



O'Haver, Tommy (b. 1967)

by Linda Rapp

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Director and screenwriter Tommy O'Haver has drawn on his own experiences as a gay man in creating films and has also demonstrated his versatility by working on a variety of other cinematic projects.

Thomas C. O'Haver was born November 30, 1967 in Carmel, Indiana, a suburb of Indianapolis. The culture of the state was not particularly accepting of deviation from heterosexual norms, a fact that O'Haver would learn early on.

At around the age of five O'Haver saw Franklin J. Schaffner's *Planet of the Apes* (1968) on television and responded to its depiction of the male physique: "The image of Chuck [i.e., Charlton Heston] running through the woods naked has stayed with me forever," he stated.

"I remember that the first time I really said anything to anybody [about being gay]. I must have been 8 or 9 years old," he recalled in a 1998 interview. As a result, he was disinvited from a friend's birthday party.

O'Haver began his filmmaking career in the fourth grade. Using his family's Super-8 movie camera, his sister's Barbie doll and Barbie hot tub, and ten plastic dolls--purchased for 99 cents each--as a chorus line, he made a juvenile stop-action epic. Financing impeded the project. Lacking sufficient allowance to buy a Ken doll, he put his E. T. toy into the hot tub as Barbie's costar.

O'Haver's first cinematic endeavor was whimsical, but he subsequently faced bleaker times. For a young gay Hoosier, "there [was] nobody to identify with," he said, adding in frustration, "Indianapolis is the most conservative city in the entire United States."

Because of these feelings of isolation, he stated, "My parents thought I was a drug addict in high school, my mood swings were so bad." He even once attempted suicide after a male schoolmate initially responded positively to a sexual advance but then turned on him.

After graduating from Carmel High School in 1985, O'Haver enrolled at Indiana University, where he majored in journalism to prepare for a hoped-for career as a film critic.

In the somewhat freer atmosphere of Bloomington, O'Haver began to explore his sexuality, but he still did not come out to his parents.

O'Haver moved to Los Angeles in 1991 to work in the film industry. His first job was as a production assistant on Rachel Talaly's *Freddy's Dead: The Final Nightmare* (1991). He was subsequently employed by New Line Cinema, beginning in the mailroom and working his way up to a job as an assistant in the Home Video Publicity department.

While there, O'Haver took screenwriting classes at UCLA and began creating short features. Among them was "a five-minute letter to [his] parents . . . about [his] first high school crush on a straight guy." When he

eventually sent the work to them, it was not well received: his mother, to whom he was already out, tossed it into the trash. She then broke the news about O'Haver's sexual orientation to his father.

In 1998 O'Haver stated that his parents were "still not all the way there" in accepting his sexuality but were supportive of him and "really proud and excited" about his success.

Another of O'Haver's short films enjoyed a much better reception. *The Pitch*, about selling a screenplay to Hollywood executives, was bought by the Showtime network. It also impressed the faculty at the film school of the University of Southern California and won him acceptance into their program, from which he graduated in 1995.

During his course of study at USC, O'Haver made several short films that were shown at film festivals and drew a positive response. One of them, *Catalina*, presented at the New York Film Festival in 1994, was the story of a photographer taking pictures at a party on Santa Catalina Island who develops a crush on one of his subjects but cannot tell whether the other man is gay or straight. O'Haver developed the idea further and made it the basis for his first full-length feature, *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss* (1998).

O'Haver initially had difficulty finding financial backers, but producer David Moseley believed in the project and helped raise about \$250,000 to bring it to the screen. Another problem that O'Haver faced was casting because some agents advised their clients to avoid the gay-themed movie. "The fear still exists that once you're identified as a gay actor, it will affect the rest of your career," O'Haver stated. Sean P. Hayes, who subsequently played another gay character on the situation comedy *Will and Grace*, and Brad Rowe signed on for the leading roles.

In *Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss*, photographer Billy has hired the gorgeous Gabriel to model for a series of Polaroid pictures recreating classic love scenes from the movies but with gay men instead of heterosexual couples. Billy is smitten and hopes for a romance with Gabriel despite the fact that he keeps mentioning a girlfriend in San Francisco. When Gabriel heads to Catalina to model for a more famous photographer (played by Paul Bartel) who is also interested in him, Billy takes off in hot pursuit to try at last to win the man of his dreams.

Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss is a stylish film that combines the main action with dream sequences about Billy's hopes and anxieties about his relationship with Gabriel. The dreams, filmed in black and white, turn into scenes from Hollywood classics, with Billy and Gabriel as the romantic couples. The movie also features a trio of drag artists who function as a Greek chorus and impart their messages by lip-synching torch songs.

Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss was a hit at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998 and at several gay film festivals around the United States. Trimark subsequently acquired the picture for cinematic distribution.

Critical response to O'Haver's debut commercial film was favorable. Louis B. Parks of the *Houston Chronicle* wrote, "'Billy's Hollywood Screen Kiss' is a disarming romantic comedy that is long on charm, sharply observed, and bittersweet." He also commented that the movie "doesn't break any new ground, either as a gay film or romance, except for the fact of treating the whole subject as a non-issue"--a point that is hardly insignificant. Parks went on to note that "most of Billy's feelings and situation are universal, whatever the sexual preference."

O'Haver himself explained the film's appeal by saying, "I think the movie took off because it's cinematic, and people really don't expect that from indie films. Also, the lead character is honest, down-to-earth, and easy to relate to. I think everybody, gay or straight, has been in Billy's shoes at one time or another, and we're all subject to these strange laws of attraction, after all."

O'Haver's next directorial effort, *Get Over It* (2001), was another romantic comedy but one centered on heterosexual teenagers. The travails of lovelorn high-schoolers can often make for tedious cinema, but reviewer Bruce Westbrook noted that "Tommy O'Haver's spry sense of fun makes the movie work" and called the film "a breath of fresh air--a light-hearted musical with style for miles."

Get Over It focuses on a boy's efforts to win back his girlfriend after she has dumped him for a teen idol musician from a boy band. All three of them, plus the boy's female friend and true soulmate, take part in the production of *A Midsummer's Night's Rockin' Eve*, an update of Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream*, by the high school's "sexually ambiguous drama teacher" (played by Martin Short). The film features music by Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman, including a disco number entitled "It's Fun to Be a Fairy."

O'Haver stated that the movie reflected "my sense of high camp," adding, "*Get Over It* is not a gay film, but in an effort to give the teen-comedy genre a face-lift, we've twisted the clichés a bit."

O'Haver subsequently directed a children's film, *Ella Enchanted* (2004), a screen adaptation of Gail Carson Levine's book of the same name (1997) retelling the Cinderella tale. At Ella's birth, her fairy godmother gives her the gift of obedience, a trait exploited by her wicked stepsisters to torment her. A handsome prince and a happy ending arrive in due course, however.

Critic Michael Booth praised the film for "the unshakable utility of its message" to young girls: "The demands of obedience should not be used to chain their souls," a lesson that may also resonate with gay and lesbian children who need to learn to value themselves for who they are.

O'Haver made a complete departure from his previous comedic work with *An American Crime* (2007), which he co-wrote with Irene Turner. The film tells the true story of the horrific murder of 16-year-old Sylvia Likens at the hands of Gertrude Baniszewski, who was supposed to be her caretaker, in Indianapolis in 1965. Baniszewski not only inflicted physical torture upon Likens in the guise of discipline but, in a scenario reminiscent of William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1955), also had her own children and others from the neighborhood participate in the abuse.

Of the film project O'Haver said, "As a kid growing up in Indianapolis, this was a case that was always a dark part of the town's history. I am deeply grateful that First Look and Killer Films share my passion to tell this story."

Upon its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival, *An American Crime* received mixed reviews. Todd McCarthy of *Variety* felt that it lacked "a deeply felt emotional or spiritual catharsis," but Ruthe Stein of the *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote that the "strong stuff" of the horrific true crime story was "sensitively handled" in O'Haver's film.

O'Haver will return to gay-themed film with *Breakfast with Tiffany*. He and Turner are writing the script based upon Edwin James Wintle's memoir of the same name (2005), relating his experiences as a gay man who suddenly becomes the guardian of his 13-year-old niece. The film is expected to be released in 2008.

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