



Kleiser, Randal (b. 1946)

by Craig Kaczorowski

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2014 glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Although best known for his direction of *Grease*, the highest-grossing movie musical to date, and such teen-oriented films as *The Blue Lagoon*, the writer, director, and producer Randal Kleiser made his most significant contribution to gay cinema with the 1996 AIDS-themed *It's My Party*, about the planned suicide of an HIV-positive man. The film is based, in part, on Kleiser's own experience with his partner of eight years who killed himself after struggling with complications due to AIDS.

Kleiser had been openly gay with family, friends, and colleagues for many years, but he did not come out publicly until 1996, when he gave an interview to the *Advocate*. In the interview, Kleiser said, "I've never hidden being gay, and I never pretended to be straight."

Born John Randal Kleiser in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on July 20, 1946, he is the first of two sons of Harriet and John Raymond Kleiser, a psychologist. He grew up in Lebanon, Pennsylvania and attended Radnor High School.

Kleiser's interest in movies began early. As he explained in an interview, when he was around ten years old he saw *The Ten Commandments* (1956), directed by Cecil B. DeMille, and "with the opening of the Red Sea [a celebrated scene in the film], I decided I wanted to become a director."

Toward that goal, after graduating from high school in 1964, Kleiser moved to Los Angeles to attend the University of Southern California and study filmmaking at the USC School of Cinematic Arts. To help finance his college education, Kleiser worked part-time as a model and actor, appearing in television commercials and as an uncredited extra in several Elvis Presley movies, as well as the big-budget musicals *Camelot* (1967) and *Hello, Dolly!* (1969).

His college roommate at USC was the future film director and producer, George Lucas. In fact, as a freshman, Kleiser starred in Lucas' first student film *Freiheit* (1966).

After earning his B.A. from USC in 1968, Kleiser found employment working in post-production on educational films. But he was unhappy, "editing these stupid little films about weaving," as he explained years later. At the advice of his father, Kleiser returned to USC for his Master's degree in film studies.

Kleiser's M.A. thesis film was *Peege* (1972), a 28-minute meditation on aging and mental decline, based on



Randal Kleiser.
Via YouTube. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nSgtYYCcuVg>

his memories of a Christmas visit to his grandmother in a nursing home. In 2007, the film was inducted into the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress, only the second student production chosen for the Registry, a compendium of films recognized as "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant."

The film impressed several executives at Universal Studios and Kleiser was soon hired to direct television shows. In a two-year period, beginning in 1974, Kleiser directed episodes for such series as *Marcus Welby, M.D.* (1974-1975), *Lucas Tanner* (1975), *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-1976), *The Rookies* (1976), and *Family* (1976).

He also directed several made-for-television movies, including *All Together Now* (1975), about four orphaned children who are given 30 days to prove they can remain together as a family; *Dawn: Portrait of a Teenage Runaway* (1976), about a 15-year-old girl who runs away from home and subsequently turns to prostitution; and *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble* (1976), which featured John Travolta in one of his earliest starring roles as a young man born with a deficient immune system who must spend his life in a completely sterile environment.

Kleiser's television work also included two other movies about aging, building on themes he first explored in his student film. *Portrait of Grandpa Doc* (1977), which first aired on ABC Weekend Specials, is about a grandfather's relationship with his grandson, while *The Gathering* (1977), also for ABC-TV, focuses on a dying man's attempt to reconcile with the family he abandoned years before. *The Gathering* won the 1978 Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Special, while Kleiser himself was nominated for an Emmy for Outstanding Directing in a Special Program.

Although Kleiser had never directed a feature-length film, John Travolta personally requested him as the director of his first movie musical, *Grease* (1978). Travolta appreciated the critical success of the television movie *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble*, and the affable relationship the two men had developed during its making.

Based on the 1971 musical of the same name, with music and lyrics by Jim Jacobs and Warren Casey, *Grease* focuses on the relationships among a group of high school students in the late-1950s. Co-starring Olivia Newton-John and Stockard Channing, the movie was a commercial success upon its release and has gone on to become the highest-grossing movie musical to date.

After the phenomenal success of *Grease*, Kleiser was given free rein to pick his next project. He chose to make *The Blue Lagoon* (1980), based on the 1908 novel by Irish writer Henry De Vere Stacpool, which Kleiser had read several years prior and greatly admired.

The film explores the growing romance between young teenagers, played by Brooke Shields and Christopher Atkins, marooned on a lush tropical island. Promotional materials for the movie called it a "a sensual story of natural love."

Noted for its sumptuous cinematography by Néstor Almendros, the film nevertheless took a critical drubbing on its release--the film critic Roger Ebert, for example, called it "the dumbest movie of the year." Despite negative reviews, the film was a commercial success, due mainly to the supposed nudity of its two stars (although it was later revealed that body doubles were used throughout the film).

Kleiser went on to direct such feature films as *Summer Lovers* (1982), for which he also wrote the screenplay; *Grandview, U.S.A.* (1984); *Flight of the Navigator* (1986); *Big Top Pee-wee* (1988), starring Paul Reubens as his comic fictional character Pee-wee Herman; *Getting It Right* (1989), featuring Sir John Gielgud; *White Fang* (1991), based on the 1906 classic adventure novel by Jack London; and *Honey, I Blew Up the Kid* (1992). He was also the executive producer of the sequel *Return to the Blue Lagoon* (1991).

In 1996, Kleiser made his most personal film, *It's My Party*, which he wrote, directed, and co-produced. The film, about a man suffering from complications due to AIDS who chooses to end his life, is based, in part, on Kleiser's own experiences.

While filming *Summer Lovers* in Greece in 1982, Kleiser met Harry Stein (1954-1993), an on-location production assistant also working on the movie. The two men subsequently embarked on a relationship that lasted eight years.

Although he had been HIV-positive for several years, in 1993 Stein learned that he had developed untreatable lesions on his brain that would leave him blind and without any motor control. Instead of waiting passively for the ravages of AIDS to overtake him, Stein decided to take control and end his life with dignity.

"Harry Stein . . . took charge of his death as he did his life," Kleiser explained. "He indeed threw a goodbye party. He was able to say things to his friends and family while he was lucid."

It's My Party

stars Eric Roberts as an HIV-positive architect who assembles his family and friends for a final farewell gathering. As he explains, he wants to die "while I am still me." Gregory Harrison plays his ex-lover, a successful television director. The large ensemble cast also includes Olivia Newton-John, Marlee Matlin, Bruce Davison, Margaret Cho, Bronson Pinchot, Lee Grant, Nina Foch, and Roddy McDowall, among many others as the party guests.

The film, while admired by some critics, met with decidedly mixed reviews. The most negative critics dismissed it as "sentimental," and it failed to find the large audience it deserved. However, it has become a cult classic among many viewers who find it a deeply moving though painful portrayal of a gay man's complex relationship with his family, friends, and former lover.

Since then, Kleiser has directed the mystery-thriller *Shadow of Doubt* (1998), *Love Wrecked* (2005), a romantic comedy, and the family-friendly adventure *Red Riding Hood* (2005).

Kleiser also spent several years working with George Lucas, the noted filmmaker and Kleiser's former college roommate, to create *The Nina Foch Project*, an instructional video for aspiring actors, writers, and filmmakers.

Foch, the Dutch-born actress who starred in Hollywood productions throughout the 1940s and 1950s, taught classes on "Directing the Actor" at the USC School of Cinematic Arts for 40 years beginning in the 1960s. Her course was a requirement in the Master of Fine Arts program.

Kleiser was greatly influenced by Foch's teachings and maintained a close relationship with her until her death in 2008.

Kleiser currently resides in Los Angeles.

Bibliography

Hadleigh, Boze. *The Lavender Screen: The Gay and Lesbian Films: Their Stars, Makers, Characters and Critics*. New York: Citadel Press, 2001. 253-257.

Kallay, Bill. "Randal Kleiser: Director." *The Backlot* (April 2009). http://www.fromscripttodvd.com/grease_randal_kleiser.html

Klemm, Michael D. "Comfortably Numb." *CinemaQueer.com* (December 2009). <http://www.randalkleiser.com/magazine-articles/comfortably-numb--randal.html>

Parks, Tim. "FilmOut: Randal Kleiser Celebrates his 'Party.'" *San Diego LGBT Weekly* (August 18, 2011). <http://lgbtweekly.com/2011/08/18/randall-kleiser-celebrates-his-party/>

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.