



Perkins, Anthony (1932-1992)

by Tina Gianoulis

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2007 glbtq, Inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

The life and career of actor Anthony Perkins seems almost like a movie script from the times in which he lived. One of the dark, vulnerable anti-heroes who gained popularity during Hollywood's "post-golden" era, Perkins began his career as a teen heartthrob and ended it unable to escape the role of villain.

In his personal life, he often seemed as tortured as the troubled characters he played on film, hiding--and perhaps despising--his true nature while desperately seeking happiness and "normality."

Perkins was born on April 4, 1932 in New York City, the only child of actor Osgood Perkins and Janet Esseltyn Rane. His father died when he was only five, and Perkins was reared by his strong-willed and possibly abusive mother.

He followed his father into the theater, joining Actors Equity at the age of fifteen and working backstage until he got his first acting roles in summer stock productions of popular plays like *Junior Miss* and *My Sister Eileen*. He continued to hone his acting skills while attending Rollins College in Florida, performing in such classics as *Harvey* and *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Perkins was an unhappy young man, and the theater provided escape from his loneliness and depression. "There was nothing about me I wanted to be," he told Mark Goodman in a *People Weekly* interview. "But I felt happy being somebody else."

During his late teens, Perkins went to Hollywood and landed his first film role in the 1953 George Cukor production, *The Actress*, in which he appeared with Spencer Tracy. He returned to New York to take a leading role on Broadway, replacing John Kerr as Tom Lee in Robert Anderson's *Tea and Sympathy*. For a young man who must already have been aware of but frightened by his attraction to other men, the role of a sexually ambivalent student undoubtedly struck a painfully familiar chord.

His success on Broadway led to a flood of roles on television shows like *The Fugitive*, *Studio One*, and *General Electric Theater*.

In 1956, Perkins returned to Hollywood to take the star-making role of Josh Birdwell, a Quaker teenager, in the William Wyler film *Friendly Persuasion*. Not only were the movie and its director nominated for Academy Awards, but Perkins also earned a nomination as Best Supporting Actor. In addition, Perkins won a Golden Globe Award as Most Promising Newcomer. He was on his way to becoming a teen idol and a major star.

Through the rest of the 1950s, Perkins appeared in two or three movies a year, including Robert Mulligan's *Fear Strikes Out* (1957), Anthony Mann's *The Tin Star* (1957), Delbert Mann's *Desire under the Elms* (1958), John Michael Hayes' *The Matchmaker* (1958), Mel Ferrer's *Green Mansions* (1959), and Stanley Kramer's *On the Beach* (1959). In these films, Perkins typically played an awkward, sometimes alienated, and always brooding young man. He was touted as an heir to the mantle of James Dean.

At the same time he pursued a busy film career, Perkins also maintained an acting career on the stage. He appeared in several Broadway productions during the 1950s and 1960s, earning a Tony Award nomination for *Look Homeward, Angel* (1958), Ketti Frings' play based on Thomas Wolfe's novel, and excellent reviews for his appearance in *Greenwillow* (1960), the Frank Loesser musical.

During the late 1950s and early 1960s, gay men and lesbians in Hollywood were not only made invisible but also demonized as predatory monsters. Mysterious and sensitive young men like Perkins kept their homosexuality a closely guarded secret, and the movie studios helped to deflect suspicion by arranging dates with pretty young actresses, thereby providing cover for actors they knew had no interest in women.

Perkins went out with starlets for the benefit of the Hollywood press, but his real romantic relationships were with men, including Tab Hunter and other actors. He later reportedly had affairs with such celebrities as Stephen Sondheim and Rudolf Nureyev, as well as a six-year relationship with dancer-choreographer Grover Dale.

At the same time that he was engaging in homosexual relationships, however, Perkins was also in psychoanalysis, attempting to eradicate his homosexual desire and to develop a heterosexual response.

In 1960, the tall, slender, handsome Perkins appeared as a hunky basketball player in Joshua Logan's *Tall Story* opposite film newcomer Jane Fonda, in a role designed to capitalize on his appeal as a teen heartthrob and to establish him as a romantic leading man.

But 1960 was also the year in which he was offered the role that would change his career forever, transforming him into a character actor of the first order, but also severely limiting his range: director Alfred Hitchcock, unable to secure Dean Stockwell for the part, cast him as the creepy murderer Norman Bates in the film *Psycho*.

The same nervous shyness that had made Perkins engaging as a misunderstood teenager in earlier roles made him disturbingly believable as a mentally unbalanced slasher in Hitchcock's thriller. Perkins delivered a consummate performance, all tics and twitches, so memorable as to forever alter the American public's perception of him.

Indeed, immediately after the success of *Psycho*, Perkins found it difficult to get other roles, since studio heads believed that American audiences would continue to view him as Norman Bates. To continue his career, he was forced to go to Europe, where less impressionable audiences appreciated his performances in many French films, including Anatole Litvak's *Goodbye Again* with Ingrid Bergman in 1961 (for which Perkins won a Best Actor Award at the Cannes Film Festival) and Jules Dassin's *Phaedra* with Melina Mercouri in 1962. He received critical plaudits for his performance as Joseph K. in Orson Welles' film of Kafka's *The Trial* (1962).

When he returned to the U.S. during the late 1960s, Perkins still found himself typecast in the horror genre. This time, he sought to capitalize on the identification and made a series of thrillers, including Noel Black's *Pretty Poison* (1968) with Tuesday Weld and several *Psycho* sequels, one of which he directed himself.

Although for the rest of his career Perkins would be identified in the public imagination with Norman Bates, he did perform in other roles, including a striking cameo in Sidney Lumet's *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974). He even camped it up as a gay photographer in Berry Gordy's vehicle for Diana Ross, *Mahogany* (1975). He also directed and starred in the off-Broadway production of Bruce Jay Friedman's *Steambath* (1970).

With Stephen Sondheim, he wrote the screenplay for the Herbert Ross film *The Last of Sheila* (1973), for which he and Sondheim received an Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America for Best Motion Picture Screenplay.

In 1972, at the age of 39, while filming John Huston's *The Life and Times of Judge Roy Bean*, in which he had a small part, he had what is reported to be his first sexual experience with a woman, an affair with co-star Victoria Principal.

In 1973, determined to hide, if not eradicate, his homosexuality and to achieve what he thought of as a "normal" family life, Perkins married Berry Berenson, a photographer and actress sixteen years his junior, whom he met at a cast party for Frank Perry's *Play It As It Lays* (1972), in which he appeared opposite Tuesday Weld. Berenson, the sister of actress Marisa Berenson, had fallen in love with Perkins as a pre-teen watching his early films. She actively pursued a relationship with him once they met as adults.

Following their marriage, the couple soon had two sons, Elvis and Osgood, and appeared to live happily together.

Although the marriage was greeted with considerable skepticism by many of Perkins' gay friends, such as Don Bachardy and Christopher Isherwood, it was seen by others as the happy culmination of the actor's long and torturous quest to "cure" his homosexuality.

Although Perkins might have become the poster boy for the "ex-gay" movement, there was one problem with this possible scenario. Despite his heterosexual marriage, and his apparent ability to perform heterosexually, he continued to have sex with men. For example, author and publisher Felice Picano revealed that he had a sexual encounter with Perkins during his marriage. Indeed, Perkins' biographer, Charles Winecoff, through interviews with employees of sex shops, hotel bell boys, and street hustlers, details at considerable length the actor's "double life" after his marriage.

During the last phase of his career, Perkins was a staple in low-budget movies and in movies made for television. Although he occasionally appeared in small parts in major motion pictures, and kept active in theater, his public persona became more and more intertwined with that of Norman Bates. He even served as host of the short-lived television horror anthology series, *Chillers* (1990).

In 1990, Perkins was as surprised as anyone to see a headline in the *National Enquirer* proclaiming, "Psycho Star Has AIDS Virus." Stunned, he quickly had himself tested and discovered that he was indeed HIV-positive. (Earlier in 1990, Perkins had given a blood sample as part of a treatment for a palsy on the side of his face. The *National Enquirer* illegally obtained the sample and had it tested for the AIDS virus.)

Fearing that revelation of his diagnosis might prevent him from working again, he kept the information private. He also never acknowledged his homosexuality, but he did spend the last two years of his life working to support others with the disease in organizations like Project Angel Food, which supplied meals for people with AIDS.

Perkins died on September 12, 1992. In his final statement, released after his death and quoted in the September 28, 1992 *People Weekly*, he said, "There are many who believe this disease is God's vengeance. But I believe it was sent to teach people how to love and understand and have compassion for each other. I have learned more about love, selflessness and human understanding from the people I have met in this great adventure in the world of AIDS than I ever did in the cutthroat, competitive world in which I spent my life."

Shortly before his death, Perkins recorded an epilogue for Roger Spottiswoode's television film version of Randy Shilts's history of the early years of the AIDS epidemic, *And the Band Played On* (1993).

Berry Berenson Perkins died on September 11, 2001. She was a passenger on one of the planes hijacked in the attack on New York City's World Trade Center. Anthony Perkins' son Osgood, also an actor, made his film debut as the young Norman Bates in the 1986 film *Psycho III* and has since appeared in several films; his son Elvis is a musician.

Bibliography

Fairbanks, Brian W. "Actor Profile: Anthony Perkins." *Brian W. Fairbanks, Writer*. <http://www.angelfire.com/oh2/writer/anthonyperkins.html>

Goodman, Mark. "One Final Mystery." *People Weekly* 38.13 (September 28, 1992): 38-44.

Hunter, Tab, with Eddie Muller. *Tab Hunter Confidential: The Making of a Movie Star*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Algonquin Books, 2005.

"In His Father's Footsteps: Oz Perkins." *People Weekly* 56.7 (August 13, 2001): 88.

Patterson, Troy. "Tony Perkins Dies." *Entertainment Weekly* No. 449 (September 11, 1998): 144.

Picano, Felice. "Tab Talks." *The Advocate* (October 11, 2005): 70-77.

Thomson, David. "Anthony Perkins, 1932-92: 'Let Them See What Kind of Person I Am.'" *Film Comment* 28.6 (November-December 1992): 78-80.

Warnor, Andy. "Berry & Tony: A Love Story." *Interview* 31.11 (November 2001): 147-50.

Winecoff, Charles. *Split Image: The Life of Anthony Perkins*. New York: Dutton, 1996.

About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.