

INTERVIEW

TALKING INTIMATELY

A new documentary is a bold portrait of an artist exploring HIV on a very personal level

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by Howie Bagdadonutz

To say that Michael Kearns has led a dramatic life would be an understatement. When he first landed in Hollywood from the Midwest some 25 years ago, the actor took Los Angeles and the country by storm as Grant Tracy Saxon (a.k.a. "The Happy Hustler"), a male incarnation of New York madam Xaviera Hollander (a.k.a.

Cinema

"The Happy Hooker"). He played that role consistently well—appearing on talk shows, showing up for book signings and special appearances—ultimately becoming a self-made celebrity. After the act ran its course, he reinvented himself as Michael Kearns the actor, and appeared on television (*The Waltons*) and in movies (*Body Double*) before bot-
toming out on booze and drugs in the late '70s.

In the early '80s he cleaned up his act and honed his acting skills, becoming a seminal force in L.A.'s burgeoning gay theater scene, where he wrote, directed, performed and taught. When actor Brad Davis died of AIDS in 1991, Kearns went on television shows and announced that he, too, was HIV positive—a disclosure that caused his career to screech to a halt. Many in the industry hoped that he would quietly disappear and stop criticizing Hollywood for its homophobia and AIDS-phobia. He didn't.

Out of frustration, Kearns created *Intimacies*, a controversial, shockingly explicit one-man show that played in L.A. and around the country. In the play, a red scarf metamorphoses into the defining detail of six characters, who all face a turning point in their lives and choose to reckon with their inner truths because of their HIV status. The film has been touring the festival circuit and in January won the Audience Vote Best Documentary Award at the Palm Springs Film Festival.

The journey from *Intimacies* the play to *Intimacies* the film has been a long one.

"Nikila Cole saw me do *Intimacies* four and a half years ago in New Haven," Kearns recounts. "She was just out of film school, and she told me, '*Intimacies* should be in people's faces; people need to see this show.' So I said, 'Why don't you do it?' and she realized she couldn't think of a reason to say no. So she contacted a distributor, who put her in touch with a producer, who brought on board Sarah Kerruish, who co-produced and co-directed."

The film was finally completed in November 1995 and, although it's been getting a great response, mainstream Hollywood distributors won't touch it.

"They consider it too gay, too explicit, too scary, too death, too too too!" Kearns explains with a sigh. "Nobody will go near it—Showtime and HBO have seen it and are afraid of it. Nikila, who's straight, says she's learned more about

homophobia in the past four years than she ever wanted to know. People in power want to go with *Jeffrey* or *The Birdcage*, or maybe they'll take a little risk with *It's My Party*. It's too bad, really, but what can I say? I wouldn't change a word of *Intimacies* to make it more marketable."

Intimacies was filmed during three performances in Austin, Texas, in 1993. Simultaneously, Kearns was being interviewed about his life, his work and his dreams. In all, 30 hours of footage

model for the character."

We also meet Father Anthony, a gay priest who was infected with HIV by the husbands and altar boys he counseled. Naturally, he didn't use a condom, since it was counter to Catholic teachings.

A character everyone loves to hate is the smug and simpering Patrick, a closeted Disney executive who believes he has the perfect life until AIDS hits.



Michael Kearns

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was shot.

What emerges is a bold portrait of a man who bluntly looks at issues felt by many but left unspoken. The film revolves around six diverse characters dealing with HIV. There's Fernando, a flamenco dancer who married and had kids, all the while denying his homosexuality.

"I had the script for Fernando pretty much written, but I didn't have the character down until I took flamenco lessons," Kearns explains. "It became obvious that my teacher would be the

"Patrick is a pastiche of every sick queer in Hollywood," Kearns drolly observes.

The lone female character is Big Red, a sassy, streetwise hooker with AIDS, who is trying to make peace with her past, her family and herself.

"She's straight out of my imagination; I didn't walk the streets to get into the character," Kearns quickly assures me.

He did, however, do a lot of research for two of the show's characters: Mike, an alcoholic hemophiliac biker, and Paul, a gay deaf man.

"Hemophiliacs are not visible as people with HIV," Kearns says. "It's not glamorous or spicy.... I felt a responsibility to do interviews and find out what it was like. Paul, the show's deaf character, was touchy, because I'm a hearing privileged white man. So I went to some heavyweight deaf actors and explained my *modus operandi*. Once it was understood, it was OK, and I got some great insights into yet another invisible community."

Interestingly, Kearns himself becomes the film's seventh character. Interviews with the actor are intercut between each character vignette and provide the common thread that links the artist to his work.

"I think that just happened," Kearns explains. "Nikila didn't plan to shoot it that way. It became evident during the film's editing process. Now, I hate to watch myself perform, so the first time I saw the film was at its premiere. I was surprised at how well it became intertwined."

He continues: "*Intimacies* talks about how

human behavior is a very complex thing, and so, accordingly, is sex. We can't act as if life is a big coloring book: Color the tree green, stay in the lines.... It's unrealistic to think that way, and it's inhuman. People slip, make mistakes. *Intimacies* accepts that part of human nature."

So will *Intimacies* get Michael Kearns the actor more mainstream work?

"Well, I have a new manager, and it seems every new TV pilot has a gay character in it, so it would be ridiculous not to try. I'd work if the material was morally right."

"Although," he quips, "everyone on TV is 23, but my manager is pushing!"

How he'd find the time to do a TV series would be a mystery. Since January 1995, Kearns has had his hands full in his new role—that of a father.

"Tia is 19 months old, and the adoption is moving along OK. She was born two months early, crack-addicted, weighing less than three pounds. But she toughed it out."

Kearns beams with paternal pride: "She's complicated, willful,

bright and happy and, fortunately, she's doing all right. I have 12 people helping me take care of her: four couples (two gay, two straight), and four single people. We all love her. This wonderful family just evolved. I chose people who would offer Tia different things, so she's nurtured in all different ways. With all this love and attention, she's become fearless!"

Like father, like daughter.

Michael Kearns and Nikila Cole will introduce a screening of Intimacies on Saturday, April 27, at 8 pm at the Northwest Film Center, 1219 SW Park Ave. Admission is \$6, \$5 for seniors and members.