



Roos, Don (b. 1955)

by Linda Rapp

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Screenwriter and director Don Roos has won plaudits for films that feature gay and lesbian characters and that also give strong roles to women.

One of five children in a Catholic family, Don Roos was born in New York City on April 14, 1955 and grew up in the upper part of the state. His ethnic heritage is half German and half Irish. "I only really identify with the Irish part," he stated in a 1997 interview. "If you have any Irish blood, especially if you're a writer, that's what you want to claim." His connection to the old sod is close since his maternal grandfather was born in Ireland and he still has many relatives there.

Roos went to Dublin in 1975 to enroll at the School for Irish Studies. The following year one of his great-aunts, a postmistress at Grangebellow, near Drogheda, died, and he took over her duties. "I ran the little post office for a year," he told a reporter for the *Irish Times*, and "gave out the pensions and the children's allowances."

Roos subsequently returned to the United States and followed an older brother in enrolling at the University of Notre Dame, where he majored in screenwriting and graduated with honors.

He moved to southern California and immediately found work writing for television. His first job was as an assistant to playwright Mart Crowley, who was then executive producer of the series *Hart to Hart*. Roos went on to write for several television series, including *Casebusters* and *The Colbys*, but he aspired to make pictures for the big screen.

Roos achieved that goal with *Love Field* (1992, directed by Jonathan Kaplan), his story of two airplane passengers, a white woman on her way to the funeral of slain president John Kennedy in November 1963 and a black man taking his daughter with him as he runs from the law.

The film had only limited release since the studio went bankrupt, but the female lead, Michelle Pfeiffer, won an Oscar nomination for her performance, and Roos attracted considerable favorable attention for his work.

Roos wrote the screenplay for another 1992 release, *Single White Female*, based on John Lutz's novel *SWF Seeks Same* (1990) and directed by Barbette Schroeder. The film explores the relationship between Allison Jones (played by Bridget Fonda) and Hedra Carlson (played by Jennifer Jason Leigh), who responds to an ad for a roommate placed by Jones after she breaks up with her boyfriend. Carlson becomes obsessed with Jones, "beginning to emulate her with scary adoration" in the words of reviewer Vincent Canby.

Canby praised the writing of the film, calling it "smooth, entertaining, and believably sophisticated" and adding that "it has far more sound psychological underpinnings than other movies of its type."

Roos next wrote *Boys on the Side* (1995, directed by Herbert Ross), which tells the story of three very

different women sharing a car trip out of practical necessity as they all move from the eastern United States to Arizona. Whoopi Goldberg played Jane, an out lesbian, whom reviewer Janet Maslin described as "the quintessential outsider as the film begins" but who nevertheless finds a sense of fellowship with her unlikely traveling companions, the demure Robin (played by Mary-Louise Parker) and glamorous, gleeful airhead Holly (played by Drew Barrymore). "By the time it gets to Tucson," wrote Maslin, "*Boys on the Side* has warmly bonded its main characters and blurred lines of race and gender with surprising ease."

Although advertised as "a giddy romp," wrote Maslin, "*Boys on the Side* actually proves to be a wistful romance, a sardonic comedy, a 'Thelma, Edna, and Louise' tale of sisterly solidarity, and finally a sad, wrenching story It's no small irony that this, one of the strongest Hollywood movies to deal with AIDS thus far, depicts the illness in terms of a straight white woman" when Robin is diagnosed as HIV-positive and must come to terms with the terrifying reality of her situation.

Her suitor (played by James Remar) longs for the time before AIDS had to be a consideration--"I just want things to be the way they used to be!"--a wish, stated Maslin, that "*Boys on the Side* understands . . . while also recognizing that the world will never be the same."

Roos wrote the screenplay for a remake of *Diabolique* (1996, directed by Jeremiah S. Chechik), another film that provided strong roles for women. Despite the star power of Sharon Stone, Isabelle Adjani, and Kathy Bates, however, the film was not a commercial success.

Roos next both scripted and directed *The Opposite of Sex* (1998), an independent film that Maslin described as a "busily plotted, nicely unpredictable sex comedy with a sarcastic edge."

The story sees sixteen-year-old Dedee (played by Christina Ricci) leave her hometown of Creve Coeur (French for "heartbreak," although Dedee offers a rather more colorful translation), Louisiana and turn up on the doorstep of the tidy Indiana home of her 35-year-old gay half-brother (played by Martin Donovan), a sedate high school English teacher. She soon seduces and becomes pregnant by Bill's boyfriend, Matt (played by Ivan Sergei), and takes to the road again. Bill heads out in pursuit, accompanied by the acerbic Lucia (played by Lisa Kudrow), the sister of his previous partner, who died of AIDS.

Maslin praised Roos for his writing and directing skills as he "guides his lonely, smart-talking characters into relationships none ever thought possible," further noting that "the film's resolution gracefully repudiates all its poisonous talk, especially the stream of small-minded slurs about gay life that come from Dedee. Essentially generous, *The Opposite of Sex* winds up showing rotten little Dedee how little sense there is in stereotypes, and how varied and surprising love can be."

When Roos was initially trying to sell the script of *The Opposite of Sex*, he met with a lack of enthusiasm from potential backers, who worried that there might not be an audience for the film. Roos believed that it would appeal to "people who like sex, people who don't, people who understand about love, people who don't," noting wryly, "That's pretty wide really. But nobody really wanted to do the movie."

The Opposite of Sex did indeed find an appreciative audience. It was nominated for the Grand Special Prize at the Deauville (France) Film Festival and as Best Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen by the Writers Guild of America, and won the Literary Award of the PEN Center USA West in the screenplay category as well as two Independent Spirit Awards, one for Best First Feature and the other for Best Screenplay.

In a 1999 interview in *The Advocate*, Roos stated that prior to scripting *Boys on the Side* and *The Opposite of Sex*, "as a Hollywood screenwriter, I was used to disguising my gay characters as heterosexuals" because of homophobia in the film establishment. His use of an interracial attraction in *Love Field*, for example, was a way of talking about a love that dare not speak its name. Roos explained that he used women to

stand in for gay men dealing with emotional conflict because "men are still stuck in that ridiculous '50s attitude. They're never allowed to play real fear or any kind of weakness. Women get to play all those feelings."

Roos's next film was *Bounce* (2000), a heterosexual love story. Because of the success of *The Opposite of Sex*, he did not have to deal with reluctant financial backers, but instead had a 35-million-dollar budget for the movie, which starred Ben Affleck and Gwyneth Paltrow.

With the big budget came unwelcome restrictions, however. Roos described his initial version of the film as "an uneasy picture," but after it was shown to a test audience in New Jersey, "they went and made it more middle class." Roos was very disappointed with the result, saying that he had "lost his voice" in the production because of the changes demanded by the producers.

"I can't work in a system where my job is not to offend people," he stated. "The trick is to make a film for so little money nobody cares."

The following year Roos served as the executive producer of *All Over the Guy* (2001, directed by Julie Davis), a comedy about four friends--a gay couple and a straight one--on an often bumpy road to romance. The assignment gave him the opportunity to work with his life partner since the mid-1980s, writer and actor Dan Bucatinsky.

Bucatinsky revised and expanded the script of his earlier two-person stage play featuring only a heterosexual pair because he felt that that story was too similar to "every other romantic comedy." Bucatinsky, who also starred in the film, hoped that the story of the characters might become a television situation comedy, but the ABC network, after commissioning a pilot episode, did not pick up the show.

Roos wrote and directed the independently produced *Happy Endings* (2005), an ensemble piece set in Los Angeles. Roos deftly weaves together three stories involving ten characters who appear to be comfortably situated but who all experience emotional turmoil. The complicated lives of the group of people include instances of incest, blackmail, and a woman's seduction of both a wealthy man and his gay son.

"I tend to create these really flawed human beings," stated Roos. "They are easy to judge, but I end up forgiving them and loving them."

Indeed, wrote reviewer David Carr, "everyone in the film careens from dispossession to redemption in the space of 128 minutes."

Along the way, a woman must wonder anew what became of the baby she gave up when she was a teenager, and a gay man suspects that his partner was the sperm donor who is the biological father of a lesbian couple's young son. Through the reflections on relationships by these and other characters, in *Happy Endings*, as in his other films, wrote Alissa Quart of *Film Comment*, Roos "let[s] us know that our best hope lies in the families we make, as opposed to the ones we're born into."

Roos's latest film is a distinct departure from his previous work: with Scott Frank, he wrote the screenplay for a film adaptation of John Grogan's best-seller *Marley and Me* (2005), the story of a rambunctious and slightly neurotic Labrador retriever puppy with a talent for creating havoc who becomes, through his loving nature and loyalty, a cherished part of the Grogan family. The film, directed by David Frankel, and starring Jennifer Aniston and Owen Wilson, immediately shot to top of the box office list upon its release in December of 2008.

Roos appeared on-screen in Lisa Ades and Lesli Klainberg's *Fabulous!: The Story of Queer Cinema* (2006), a

documentary chronicling gay and lesbian characters and themes in films from the late 1940s through the early years of the twenty-first century.

In a 2005 panel discussion Roos opined that although there are more gay characters than ever on both the big and small screens, general audiences are not entirely comfortable accepting them as romantic figures. He further stated that he believed that it was still too risky for a lead male actor to come out as gay because "there's a very intimate relationship that the audience has with that face on the screen Until homosexuality is less disturbing to the population at large, it's distracting. The straight audience can't jump on board enough to suspend their disbelief The fear, the bigotry, runs very, very deep."

As for the future, he predicted that gay lead actors "will come out when America deserves them to come out. We can't just expect them to just take this incredible leap of faith, to not to be able to do the one thing that they love for the rest of their life because of the bigotry that's out there."

On the other hand, he stated categorically, "I think all writers should come out. We're not in front of the camera."

In Hollywood, Roos has worked not only behind the camera, but also behind the scene, as a "script doctor," called in to rescue many a foundering project. He refuses to reveal which films he has salvaged--although his contributions are an open secret in the industry--citing his gratitude to generous others who helped him early in his career.

Roos has appeared at numerous glbtq film festivals, including three at his alma mater, Notre Dame, but he severed that connection after the 2006 event, prior to which the school's president, the Reverend John Jenkins, had condemned the name of the Queer Film Festival as one that would "celebrate and promote homosexual activity" in contravention of Catholic doctrine.

"I will never come back to Notre Dame again--ever," declared Roos. "When I come here, all I feel is hate. They don't want me here. They don't want me to have my daughter [in the same house] with my boyfriend. They think I will burn in hell. Would Anne Frank go back to Bergen-Belsen?"

Adopting a child in 2005 was a source of great joy for Roos and Bucatinsky. Roos supports a woman's right to choose abortion but was glad to find a woman who not only decided to carry through her pregnancy but also chose a gay couple as the adoptive parents for the child, who was born in Wisconsin. Roos and Bucatinsky were able to file an amended birth certificate in California, with both of their names listed as parents.

In speaking of his goals in a 1999 interview in *The Advocate*, Roos said, "It's about visibility above all, and telling people there's more to life. Even films like *In & Out* and *The Birdcage* at least show we exist. And that's very different from when I was growing up."

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