

INTERVIEW

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ask for the rights. Sharon Wood is a writer who works with us, and helped us find the structure for the material. Arnold Glassman, an editor who worked on *Visions of Light*, helped us work with the clips in finding a structure for the movie. And Howard Rosenman! When Howard joined the project, things really started to take off, because Howard is the man who actually was able to get the studios to really give us the clips.

What about securing the interviews with A-list producers, directors, actors and screenwriters? Were individuals eager or reluctant?

Epstein: Both. It took a long time, because certainly the stars are all very busy people with busy schedules, and you have to go through managers and agents and a lot of front people. So it took a lot of time, and some arm-twisting. Lily Tomlin helped us with some people. Howard Rosenman helped us get to a lot of people. And then a few were there just immediately, like Susan Sarandon. We sent a letter to her house, and she responded, "Yes." And then other people just never responded, or responded with a "No." We covered the whole spectrum of possible human responses.

The film is an objective study rather than an indictment of Hollywood.

Friedman: Yeah. I think we made the decision that we... We don't make those kinds of films. We don't make the kinds of films that grab you by the collar and scream in your face, "This is what's wrong with the world, and you better feel bad about it!" Our goal is to present the evidence, allow it to accumulate, and let the audience draw their own conclusion. I mean, I think the conclusions you come to are inevitable, given the evidence. But we really wanted to make an entertaining movie.

The depiction of gay men and lesbians in film and television has improved considerably in recent years. What are some of your favorite recent positive portrayals?

Friedman: Well, we don't watch much television. Rob, do you have any favorite positive portrayals?

Epstein: I'm thinking... [Laughs]

Friedman: [Laughs] This might be your answer right now: "I'm thinking..."

Epstein: I guess I don't see a lot that I feel really represents or expresses my life, my being. I don't see much that seems real to my experience. And I suppose whatever I do see I would tend to expect from independent gay filmmakers, and not expect from Hollywood.

Specifically, let's talk about last year's *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar* and *The Birdcage*, Mike Nichols' remake of the classic '70s French drag farce *La Cage aux Folles*, starring Robin Williams and Nathan Lane.

Friedman: We saw *To Wong Foo* with Rob's 8-

year-old nephew and 13-year-old niece, and they loved it! It seemed to me that these drag queens had all the reality of Disney cartoon characters. It certainly didn't have much to say to me about my life. But I think it's a wonderful children's drag queen movie.

Epstein: Yeah, I mean, I don't think that's a bad thing if those images aren't offensive, which I don't think they are. And I expect *Birdcage* is not offensive either. But they're basically clown movies. The clowns have humanity, which is wonderful, but they're not my life.



Martha (Shirley MacLaine) confesses her love for Karen (Audrey Hepburn) in *The Children's Hour* (1962), one of the featured clips in *The Celluloid Closet*

How would you like to see gay men and lesbians portrayed in future Hollywood films?

Friedman: I would like to see us get to the point where gay people are just a part of the texture of the world, as we are. I mean, I guess if you're asking what I want to see more of in movies, I would say "truth." I would like to get to the point where having a gay character in a movie is not so unusual that it needs to be put under a microscope and judged as to its political correctness. I'd like to see us start taking it for granted.

Your television and film production company, Telling Pictures, has been based in San Francisco since its inception. Have you ever given thought to relocating to Los Angeles?

Epstein: Well, certainly it would be a career advantage, but we don't live our lives around career, and San Francisco is our home.

Friedman: And I also like having a little distance from that world.

Epstein: It gives you a little more perspective, or

a little different perspective.

What do you think are the advantages and disadvantages of being romantically and professionally involved?

Friedman: Rob...?

Epstein: Oh, God, I don't know if I'm prepared to go into that one. Jeffrey...?

Friedman: [Laughs] Well, I would say the advantage is that filmmaking is such an all-consuming activity that I think if I weren't working with my life partner, I'd probably never see him. So I think that

filmmaker.

Friedman: No.

Epstein: No. Not at all.

Friedman: As absurd as it may sound, I don't think either one of us thinks of us as gay filmmakers.

Epstein: You know, I don't mind being pegged that. I don't avoid being pegged that. But it's not how I self-identify. I identify as a filmmaker—and I'm an openly gay man—so, it's well integrated.

Since you've won Oscars for both *The Times of Harvey Milk* and *Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt*, it seemed more than likely that *The Celluloid Closet* would be up for an Academy Award. But when nominations were announced in February, the film was noticeably absent from the documentary category. Any comments?

Epstein: Go figure why. We were certainly world will have to analyze why that's the case.

Friedman: I feel like we're in good company, though.

Epstein: With *Hoop Dreams* and *Crumb*...

Friedman: There's a long history of films that have been audience favorites, and that have done well in the marketplace, that the academy has not honored for one reason or another.

Epstein: But I also think that this film may be too gay for them. In some ways *Harvey Milk* and *Common Threads* were safer films. *Common Threads* had a young boy with HIV and lots of straight people in it. And this film is very much in-your-face and critical of Hollywood.

Did you expect to be nominated?

Epstein: We were told by people within the committee, and by Sony Classics, that it was definite, that it was a shoo-in. So, only because of that did we expect anything... But in the long run, I don't think it will hurt the film. I think the film will go on and have its own life, and it will stand the test of time. So, as disappointing as it is in the short run, in the long run, we have faith in the movie.

Is there anything else you'd like to say about *The Celluloid Closet*?

Epstein: We hope people will see it on the big screen. It was intended to be a communal movie experience for audiences, and we hope people go see it.

Friedman: It's a completely different experience watching it on the big screen and watching it on video. I mean, it's been really interesting to me to watch it in both these situations. You can see how the movie changes. For some reason, audiences have a lot more fun with it when they're watching it in a movie theater.

The Celluloid Closet opens Friday, May 10, at the Cinema 21, 616 NW 21st Ave., in Portland. Call 223-4515 for show times and ticket prices.

Marvin Salles

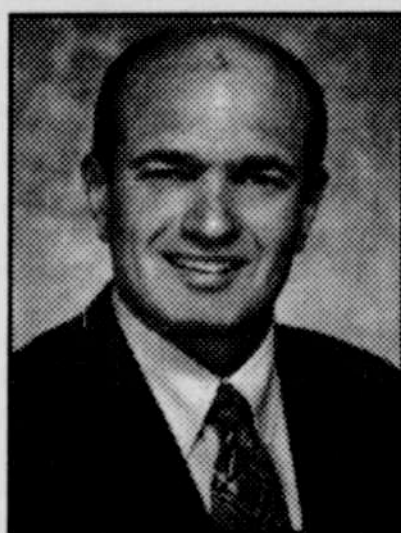
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