

Writer Paul Rudnick remembers the struggles and relishes the joys of transferring his stage comedy *Jeffrey* to the screen. His memories include homophobic rejections, a heat wave and 25 masturbating leathermen.

"When we opened in New York," Rudnick says, "even people who genuinely liked the play said, 'This will never be done outside New York.'"

Cinema

I guess they imagined gay characters wouldn't travel—that love, life and death weren't universal concerns. Since then it's been done all over the United States, in Japan, in Tel Aviv..."

Interviewing Rudnick is like dishing with an old friend and covers many of the same topics, especially gay life and show business and how the two are intersecting more and more.

"I think it's only a matter of time until TV wises up and recognizes the wealth of gay talent out there," Rudnick says, "but I think it will happen without me.... Television consumes the writer. If a show is a success, you abandon your private life. Look at *Absolutely Fabulous*, which is superb. Jennifer Saunders was smart to limit it to 18 episodes."

Although he created *Sister Act* and worked on *The Addams Family*, among other scripts, Rudnick's only official screen credit prior to *Jeffrey* was for writing *Addams Family Values*. His thoughts about film are reflected in the *Premiere* magazine columns of "Libby Gelman-Waxner," with whom he's making "joint" appearances to promote her new collection of columns, *If You Ask Me* (Fawcett, \$11.50).

After more than a year's run off-Broadway, *Jeffrey* was filmed last summer during a heat wave. Rudnick says the budget was "somewhere between \$1.5 and \$2 million, which is what it costs to shoot a TV pilot. And that included five weeks of location shooting in New York and 'that cast.'"

Recruiting a capital-C cast for a gay-themed project is still not easy. Sigourney Weaver, who loved the script and wanted to play New Age evangelist Debra Moorhouse, started the bandwagon. Once she signed on, everyone wanted to be in it. Before that there was "apprehension," Rudnick says. "Actors were frightened of roles in which the gay characters weren't 'noble victims,' but have sexuality and a real libido. It isn't always homophobia.... On any project, gay or not, you get rejection."

Where homophobia most often comes into play, he notes, is "middle-level management—agents and managers, many of whom are gay themselves, who don't even show the scripts to their actors.... I would love for someone to find

A KISS IS JUST A KISS

Writer Paul Rudnick puts straight audiences at ease without making any compromises, in *Jeffrey*—the movie

by Steve Warren



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL GINSBERG



"In most films with gay characters," Rudnick says, "a kiss, even a sympathetic one, is treated as a 'vampire moment,' with dramatic music and lots of suspense to lead up to it. I wanted to say, 'This is a kiss. Get used to it. You're going to see plenty more.'"

Above: Paul Rudnick; below: (from left) actors Bryan Batt, Patrick Stewart, Steven Weber and Michael T. Weiss

the actual actor whose career has been hurt by a gay role. Tom Hanks? William Hurt?"

From the leads—Steven Weber, Michael T. Weiss and Patrick Stewart, whom Rudnick calls "the nicest and most generous man alive"—to supporting players Weaver, Olympia Dukakis, Kathy Najimy, Robert Klein, Christine Baranski, Nathan Lane (who created his role of Father Dan at "the very first reading of *Jeffrey* in an off-off-Broadway basement") and Kevin Nealon, "everyone worked for scale or well below," Rudnick

says.

On the "who's gay?" question, Rudnick names only himself and director Christopher Ashley, who also directed the play and is making his film debut with *Jeffrey*, but he says "enormous numbers of the cast and crew, the producers, [were gay]. It became a situation where political correctness began to seem quite silly, and we just went for the talent."

The cast obviously enhances *Jeffrey's* cross-over potential, but Rudnick insists he never set out

to appeal to straight audiences. "One rule I made when writing the play and the film was never to worry about that."

And yet he does include a special moment for heterosexuals in each version. "On stage I thought, what is the audience's worst fear about coming to a gay play? That they're going to see two men in bed together having sex. So I got that out of the way in the first 10 seconds, with the whole cast in bed. Then they relax and say, 'What were we worried about?'"

The corresponding moment in the film is a "reaction shot" of a movie audience the first time two men kiss. "In most films with gay characters," Rudnick says, "a kiss, even a sympathetic one, is treated as a 'vampire moment,' with dramatic music and lots of suspense to lead up to it. I wanted to say, 'This is a kiss. Get used to it. You're going to see plenty more.'"

Nothing was softened to pander to straight audiences in adapting his play, the writer swears. "The moments where the play went a little further than people thought it might are still there." When things were cut it was because of "enormous rhythmic and technical changes" between the media.

In one scene that was filmed but later cut, Rudnick reports, "We used 25 real leather guys in a scene in a masturbation club. The guys were terrific. They brought their own harnesses and codpieces. It was 103 degrees, and we couldn't have the air conditioning on because it would interfere with the sound. It was great to watch, but the tone didn't work in the film."

Rudnick disagrees with those who find *Jeffrey* already dated. "Eventually when people look back it will be a period piece," he says, "but I think the issues of the script remain tragically relevant. I wish there had been some progress toward a cure and treatment, but I'm afraid safe sex and AIDS are with us for the foreseeable future."

Without mentioning *Jeffrey*, Rudnick makes clear the importance of its success: "In Hollywood the route to freedom is always financial. If *Wong Foo* makes a fortune, and I hope

it does, it will lead to more gay films. If *Two Girls in Love* does well, more gay filmmakers will make inroads.

"Prejudice doesn't stand a chance against financial success. That may sound crass, but that's how it is in Hollywood."

Jeffrey opens Friday, Sept. 15, for an exclusive run at Cinema 21, 616 NW 21st Ave. Call the theater at 223-4515 for show times and prices.

NO MORE FLEAS



- ◆ FLEA BATH
- ◆ FLEA DIP
- ◆ FLEA PRODUCTS
- ◆ BYE BYE FLEAS



BEAUTY OF THE BEAST
PET LAUNDERETTE

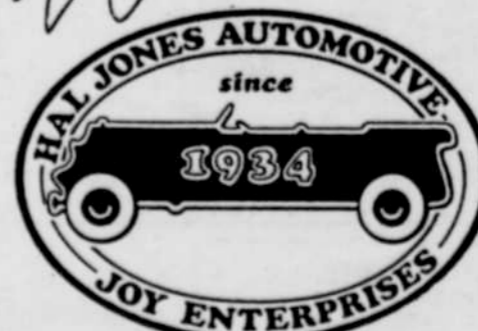
A DO-IT-YOURSELF DOG & CAT WASH
W-F 11-7 S-S 9-5 3832 NE SANDY ◆ 288-5280

HAL JONES AUTOMOTIVE

JOY ENTERPRISES

Bill Joy
Bill Joy

Ron Joy
Ron Joy



We love our just out customers.
See us for your automotive needs.

5111 NE Fremont
Portland, OR 97213

288-1130