



## Rudnick, Paul (b. 1957)

by Robert Kellerman

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American playwright, novelist, and screenwriter Paul Rudnick is a humorist who writes regularly for a variety of media, often on gay subjects. His subversive wit characteristically punctures pretensions and lays bare hypocrisies, yet it is also typically forgiving and healing.

Born in 1957 in the New York City suburb of Piscataway, New Jersey to a father who was a physicist and a mother who worked as an arts publicist, Rudnick recalls his childhood as uneventful.

He had the advantage of frequent theater trips, which cemented his early goal to be a playwright, and a very funny family, which provided him with a great deal of source material and a comic outlook on life.

Rudnick knew he was gay by the time he went to Yale University, where he received a B. A. in theater. He considered further study at Yale's graduate program in drama, but soon decided he needed to move to New York to begin a career in writing.

In New York, he initially supported himself with a variety of odd jobs--copy writer, stage set painter, and the like--until his first play, *Poor Little Lambs*, a comedy recounting the antics of the all-male Yale singing group the Whiffenpoofs, was produced in 1982.

The play, which starred the young Kevin Bacon, received a mixed critical reception, so Rudnick turned to novel writing. He wrote two ruthlessly funny satires: *Social Disease*, concerning New York nightlife (1986), and *I'll Take It*, concerning the American obsession with shopping (1989). These novels received favorable reviews and marked Rudnick as a young writer with a gift for social comedy.

In 1991, Rudnick returned to the theater with *I Hate Hamlet*, a play about a struggling actor and his haunted apartment. The New York production was noted mostly for the tantrums thrown by actor Nicol Williamson as the ghost of John Barrymore. Although the original production closed after fewer than 100 performances, it has since enjoyed several successful revivals in regional theaters.

Rudnick came into his own with *Jeffrey* (1993), an ultimately life-affirming comedy about a gay man in New York City negotiating his need for love and commitment in the age of AIDS. A nearly universally lauded play, *Jeffrey* has been produced throughout the United States and abroad. The original off-Broadway production won an Obie Award, an Outer Critics Circle Award, and the John Gassner Award for Outstanding New American Play.

In 1996, Rudnick premiered *The Naked Eye*, a comedy of manners that takes place at an exhibit of the homoerotic, sexually explicit work of a contemporary photographer: a funny Robert Mapplethorpe.

In 1998, Rudnick produced *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told*, a retelling of the Book of Genesis with same-sex couples, Adam and Steve and Jane and Mabel. Rebutting the fundamentalist Christian mantra that "God didn't make Adam and Steve," the play has had several productions by regional theaters.

Rudnick has also written and doctored screenplays. He wrote the original version of the film *Sister Act* (1992), which he intended as a raucous Bette Midler vehicle. When the movie studio recast it as a Whoopi Goldberg showcase and tamed down his script, he insisted on using a pseudonym in the credits of the final version of the movie.

Rudnick also wrote or helped write the screenplays for *The Addams Family* (1991, uncredited contributor) and *Addams Family Values* (1993), both based on the macabre *New Yorker* cartoons by Charles Addams, and *The First Wives Club* (1996, uncredited contributor).

Rudnick successfully adapted *Jeffrey* for the 1995 screen version directed by Christopher Ashley, starring Steven Weber, Sigourney Weaver, Patrick Stewart, and Nathan Lane. The gay romantic comedy became a great hit in the gay and lesbian community, but it failed to attract a large mainstream audience.

Not so Rudnik's most famous film, *In and Out* (1997), about the accidental "outing" of a small-town schoolteacher by a former student on national television. Loosely inspired by Tom Hanks' acceptance speech at the 1994 Academy Awards in which he thanked a gay former teacher, the film has been lauded by critics and audiences alike.

Directed by Frank Oz, produced by Scott Rudin, and starring Kevin Kline and Tom Selleck, *In and Out* is particularly interesting for its approach to homosexuality (often a serious "problem" in films) via the conventions of screwball comedy. Although the homophobes are properly skewered, the film is suffused with good humor and good feeling. Indeed, the film is less a satire than a comic vision of a more relaxed and accepting middle America in which gay people are free to be themselves. This film is undoubtedly Rudnick's most popular work to date.

Rudnick also wrote the screenplay for *Isn't She Great* (2000), based on the life and career of novelist Jacqueline Susann and her need for celebrity. Despite its camp appeal, the film did not succeed at the box office.

He also contributed the screenplay to Richard Benjamin's disappointing *Marcy X* (2003). More successful was the screenplay for Frank Oz's star-studded comic remake of Bryan Forbes's 1975 film of Ira Levin's 1972 novel *Stepford Wives* (2004).

As a journalist, Rudnick writes regularly for the movie magazine *Premiere* under the pseudonym Libby Gelman-Waxner, a fictional wealthy Long Island retail store executive who mixes celebrity and family gossip with movie criticism and campy insights.

Rudnick also appears regularly on the gay newsmagazine *In the Life*. In his first appearance, soon after the September 11, 2001 World Trade Center attack, he hilariously deconstructed the homophobic remarks of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, who attempted to blame gay men and lesbians for the outrage.

Rudnick writes for such diverse publications as *Vogue*, *The New York Times Book Review*, and *Interview*. He appears on-screen in Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's documentary, *The Celluloid Closet* (1995), where he discusses the disguised presence of homosexuality in the sex comedies of the 1950s.

Proudly open about his homosexuality, Rudnick is one of the most interesting comic writers at work today. He uses sharp wit and gentle satire to comment on contemporary mores. Unlike many satirists, his work is generally more positive than negative.

He lives and writes in his beloved New York City.

## **Bibliography**

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### **About the Author**

**Robert Kellerman** holds a doctorate in English literature from Michigan State University.