



Del Shores in 2007.
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Rosemary Alexander.
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Shores, Del (b. 1957)

by Linda Rapp

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Del Shores has used playwriting as a means to explore the intersection of Southern culture and glbtq culture with both empathy and humor. As a screenwriter, he has worked on numerous television series and also adapted several of his plays as feature films. In addition, he has been active in championing equal rights, particularly standing against California Proposition 8, which repealed marriage equality in 2008.

Delford Lynn Shores comes from a devout Southern Baptist family. His father, William Shores, was a minister in the church, as is his brother. Shores was born December 3, 1957 in Winters, Texas, the town that would be the model for the setting of most of his plays.

As a young man, his goal was to become an actor, and so he moved to Los Angeles in 1980. True to his roots, he quickly became a member and a Sunday school teacher at the First Baptist Church of Beverly Hills, a somewhat misnamed house of worship that is just across the city line in the gay enclave of West Hollywood.

The minister at First Baptist eventually questioned him about his sexual orientation, but Shores, who had felt homosexual yearnings but had been taught that being gay was a choice--and a wrong one--assured him that, as he truly believed at the time, he was straight.

Shores found some work as an actor but also began exploring writing. His first play, *Cheatin'*, is a comedic—and very heterosexual—romp set in the fictional town of Lowake, Texas.

When *Cheatin'* had its first production in North Hollywood in 1984, among the actors was Newell Alexander. Shores quickly formed a bond with Alexander, his wife, Rosemary, and their daughter, Kelley, because the family came from the same Texas Southern Baptist tradition as he.

Kelley Alexander was the stage manager for the initial production of *Cheatin'*, but neither she nor her parents had a role in the subsequent run of the play in Kansas City, in which Shores appeared on stage; nevertheless, she eventually got on a plane for Missouri. She and Shores, who had previously contemplated marriage, made a quick decision to proceed with the nuptials and were married one week later with the Reverend William Shores officiating.

Openly gay actor Leslie Jordan, then a member of the cast of *Cheatin'* and who would appear in productions of several of Shores' other works, stated that he served as "best man, bridesmaid, ring bearer and flower girl" at the ceremony, a description clearly to be taken with a grain of salt, although it does suggest that this marriage was not getting off to a typical Southern Baptist start.

The couple settled into a Southern California-Southern Baptist lifestyle, both of them teaching Sunday school while they pursued their careers in the entertainment industry. They eventually had two daughters.

Cheatin' had been well received, but Shores' *Daddy's Dyin' . . . Who's Got the Will?*, first performed in 1987, brought him even greater success and accolades, including awards from *LA Weekly* for Best Writing and Best

Production. Shores wrote the screenplay and served as executive producer for the film adaptation (1990, directed by Jack Fisk).

In his second play—set, like his first, in Lowake—Shores created a quirky family gathered to attend the final days of the dying—and fairly wealthy—patriarch and also to find his will, the terms of which are unknown. Daddy cannot help in the latter quest because he does not remember what he did with the document.

Karen Knutson of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* praised Shores for his story-telling and his vivid characters, writing, "Daddy shows a family at its worst with jealousies, childhood grudges never forgotten, greed, backbiting, and arguments over nothing transforming otherwise unexceptional people into extraordinary characters. But beneath the tempestuous carryings-on there's a solid core of love in the Turnover family, and that's what makes this film so endearingly believable. . . . The characters teeter on the edge of being caricatures but never fall into the abyss, remaining fresh and unpredictable. And Shores' screenplay wisely leaves several matters unresolved; the ending, while not quite happy, is hopeful."

Shores completed his Lowake trilogy with *Daughters of the Lone Star State* in 1992. The play, which features an all-woman cast, centers on the members of a ladies' social club who must confront their own long-held beliefs about societal norms when African-American women—different from the traditional core group—turn up at a recruitment meeting.

Tom Jacobs of *Daily Variety* described the play as "sort of a cross between 'Steel Magnolias' and a meeting of the Ku Klux Klan's Ladies' Auxiliary . . . [a] look at the racial and social tensions so prevalent in modern-day America," but Shores was attempting to address another question as well.

"There's a real white/black dynamic in this play," he told Kathleen O'Steen of *Daily Variety*, "but the play is not just about prejudice. It also has to do with socio-economic divisions of people. This women's club's motto, after all, is the 'privileged helping the underprivileged.' So in order to even be a member, you had to be privileged."

The question of privileged classes would take on special significance in Shores' later life and work.

Shores' career took a new turn in 1995, when he became a producer on the television comedy series *Ned and Stacey* and also wrote the script for three episodes.

The same year there was a much more dramatic change in Shores' personal life. He began a friendship with another man by e-mail, and the relationship soon became closer, progressing to telephone calls and then romantic encounters.

Shores at first denied his sexuality both in his own mind and to his wife, who opined that his comments about his new pen-pal suggested a homosexual attraction. When Shores left his computer turned on and his wife read the correspondence between the two men, she was no longer in any doubt.

Shores was initially hopeful of somehow saving their marriage but soon recognized that that was not to be. He and his wife broke the news of their impending divorce and the reason for it to their families.

The Alexanders were supportive and continued to regard Shores with affection. Shores' mother took the news without great surprise since she had long suspected the truth. His father, Shores told Don Shirley of the *Los Angeles Times*, was "very loving" but not ready to discuss the situation.

Shores moved on with his work in television, serving as co-producer of the show *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* (1996), to

which he also contributed as a writer. In addition, he started writing a new play, *Sordid Lives*, which was first produced in 1998 and would eventually be adapted as both a film and a television series.

Like Shores' previous works, *Sordid Lives* is set in a small Texas town where there is no shortage of heterosexual shenanigans. He also introduced gay characters, however, including one based on his own experience of coming out to his conservative mother.

Shores took this step with some trepidation. "When I wrote the play, I thought this could be career suicide for me," he told Brian Edan of *Hollywoodfyi*, but he was eventually glad to have taken the risk because "*Sordid Lives* opened up my life creatively and personally."

Far from ending Shores' career, *Sordid Lives* enhanced it, running for thirteen months in Los Angeles and garnering numerous local theater awards.

Shores adapted his script into a screenplay and directed the cinematic version (2001). The cast included Beau Bridges, Delta Burke, Olivia Newton-John, and both of Shores' former parents-in-law.

Leslie Jordan portrayed Earl "Brother Boy" Ingram, whose otherwise feuding sisters are united in their determination to spring him from the mental institution to which he has been confined for being homosexual rather than for the more troubling fact that he believes himself to be country singer Tammy Wynette.

Sordid Lives was well received at film festivals, winning many awards. As a low-budget, independent film, it had only a limited general release but it became a cult hit with glbtq audiences. In the Camelot Theatre in Pasadena, California, it was on the bill and well attended four times a day for an astonishing 96 weeks.

Shores returned to producing and writing for television with the comedy series *Dharma and Greg* (2001-2002) and also debuted a new play, *Southern Baptist Sissies* (2001), which explores the reactions of four friends who grew up singing in the church choir together and who must, as young men, confront the clash between the notions of faith, family, and sexuality instilled in them during their youth and the reality of their true identity as gay men and their place within all those relationships.

The play, the cast of which included both Rosemary and Newell Alexander and Leslie Jordan, ran for nine months—well beyond the original contract—in Los Angeles and received many awards.

Shores followed that up with another success, *The Trials and Tribulations of a Trailer Trash Housewife* (2003), the story of a woman physically and psychologically abused by her husband. The dark theme was a departure for Shores, but the play does include some of his characteristic humor as Willi, the housewife of the title, struggles to cope with the horrors of her life. The play, originally staged in Los Angeles, brought awards to both Shores and the cast members.

Shores was delighted by the opportunity to work as a writer and producer on the cable series *Queer As Folk* (2003-2005). He told Edan, "It's a wonderful thing to be on a show like *Queer As Folk* because there's not a lot of censorship at all, and I was able to continue my journey."

Shores was taking that journey in the company of actor Jason Dottley. After two years together, the couple became domestic partners in October 2003 and celebrated their union with a ceremony that they considered their wedding although they could not marry in California at the time.

Shores brought *Sordid Lives* to the small screen in 2008 with the LOGO network production *Sordid Lives: The Series*, for which he served as writer, director, and executive producer. A number of cast members from

the film, including Jordan, Newton-John, Beth Grant, and the Alexanders, reprised their roles. Dottley and veteran character actor Rue McClanahan were among the new players. The show immediately became the network's biggest hit.

Three months after the debut of the series, on October 26, Shores and Dottley had the real wedding for which they had been longing. Almost immediately, however, they saw with horror that polls showed that California Proposition 8 might pass in the rapidly approaching election.

Together with Shores' daughters, the couple marched in demonstrations and spoke out for marriage equality, including posting youtube videos. All were devastated when the pernicious measure passed and same-sex couples had the right to marry taken away. Shores resolved to become more vocal and visible in working for glbtq rights.

Shores soon saw a professional setback as well. Both he and the LOGO network were eager to produce a new season of the extremely popular *Sordid Lives: The Series*, but the production company, Once Upon a Time Films, which had not even paid Shores, the cast, and the crew residuals for the first season, could not possibly finance a second. Shores attempted to buy back the rights but was unable to do so.

Without the income that he had expected to receive from the production company, Shores lost his house to foreclosure. At the suggestion of his husband, who was about to begin a tour to promote a record, he took to the road with a one-man show, *Del Shores: My Sordid Life*. The experience—especially the warm response from the fans that he met—revitalized him, and the project helped him get back on his feet financially.

Shores' most recent play is *Yellow* (2010). Set in Vicksburg, Mississippi, *Yellow* once again deals with family dynamics, but this time the family seems to be the American ideal—parents with rewarding careers, and their two bright teen-agers, a son who excels at sports and a daughter who is the star of the high school drama club. Their comfortable existence and relationships are shaken when the son contracts a potentially fatal form of jaundice.

While facing the possible loss of their own son, the family takes in another boy, the daughter's Broadway musical-loving best friend Kendall, whose Bible-thumping mother cannot accept what she perceives as sinful tendencies in her son. Bob Verini of *Variety* observed that "Shores typically dramatizes the clash between fundamentalism and flamboyance, but by putting them in the same family, he achieves blazing dramatic effects."

Of the Kendall character Verini wrote, "It's not easy to play a holy fool type, utterly without vanity, devoted only to making things better for those he loves. [Under Shores' direction,] in [actor Matthew Scott] Montgomery's hands, Kendall stands at the play's center while remaining utterly real."

Impressed by *Yellow* as well as the rest of Shores' oeuvre, he concluded, "This idiosyncratic playwright clearly has even more surprises up his sleeve."

Shores' legions of fans await these, perhaps none more eagerly than the glbtq members of his audience. In interviews, Shores has repeatedly mentioned getting messages from people who found affirmation in his work.

Writing in the *Huffington Post*, Shores cited the example of a 44-year-old Oklahoma native who discovered the strength to go home and come out to his Southern Baptist family after seeing the play *Sordid Lives*. "He felt that if I could share my story with so much humor, that exposing this part of himself to his family wouldn't be so bad," stated Shores, recalling the man's words to him: "Your play changed my life. . . . The laughter will heal so many people . . . like it healed me and my family."
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In November 2011 Shores announced through a posting on Facebook that he and Dottle were divorcing.

In an April 2012 op-ed piece in *The Advocate* Shores described the divorce as "pretty painful," but he resolved to remain optimistic and offered encouragement to others going through difficult situations, writing, "Know this, my friends, it is very possible that if you are going through a hard time right now, a time where you feel lost and defeated, that you may just look back one day and realize that that dark period is your blessing. It happened to me once and I'm counting on it--again."

Shores has returned to the stage, starring in *Del Shores: My Sordid Life* and the stand-up show *Del Shores: Sordid Confessions*.

With his gift for touching people and his strong commitment to the cause of equality, Shores has a singular but important voice to raise for glbtq rights.

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