël Coward," explaining that *Will & Grace* had the "pedigree of an intellectual show, but ridiculously funny and silly."

King also said that he enjoyed "the opportunity to form this new show where there are gay characters and straight characters living in the same world, and no one was really a villain."

However, when *Sex and the City* premiered on HBO in June 1998 it became a hit for the network, and King

left the staff of *Will & Grace*

to return to the HBO show, joining Darren Star for its second season. Star left the series at the end of the third season to pursue other opportunities, making King the show's executive producer.

The series focused on Carrie (played by Sarah Jessica Parker), a lifestyle columnist, and her three best friends: Samantha, a publicist (Kim Cattrall), Miranda, a corporate lawyer (Cynthia Nixon), and Charlotte, an art gallery manager (Kristin Davis). The show, according to Star, "was meant to look at relationships and sexuality from the point of view of urban women in their thirties."

HBO, a premium cable network, offered Star, King and their creative team much more liberty to explore their characters' sexuality than they would be allowed on more mainstream shows on broadcast television. Consequently, *Sex and the City* garnered considerable attention for the libertine attitudes of its female characters and their frank and casual discussions about sex.

King has noted that one of the things that initially appealed to him about working on the show was the "lure" of "taking sex out of the shadows."

"I'm Irish Catholic," he explained, "so sex was the thing to not talk about. To be sexual in an Irish Catholic family is the great taboo. So, for me, the pent-up giddiness and waiting to burst that from all the years with the nuns and to actually be doing sexual stories at a point in my life where I was completely open about who I was, was really great."

Given that both King and Star were open about their (homo)sexuality, many critics suggested that *Sex and the City* was actually about four gay men, disguised by the show's creators for the sake of convention as four heterosexual women.

King emphatically stated that he had never intentionally inserted a gay voice into the show. "I really don't feel that I'm a gay man who's channeling a gay voice into women," he said.

"I was in a room all day with six women [writers]," he added. "This is personal and it's their lives."

Nonetheless, as the television historian Ron Simon has noted, "the creative dialogue between the gay sensibilities of the male executive producers and the multitudinous real-life experiences of the female writing team gave the series its unique voice."

Sex and the City

featured two recurring gay characters, talent agent Stanford Blatch (Willie Garson), who makes an appearance in the very first episode of the show, and Anthony Marantino (Mario Cantone), an event planner, who was introduced in the third season. However, both characters had limited emotional lives on the show and instead served as archetypal sexually nonthreatening confidants to the straight female characters.

There were no recurring lesbian characters on *Sex and the City*; nevertheless, in season two, Charlotte was

befriended by a group of "power lesbians" and explained that "while sexually, I feel that I am straight, there's a very powerful part of me that connects to the female spirit," and for three episodes in season four, Samantha became involved in a lesbian relationship with a Brazilian painter (played by Sonia Braga).

"The legacy of the show," King observed, "is an enormous exposé on all the different ways you can be a woman and live your life."

Over the course of its six seasons, *Sex and the City* was nominated for more than fifty Emmy Awards, and won seven, including Outstanding Comedy Series in 2001. King won an Emmy for Outstanding Director for a Comedy Series in 2002. The show was also nominated for twenty-four Golden Globe Awards and won seven.

The popularity of the show prompted two feature-length film sequels, both written and directed by King.

The first film premiered in May 2008, and went on to become a worldwide box-office hit. Mick LaSalle, writing in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, called it "the best American movie about women so far this year. Indeed, at the rate Hollywood has been going, it may stand as the best women's movie until *"Sex and the City II,"* if that ever comes along."

Given the overwhelming success of the film, a second sequel was inevitable. *Sex and the City 2* was released in May 2010.

The film opens with the wedding of the television series' two main gay characters--Stanford Blatch and Anthony Marantino--and features a cameo by gay icon Liza Minnelli.

This second film, however, was less successful than the first, especially among critics. Mick LaSalle, who had praised the first film, said of the second in his review, again for the *San Francisco Chronicle*: "Twenty minutes in, the movie is already operating at a deficit, and it never recovers. It can't recover, because it never finds something that it wants to say, or a story that it needs to tell."

King later said that he was "completely surprised," by the critical reception of his second film, but was nonetheless proud of his work.

He returned to television, and to HBO, in 2005 with *The Comeback*, which he created with the actress Lisa Kudrow.

Kudrow had just ended her 10-year stint on the extremely popular comedy *Friends* (1994-2004), and had also starred in such movies as *The Opposite of Sex* (1998) and *Happy Endings* (2005), both written and directed by the gay filmmaker Don Roos.

Shot in the style of a reality television show, *The Comeback* starred Kudrow as Valerie Cherish, an actress desperately trying to resuscitate a once-thriving television career.

The series also featured Robert Michael Morris as Valerie's gay friend and confidant Mickey, an old-style Hollywood hairdresser.

King called *The Comeback* "a brilliantly original tale about what someone is willing to do to stay in the spotlight."

Although the structure of the show was innovative and the writing sharp, *The Comeback* met with low ratings and a mixed critical response, and was canceled by HBO after only one season.

Nonetheless, King was nominated for the 2006 Emmy for Outstanding Director for a Comedy Series for his work on *The Comeback*.

In 2011, he returned to network television with the successful CBS sitcom *2 Broke Girls*, which he co-created with the comedian Whitney Cummings. The show, set in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn, concerns two young women and their efforts to start a cupcake business.

King has often stated that he enjoys writing for "strong female characters."

"I'm comfortable with women," he added. "Women characters are allowed to be more emotional--both comically and dramatically."

King is working on several more television series as both writer and producer.

He currently lives in Manhattan with his partner. He is reluctant to talk about his relationship publicly.

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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.