



Craig Zadan (left) and Neil Meron (YouTube video stills).

## Zadan, Craig (b. 1949), and Neil Meron (b. 1955)

by Linda Rapp

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Prolific film, television, and stage producers Craig Zadan and Neil Meron have created a diverse body of work, including a number of theatrical films and television features with glbtq themes.

Florida native Craig Zadan, born April 15, 1949 in Miami, became a New Yorker at the age of two, when his family moved to Brooklyn. As a youth he learned to appreciate the cultural opportunities of New York City, often going to Manhattan for Saturday matinees.

Zadan's love of theater led him to become a commentator for *New York* magazine. He also contributed articles to such publications as *After Dark*.

His first work in production came in 1973, when he co-produced a Broadway tribute to Stephen Sondheim that featured Angela Lansbury and Alexis Smith. His love for Sondheim's work was also expressed in 1974, when he published the first edition of *Sondheim and Company* (revised 1986 and 1990), still recognized as one of the best books published on the composer and lyricist. The book has been lauded not only for its insights into the creative genius of Sondheim, but also for its details about the complex process of putting together a Broadway musical.

Meron, born in Brooklyn in 1955, said in a 2002 interview that he knew "in the womb" that he wanted a career in show business. "I was reading *Variety* as I was coming out," he quipped. Like Zadan, he had attended Broadway musicals as a child and was captivated by them.

When he was a senior at Brooklyn College, Meron invited Zadan, who had recently published *Sondheim and Company*, to speak in a lecture series there. Meron took advantage of the occasion to ask the author if he knew of anyone who might be able to help him get into musical theater. Zadan promptly invited the young man to become his assistant.

When Meron graduated in 1976, he and Zadan became professional partners, producing shows at the Ballroom in Soho that showcased the music of Sondheim and Andrew Lloyd Webber, among others. Their success attracted the attention of Joseph Papp, who engaged them to work on shows at the Public Theater.

In the early 1980s both Zadan and Meron were employed by producer Peter Gruber. Zadan went to Hollywood while Meron remained in New York. In Hollywood, Zadan's first major production job was on Herbert Ross's film *Footloose* in 1984.

Zadan and Meron soon founded their own production company, Storyline Entertainment. During the 1990s they worked primarily on made-for-television movies rather than theatrical releases. One of their first great successes was a 1993 screen adaptation of the stage musical *Gypsy*. CBS executives agreed to make the picture provided that the producers could sign Bette Midler to star. Midler was initially reluctant, thinking that appearing in a television production might not be a good career move. Her fears were unfounded, however; *Gypsy* not only garnered extremely high audience ratings but also twelve Emmy Award

nominations as well as a Golden Globe for Midler.

Other musicals that Zadan and Meron have brought to television are *Cinderella* (1997), which starred Whitney Houston and Brandy Norwood; *Annie* (1999), which featured Bernadette Peters, Alan Cumming, and Audra McDonald; and *The Music Man* (2003), with Matthew Broderick in the title role. All three productions, which appeared on *The Wonderful World of Disney* show, received critical praise and drew impressive audiences.

The team also produced *Double Platinum* (1999), an original television musical starring Diana Ross as a diva threatened by the professional success of her daughter, played by Brandy Norwood.

In addition to musicals, Zadan and Meron have produced a number of "biopics" for television, beginning with *Serving in Silence: The Margarethe Cammermeyer Story* (1995). Glenn Close portrayed the decorated Vietnam veteran who aspired to be the chief nurse of the National Guard but was true enough to herself to acknowledge her lesbianism in the course of a security-clearance investigation for a promotion. Her honesty led the military to seek to expel her despite her superlative performance.

Zadan and Meron also produced *What Makes a Family* (2001), a film for the Lifetime channel that related the story of a lesbian fighting for custody of the biological daughter of her deceased life partner. The movie starred Brooke Shields and Cherry Jones, the first openly lesbian actress to win a Tony Award, who appeared in flashbacks as the mother of the couple's child.

Controversy attended another Zadan and Meron production, *The Reagans* (2003). Among those protesting the airing of the mini-series were Ronald and Nancy Reagan's son Michael, Republican National Committee Chairman Ed Gillespie, and conservative activist Brent Bozell, who launched an initiative to deter corporate sponsors from supporting the show.

Among the issues of contention was a line that had Reagan saying of AIDS sufferers, "Those who live in sin shall die in sin." The specific sentence was apparently the invention of the writers, but it reflected an opinion quoted by Reagan biographer Edmund White: "Maybe the Lord brought down this plague [because] illicit sex is against the Ten Commandments."

CBS declined to run the mini-series, claiming that the decision had nothing to do with the protests but rather was motivated by a belief "that it [did] not present a balanced portrait of the Reagans."

Zadan and Meron put out a statement expressing disappointment that the network had chosen not to air *The Reagans* "produced for them, from a script that they approved" but saying that they were pleased that the Showtime channel had picked it up.

The move to a cable channel meant that fewer people would be able to see the show. This led a number of commentators to express concern over political influence on broadcasting. Steve Randall of Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting stated, "When you have people in the government and close to the government, like the Republican National Committee, like Representative Eric Cantor (R-VA), with Ed Gillespie, organizing against the film, you're talking about chilling if not censorious behavior. You're talking about people with direct oversight of the media."

Another television project produced by Zadan and Meron was the short-lived but memorable ABC sitcom *It's All Relative* (2003-04). Centered around an upper-class gay couple whose Harvard-educated daughter is determined to marry her working-class boyfriend, the comedy focused on the conflicts caused by the different values of the future in-laws.

Zadan and Meron also produced several television films based on the lives of stars of the entertainment industry: *The Beach Boys: An American Family* (2000), *The Three Stooges* (2000), *Martin and Lewis* (2002),

*Lucy* (2003), and *Life with Judy Garland: Me and My Shadows* (2001).

The Garland film starred Australian actress Judy Davis, who was surprised to be chosen to play the iconic American entertainer. "I had to put my faith in these producers," said Davis, who had previously portrayed Cammermeyer's partner in *Serving in Silence*. "Fortunately, they are extremely professional, efficient, [and] understand the musical form."

Never was Zadan and Meron's understanding of the musical form more evident than in the production of Rob Marshall's *Chicago* (2002), a theatrical film interpretation of John Kander, Fred Ebb, and Bob Fosse's stage musical. William Condon contributed the script for the movie.

The stylish production was a runaway hit, winning rave reviews and garnering thirteen Academy Award nominations. Among the six Oscars that went to *Chicago* was the prize for Best Picture. It was the first such win for a film musical in 34 years.

Zadan and Meron also produced the screen version of another hit Broadway musical, *Hairspray* (2007), based on John Waters' film of the same title. Tony Award-winning composer and lyricist Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman wrote three new songs for the movie.

Zadan and Meron are also planning to film Randy Shilts's book on slain San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk, *The Mayor of Castro Street*. "The last time we saw Randy before he passed away from AIDS, we promised him we'd make this movie, but only if it was done properly," stated Zadan. After fifteen years of looking for the right combination of talent, they now anticipate a 2009 release of the film.

Zadan and Meron's recent television projects include the series *Empire* (2005), set in ancient Rome. They have produced a version of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, directed by Kenny Leon, which is scheduled to air on television in 2008.

Another current project is a film released in January 2008. *The Bucket List*, directed by Rob Reiner, stars Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman as two terminally ill cancer patients who escape from the hospital and go on the road for a last chance to do some of the things that they have always wanted to do. Sean Hayes is among the supporting cast. Marc Shaiman composed music for the soundtrack.

The productions of Zadan and Meron have won them an impressive collection of honors: 66 Emmy nominations with ten wins, six Academy Awards, five Golden Globe Awards, two Peabody Awards, and two awards from GLAAD (the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation).

As well as being recipients of GLAAD Media Awards, Zadan and Meron were the executive producers of the first broadcast of the ceremonies in 2005. They also produced the 2006 event.

Both Zadan and Meron have been out as gay men since the beginning of their careers. They acknowledge a certain "gay sensibility" in their productions, but insist that this expands rather than limits the projects that interest them. They are, for example, planning to make a film version of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (expected to be released in 2008) because of the importance of the issue of censorship.

In choosing their vehicles, Zadan and Meron look for solid storylines and engaging characters. Zadan observed, "If you look at all our films, they have a strong emotional core and they're ultimately about family."

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