



Lucas, Craig (b. 1951)

by John McFarland

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>



Craig Lucas.
Courtesy William Morris
Agency.

A leading contemporary American playwright, Craig Lucas integrates high-spirited, kaleidoscopic storytelling with provocative explorations of the meaning of family and love in all its varieties. With the almost-simultaneous successes of the Broadway romantic comedy *Prelude to a Kiss* and the landmark AIDS film *Longtime Companion* in 1990, he gained access to a platform for speaking out; he has continued to use that forum for discussing the role and responsibilities of gay artists in society.

Born in Atlanta, Georgia on April 30, 1951, Lucas was abandoned that very day in the back seat of a car parked at a gas station. Before he was ten months old, however, he was adopted into a Pennsylvania family; his adoptive father was an FBI agent, and he was raised in a very conservative home and community.

During the political, sexual, and creative ferment of the late 1960s and 1970s, Lucas was drawn to the political left and came to terms with his attraction to other men. To this day he contends that only after he came out could he embark on a course of emotional healing that was essential to his growth as a writer. The freedom he has achieved to create work on his own terms appears not only in plays that include gay and lesbian characters and issues (*Blue Window* and *The Dying Gaul*), but also in plays that concern characters with quite different profiles (*Reckless* and *Prelude to a Kiss*).

After he graduated from Boston University in 1973 with a bachelor's degree in theater and creative writing, his teacher and mentor poet Anne Sexton urged him to pursue his writing ambitions in New York. While he worked at various day jobs, his acting, singing, and dancing talents helped him land small parts in Broadway musicals, including *Shenandoah*, *On the Twentieth Century*, and *Sweeney Todd*.

Early Work

When Lucas was rewriting a play about a family's Thanksgiving dinner that eventually emerged as *Missing Persons* (1991), a friend showed a draft to director Norman René. That play centered on Gemma, a reclusive literary critic and the kind of person who can't keep from telling her son how his poetry fails; the wary family members and sparring friends in *Missing Persons* are typical of the mix of characters Lucas loves for his casts. René, who promised to produce the completed play, became his closest collaborator over the next fifteen years; he directed all of the early plays, as well as the films from Lucas's screenplays for some of those works.

As Lucas was working on *Missing Persons*, he and René also developed *Marry Me a Little*. In this cabaret revue of little-known Stephen Sondheim songs, a man and woman living in apartments next to each other without ever meeting sing of yearning and failure to connect. A favorite with showtune enthusiasts, the original cast album features Suzanne Henry and Lucas in a rare recording of his way with a song.

Blue Window (1984) and *Reckless* (1988) showcase Lucas's talent for fusing meditations on personal identity with exuberant, often zany, satire. *Blue Window* follows seven people (including a lesbian couple and the

probably-gay character Griever) before, during, and after a comically tense New York dinner party; its spiky collage-like structure, with songs and sidetrips into dreams and memories, injects fresh energy and surprising resonance into a comedy of Yuppie manners that is both funny and thoughtful.

The hostess Libby breaks a cap on a front tooth before her guests arrive; she goes through much of the party trying to be the perfect hostess while hiding the broken tooth from everyone. This scenario of an absurd accident and its awkward aftermath enables a mercurial actor to jump back and forth between anxiety and comedy as Libby's story of her recovery from an earlier more serious injury unfolds.

Lucas's determination to present multiple facets of his characters in a highly theatrical way is also evident in his treatment of Griever. On the one hand, he offers a private moment in which Griever delivers an over-the-top imitation of Diana Ross's response to the torrential rain at her infamous 1983 Central Park Concert, and then later shows how deeply attuned Griever is to Libby's anxiety and struggle to reconnect with others.

In *Reckless*, Lucas once again balances comic routines with heartbreak. This black comedy in the John Waters vein introduces us to Rachel, one of the world's most trusting and long-suffering women. Driven from her home on Christmas Eve and forced to leave her baby son by a husband who has ordered a hit on her, she wanders abroad, like Voltaire's *Candide*, amid horrors and catastrophes.

The play's antic spirit, with a surrealistic conjunction of TV game shows and threats to its heroine's life, keeps audiences laughing while Lucas assesses the toll that being alone and on the run takes on Rachel. The film version (1995), with Mia Farrow in a performance that downplays the spunky exuberance found in most staged versions, illuminates Lucas's statement that he wrote *Reckless* to explore his feelings about his early abandonment; in the film the deeply affecting performance of Stephen Dorff as Rachel's grown son stands out more clearly because of Farrow's interpretation.

Longtime Companion and *Prelude to a Kiss*

The pop-culture references, sassy humor, and fluid scene-movement of *Blue Window*, *Three Postcards* (a 1987 collaboration with composer Craig Carnelia about three women's uneasy but enduring friendship), and *Reckless* (not to mention Lucas's ability to rethink *Blue Window* cinematically in his screenplay for its *American Playhouse* telecast) soon attracted the attention of Hollywood producers. When they asked for film projects from Lucas, he proposed one about the impact of AIDS on a group of friends in the early 1980s. In revisiting the making of *Longtime Companion* in a 2002 article in *The Advocate*, Lucas spoke of the chilling silence that filled one conference room after another at his suggestion. He also gives full credit to Lindsay Law, producer of PBS's *American Playhouse* at the time, for determining to bring that landmark film to the screen in 1990.

In 1990 when he was putting the finishing touches on *Longtime Companion* with Norman René as director of his original screenplay, Lucas was working on another very different stage project (also with René as director). *Prelude to a Kiss* (1990) is a romantic comedy about a marriage challenged from its first moments.

At her wedding reception Rita is kissed by a mysterious stranger. As if by magic, the kiss enables the stranger's personality to move into Rita's body and vice versa. The physical Rita, inhabited by the alien spirit, and her new husband Peter then go off on a honeymoon to Jamaica; needless to say Peter is perplexed by the odd changes in the woman he married. The play's nod to the storytelling traditions of fairy tales appears when the forces of true love, goodness, faith, and persistence eventually reverse the mysterious transmigration of souls.

Before that happens, however, the Spirit of Rita resident in the stranger's body begs: "So we might as well have a good time while we're here, don't you think?" This plea can serve as a motto for more than one of

Lucas's put-upon survivors. Playing Rita, endearingly complex in her original state and comically cantankerous later when occupied by the stranger's personality, Mary-Louise Parker received wide acclaim and became a Broadway star; the play itself became Lucas's biggest Broadway success to date.

Almost simultaneously with the commercial success of *Prelude to a Kiss*, *Longtime Companion* debuted in movie theaters. In contrast to Lucas's effervescent, even fantastical, stage work up to that time, this film about a circle of friends in New York City in the 1980s is a naturalistic chronicle of the impact of the AIDS pandemic. From July 3, 1981, the day *The New York Times* first ran an article on a mysterious syndrome appearing in homosexual men, through July 19, 1989, when only three members of the work's original circle of eight characters survive, the movie portrays the way the world abruptly changed for gay men and their families and friends.

With its attention to everyday details within the circle, *Longtime Companion* reflects Lucas's own experience (he was a volunteer for Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York and lost many lovers and friends to AIDS). The film, as a result, carries the emotional power of witness testimony: it depicts the stages of the pandemic from early fear and denial, through the years of care-giving and loss, to the shell-shock and exhaustion of those who survive.

Near the end of the film the characters Willy (Campbell Scott), Alan/Fuzzy (Stephen Caffrey), and Lisa (Mary-Louise Parker) are strolling on the beach at Fire Island; their mood is subdued compared to that of the summer of 1981. Willy, the now-weary, once-wide-eyed innocent, notes that his one wish after seeing so many of his friends die is "to be there if they ever find a cure." The vision that the three friends share of what such a day would be like is the basis for one of the film's few flights of fantasy: everyone they had lost races back to the beach for a joyous reunion, and then, in an instant, the imagined celebration dissolves. As the film ends, the three friends are back in their reality of grief and loss.

The success of two such different projects in film and on stage ignited media interest in Lucas, including some that was very curious. For example, one queer critic attacked him for being "a closeted gay writer" because *Prelude to a Kiss* did not focus on gay and lesbian characters. Others took Lucas to task for *Longtime Companion*: one prominent movie reviewer dismissed its characters as devoid of interest, whereas a gay critic criticized Lucas for not using an all-gay cast.

Defending his creative rights against such criticism, Lucas has given notice that the popularity of some of his work would not "prevent (him) from writing other, perhaps even different, plays as time goes on," and that "the business of artists is to offer what they have seen and to imagine what they cannot truly know . . . I believe I can speak sympathetically towards (straight people's) hopes and fears as well as to the issues facing queer people." Following those media dust-ups, Lucas moved on to write the screenplay for *Prelude to a Kiss* (starring Meg Ryan as Rita, a performance that drew ire from many fans of the play in 1992). The experience of making a major Hollywood movie proved to be another an eye-opener for him.

Later Work

Whether in reaction to reviewers sniping in 1990 or in response to the commercial pressures he felt during production of the film of *Prelude to a Kiss*, a new, angrier playwright emerged in his next play. *The Dying Gaul* (1998) follows the journey of Robert, a screenwriter grieving after his lover's death from AIDS. The play is savage in its portrait of the film industry and the compromises demanded from artists who wander into it unprepared. If Rachel, the innocent survivor of *Reckless*, seemed only moderately tarnished by her run-ins with an absurdly harsh world, Robert is clearly damaged goods in *The Dying Gaul* and admits it.

As Lucas has written, "My lover, my best friend, my closest colleague over decades . . . and . . . several dozen friends, ex-lovers and colleagues all died rather horrible deaths in rapid succession, and I did not find myself ascending into a compassionate, giving place, but instead a significantly meaner and less generous one." Not surprisingly, his later dramatic work is informed by searing anger and grief and is set in

eerier territories than his early romantic comedies occupied.

Since 1998, Lucas has also been expanding his theatrical reach. As director and writer on musical theater pieces in various stages of development, he has collaborated with a number of composers (Adam Guettel in *The Light in the Piazza* and Jeanine Tesori in *Don Juan de Marco*, among others). He has also directed productions of classics by his theatrical idols, including August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* and Joe Orton's *Loot*. On the film front, he has written the award-winning screenplay for Alan Rudolph's *The Secret Lives of Dentists* (2002), adapted from Jane Smiley's novella *The Age of Grief*, and has directed his own screenplay of *The Dying Gaul*.

At the same time he was involved in these collaborations, Lucas was also developing a major new work for the stage. *Singing Forest* (2004) charts one family's forced march from Nazi-infested Vienna in the 1930s to celebrity-intoxicated New York City in the year 2000. While exploiting the two geographical and time settings for farcical and tragic dramatic effects, Lucas casts a cold eye on psychotherapy (Freud appears as a friend of the family in 1930s Vienna) and dramatizes how it has succeeded in some of its aspirations to enrich lives yet has fallen short in others.

Lucas's comparison of the two eras and places also throws into high relief the changes in the status of gay men. In 1930s Vienna, same-sex relationships could lead lovers to Nazi death camps; in millennial New York, Lucas seems to indicate, homosexuals are now just as likely as our heterosexual brethren to have comically complicated love lives but without fatal results.

Yet Lucas, for all his comic flair, clearly wants more than zany antics for the conflicted, struggling survivors of *Singing Forest*; and his ability to portray them with equal measures of affection, empathy, and irony is what keeps him at the forefront of contemporary American playwrights.

Bibliography

DeGaetani, John L. *A Search for a Postmodern Theater: Interviews with Contemporary Playwrights*. New York: Greenwood, 1991.

Hopkins, Billy. "Craig Lucas." *Bomb* (New York) 28 (Summer 1989): 56-59.

Lucas, Craig. "Equality in the Theatre." *Bomb* (New York) 57 (Fall 1996): 66-70.

_____. "Justifying Our Love." *The Advocate* (November 12, 2002): 87.

_____. *Prelude to a Kiss and Other Plays (Missing Persons and Three Postcards)*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1992.

_____. *Reckless and Blue Window: Two Plays*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1989.

_____. *What I Meant Was: New Plays and Selected One-Acts*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999.

Swartz, Patti Capel. "Craig Lucas." *Gay & Lesbian Literature, Volume 2*. Tom Pendergast and Sara Pendergast, eds. Detroit: St. James Press, 1998. 232-34.

About the Author

John McFarland is a Seattle-based critic, essayist, and short story writer. He is author of the award-winning picture book *The Exploding Frog and Other Fables from Aesop*. He has contributed to such anthologies as *Letters to Our Children: Lesbian and Gay Adults Speak to the New Generation*, *The Book Club Book*, *The*

Isherwood Century, and Letters to J. D. Salinger.