

INTERVIEW

This has been the best response I've ever had to anything I've worked on," Randal Kleiser tells me during a telephone interview from his hotel room in Park City, Utah, following the world premiere of his new film, *It's My Party*, at the Sundance Film Festival last month. "The audience gave us a standing ovation, and they were all crying. It was just wonderful."

Written, directed and co-produced by Kleiser,

Cinema

It's My Party was inspired by his former lover Harry Stein's life and death. The film stars Eric Roberts as Nick Stark, a gay man with AIDS who, rather than succumb to the ravages of the disease, chooses to take his own life following a two-day gathering of family and friends. Gregory Harrison co-stars as Nick's former lover, Brandon Theis, a role Kleiser based on himself.

"I think I made the character into a bit more of a villain than I am, to make it more interesting," the writer-director says with a chuckle.

Kleiser—whose eclectic list of credits includes *Grease*, *The Blue Lagoon*, *Summer Lov-ers*, *White Fang* and *Honey, I Blew Up the Kids*—says he called in every favor owed him in assembling the cast and crew that would help him realize his vision. Many of the actors involved in the project—Christopher Atkins, Bruce Davison, Gregory Harrison, Olivia Newton-John—had worked with Kleiser previously. Others—such as Marlee Matlin, Roddy McDowall and Bronson Pinchot—contacted the director personally to voice their desire to participate in the making of the film. The star-studded roster of players also includes Margaret Cho, Nina Foch, Lee Grant, Devon Gummersall, Michael Kearns, Sally Kellerman, Greg Louganis, Paul Regina and George Segal.

It's My Party is sure to intensify the public debate surrounding a person's right to die. Kleiser admits that, already, people have said to him such things as: "If only my father had seen this movie. He didn't want to suffer, and he ended up suffering terribly before he died. This could have inspired him to figure out another way to handle the situation."

Below, Kleiser reveals more about breathing life into *Party*.

Vaillancourt: What made you decide to write the script for *It's My Party*?

Kleiser: Well, the death of Harry was what triggered me to sit down.... The night of that death, I began writing.

So Harry actually did have a two-day farewell gathering.

THE LIFE OF THE PARTY

Writer-director Randal Kleiser talks about bringing the latest AIDS-themed film, *It's My Party*, to the silver screen

by Daniel Vaillancourt

Yes. And that's what triggered it. Then I just didn't do anything else until I finished [the film], which was just recently. So, it's been three years of work.

What are some of the emotions you went through in completing the screenplay and during filming?

It was therapeutic in a way, and it was difficult. It was made easier by the fact that everybody connected with the project got totally behind it and supported what I was trying to accomplish, including the crew, who worked for less than they would normally work for. The actors all worked for scale. And the composer, Basil Poledouris,

did *Longtime Companion*, and they said, "Listen, we made *Longtime Companion*, and it didn't make that much money. It was very hard to market. We've done that, and we just can't do that anymore. We don't want to try that again. It was too tough." So I went other places, and they just said, "This is too dark," or "We don't envision lines around the block to see this movie." Because this kind of a story has to be done a certain way, or else it's just totally depressing. What all of us tried to do was to make it a celebration of life rather than a movie about death.

There was such warmth and intimacy between the characters in the film, so much love

It's My Party is sure to intensify the public debate surrounding a person's right to die. Kleiser admits that, already, people have said to him such things as: "If only my father had seen this movie. He didn't want to suffer, and he ended up suffering terribly before he died. This could have inspired him to figure out another way to handle the situation."

who normally gets \$350,000 for a score, did this for me for one dollar.

How difficult a film was it to get made in Hollywood? How receptive were the studios?

It was turned down by everybody I went to. I went to the majors, I went to the independents, and I couldn't get anybody to back it until I met John Calley at United Artists. He used to be a producer; he produced *Remains of the Day*, and now he runs United Artists. He liked it, and said that if we could get this movie made, United Artists would distribute it. When you have a distribution deal, it allows you to raise money because it's kind of like a guarantee the movie will have some life rather than be on the shelf. So, that allowed us to raise the money to make the film.

What were some of the reasons people gave you for turning it down?

Well, as an example, I went to the people who

flowing from each frame. I believe that goes beyond great writing, acting and directing. How do you think such poignancy was captured on film?

I've never worked with a group of actors who were more totally behind the project. They showed up every day with enthusiasm, just wanting to support what was going on. Because a lot of it was a party scene, everybody was in the shots. A lot of times when I've worked on movies with a lot of people, the stars will come up and say, "Can you shoot my close-ups and let me go home, and then shoot everyone else?" In this case no one ever said that, and they were as enthusiastic about being way off in the distance emptying ashtrays behind someone else's dialogue scene as they were about being in close-ups. [Laughs] I'd never experienced that. They checked their egos at the door, and they were just all like one supportive family, because they wanted to help me make this movie. That's what came across in the film. You can sense that. Nobody's trying to push anyone

out of the way and get a better shot. No one's trying to upstage anybody. It's all just working together.

I think one of the most moving relationships portrayed in the film is that between Nick and his gay teen-aged nephew, Andrew, played beautifully by Devon Gummersall of *My So-Called Life*. Why was it important for you to address some of the issues facing gay youth today?

I don't think anyone has. I've never seen a film that dealt with that. And also, I haven't seen a film that deals with role models. One of the things I've always found kind of unfortunate is that gay people don't have role models in literature or film. There's nobody of whom you can say, "Ah, I'd like to live my life like that." And so, this movie was exploring that a little bit.... Nick and Brandon were role models for Andrew.

***It's My Party* will inevitably be compared with *Philadelphia*. How similar, how different, do you feel the films are?**

I liked *Philadelphia*. I think it was a wonderful groundbreaking project, and in a way, probably paved the way for John Calley to say, "Yes, I'll take this gamble." *Philadelphia* is more about the politics of AIDS, it seems to me—although there was a lot of family stuff. This movie is more about how everyone is affected [by AIDS], not only physically, but the dynamics of relationships, and the dynamics of losing a generation of friends. It is the next step in exploring what's going on—what has been going on for the last 15 years.

The relationship between Nick and Brandon in *It's My Party* is infinitely more convincing than that between the Tom Hanks and Antonio Banderas characters in *Philadelphia*. The kiss Eric and Gregory share near the end of the film is certainly one of the most unabashed ever seen in a major Hollywood studio release. Tell me about the filming of that scene.

I purposely shot the movie in the order of the script, so that when we got to the end and everyone knew that it was going to be over—that the party was going to be literally over—that dynamic would permeate the set.... Keeping [the kissing] scene near the end allowed Greg and Eric to really get to know each other as people, and they knew that it was very important to me that this work. And so, they were really just trusting me to guide this moment to work. And I was trusting them to really get into it and experience the feelings rather than just go through the mechanics.

At the core of *It's My Party* is the controversial, complex issue of a person's right to die. If

Catholic?

Gay? Lesbian? Bisexual?
Transgender? Fallen-away?
Lapsed? Alienated?

You're welcome at
The Downtown Chapel
(St. Vincent de Paul Parish)
601 W. Burnside

Come join us as we affirm and
celebrate the beautiful diversity
of God's creation.

MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE PARTY, JEFFREY AND ARLENE
DISCUSS OLIVIA'S AWFUL NEW HAIRCUT...



DON'T LET THIS HAPPEN
TO YOU! COME IN AND
SEE US TODAY!

**GARY
LUCKEY**

4016 NE FREMONT
281-7831

WE PROUDLY FEATURE

Matrix
HAIR • SKIN • COSMETICS

30% OFF SELECTED PRODUCTS

Travel the world,
but call us first...



232-5944

1-800-232-5944

1939 SE Hawthorne Blvd, Portland