



Vachon, Christine (b. 1962)

by Teresa Theophano

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Christine Vachon.
Courtesy Office of
Christine Vachon.

Heralded as the most important producer in the history of queer cinema, Christine Vachon has become a driving force in independent film. Her dedication to making movies that matter--ones that broach contentious topics and require serious risk-taking--has brought her an unprecedented level of success in the independent film world.

Along with her own accomplishments, she has also helped to bring talented filmmakers such as Kimberly Peirce, Tom Kalin, Mary Harron, and Todd Haynes into the public eye.

Vachon, born in Manhattan in 1962, developed a passion for the movies in early childhood; her parents contributed to her fascination by encouraging her to watch intelligent, mature films. While at Brown University, however, the only way for her to study film was to enroll in the semiotics department. She became immersed in theory rather than practice.

After graduation, she decided against going to film school. Instead, she took a series of jobs upon her return to New York City in 1983 in hopes of learning each step of making independent films.

Working as an assistant on the 1986 film *Parting Glances*, a matter-of-fact look at gay life in New York directed by Bill Sherwood, Vachon decided that the do-it-yourself attitude of the filmmakers would be a major influence on her own work.

With director Todd Haynes and another friend, Barry Ellsworth, Vachon formed her first filmmaking company, Apparatus Films, in 1987. The company helped to lay the foundation for her current work by setting out to make films that were cutting-edge but genuinely entertaining.

At Apparatus Vachon produced seven shorts in five years. These films dealt with African-American life, women's issues, and gay themes. The most notorious of these was the first, Haynes' *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987), which uses Barbie dolls to tell the tragic story of the anorexic pop singer.

Vachon also produced two highly stylized features, Haynes's *Poison* (1991) and Tom Kalin's *Swoon* (1992). *Poison*, which won a prize at the Sundance festival, sparked controversy because of its graphic sex scenes and because it received partial funding from the National Endowment for the Arts.

But the controversy ultimately helped draw attention to the film and resulted in an unprecedented \$50,000 opening weekend at the Angelika Film Center in New York City. *Poison*, along with Tom Kalin's *Swoon* (1992), helped gain Vachon notice.

Other films produced by Vachon in the early 1990s include Haynes' short *Dottie Gets Spanked* (1993) and his feature starring Julianne Moore, *Safe* (1995).

With her brand-new film company, Killer Films, Vachon produced the 1997 cult film *Office Killer*, directed

by Cindy Sherman. Other titles of note from Vachon and Killer include queer-themed movies such as Kimberly Peirce's *Boys Don't Cry* (1999), Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine* (1998), and Tony Vitale's *Kiss Me Guido* (1997); as well as the highly controversial films, *Happiness* (1998), directed by Todd Solondz, and *Kids* (1995), directed by Larry Clark; and Mary Harron's acclaimed *I Shot Andy Warhol* (1996). These works explore significant issues of transsexuality, homophobia, and pedophilia.

Vachon dislikes the "Queen of Queer Cinema" title often bestowed on her, and does not want to be portrayed as the spokesperson for gay films. She has been criticized by both lesbians (for not making enough lesbian films) and gay men (for negative depictions of gay life). Nigel Finch's *Stonewall* (1996), loosely based on Martin Duberman's memoir, was particularly criticized for its fictionalization of the central event in the modern gay rights movement

Her lesbian audiences were somewhat mollified by the charming lesbian-themed film *Go Fish* (1994), directed by Rose Troche. Meanwhile, Vachon claims that she never has and never will make a movie solely on the basis of its queer content or appeal to a queer audience. Yet neither will she tailor her work to straight audiences, and she is best known for her films that deal with American gay life in all its varieties.

Awards presented to Vachon include the 1994 Frameline Award for Outstanding Achievement in Lesbian and Gay Media, the Outfest Achievement Award for her dedication to queer film, and the 1996 Muse Award for Outstanding Vision and Achievement by New York Women in Film and Television.

Recent projects include her first movie with a "big star," Robin Williams in Mark Romanek's *One Hour Photo* (2001); the film adaptation of John Cameron Mitchell's *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (2001); Rob Schmidt's *Crime and Punishment in Suburbia* (2000); Haynes' acclaimed deconstruction of 1950s American life, *Far from Heaven* (2002); Rose Troche and Enrique Chediak's *The Safety of Objects* (2003); Fenton Bailey, Randy Barbato, and Teodoro Maniaci's *Party Monster* (2003); and Michael Mayer's *A Home at the End of the World* (2004), based on Michael Cunningham's novel.

Because Vachon is a producer rather than a highly-publicized actress, her private life rarely comes up in interviews. However, she is comfortably out as a lesbian. She lives in New York City.

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About the Author

Teresa Theophano, a freelance writer, is a social worker who specializes in community organizing with glbtq populations. She is also the editor of *Queer Quotes* (Beacon Press, 2004).