

## INTERVIEW

## AN ACT OF TRUST

Filmmaker Monte Bramer reflects on the daunting task of recording the end of Paul Monette's life

by Daniel Vaillancourt

The first article of mine ever to be published in a national magazine was an interview with author Paul Monette, which appeared in the June 1994 issue of *10 Percent*. Monette and I had never met, although I'd long been an ardent admirer of his work, be it poetry (*Love Alone*), fiction (*Afterlife*, *Halfway Home*), or autobiography (*Borrowed Time* and the National Book Award-winning *Becoming a Man*). My being

## Cinema

granted one private hour with him was a dream come true, and I looked forward to publicizing his then eagerly awaited collection of essays *Last Watch of the Night*. After our conversation—conducted via telephone: me in San Francisco, he in Los Angeles—Monette and I agreed to connect in person, one month hence, when his book tour would bring him to Northern California. Unfortunately, he became ill shortly thereafter. There would be no Bay area bookstore appearance. Paul died of AIDS complications almost one year later, on Feb. 10, 1995.

Although we never did meet face to face, I feel as if I knew the man—due to the visceral memoirs he left behind, certainly—but especially thanks to the recently unveiled documentary *Paul Monette: The Brink of Summer's End*. Produced by Lesli Klainberg, written and directed by Monte Bramer, the film—which won the Audience Award for Best Documentary at this year's Sundance Film Festival—is a graceful, poignant tribute. Shepherded early on by corporate fairy godmother Sheila Nevins, senior vice president of documentary and family programming for HBO, it is set to air on Cinemax in June.

"I wanted to make some kind of connection with him that would be more than just shaking his hand at a book signing," says writer-director Bramer, 36. According to him and Klainberg, the film explores "Paul's life from his seemingly idyllic New England boyhood to his closeted adolescence to his development into a successful writer, committed lover and activist." Shot during the 30 months preceding his death, *Brink* combines formal interview footage with family photographs and home movies from Monette's private collection. Narrated by Academy Award-winning actress Linda Hunt (a close friend of Paul's), the film is laced with testimonials from such key individuals as Monette's last lover, Winston Wilde; his beloved brother, Robert; his nurse, Ande Hughes; St. Martin's Press editor Michael Denny; his longtime friend photographer Star Black; actress Judith Light; psychotherapist Betty Berzon; and writer/activist Larry Kramer. Throughout the film, selections from Monette's oeuvre are read by openly gay actor Jonathan Fried. Original music for *Brink* was composed by Jon Ehrlich.

"It's not just a story about his decline," warns Bramer, who traveled with Monette and Wilde to Paris and the 1993 March on Washington, D.C., among other places, in his attempts to record his subject's last months. In the same breath, Bramer admits that Monette did change in the two and a half years the project took to complete. "When we first started interviewing him, he had a kind of sexy swagger, he was a little full of himself, a little cocky," says Bramer. "By the end of his life, he'd turned into a very wise old man."

Below, Bramer shares further thoughts about Monette and the making of his celluloid biography.

**Tell me how your reading a *Los Angeles Times* article about Paul became the genesis of this project.**

It was called "Finding His Voice," and it was a promotional piece for *Becoming a Man*. I thought, "Oh, gosh. We just have to do an interview with

Paul if he's able." Because the *Times* piece made it sound like he was going to drop dead the next day. We set it up through a friend.

**"We" being you and Lesli?**

Lesli Klainberg, the producer, and I. At that point we were already working together. What Lesli and I had originally thought about doing was a film where we would go around the country and do profiles...[focusing] on average people with ordinary jobs: lesbian coal miners in Appalachia, gay dairy farmers in Minnesota. We were putting

**You must have wrestled with how to record his death, which you ultimately chose to depict in the film via photographs.**

I was so afraid of being exploitative. I didn't want to remake *Silverlake Life*. It wasn't that I thought it was a bad film. It's just that it had been done. I just thought, "Well, how do I do this? How do I do this without exploiting his situation?" I was scared of doing it, frankly.

**Much of the film consists of original footage of and interviews with Paul and Winston, and of**



Paul Monette

together that concept when I got this brainstorm about doing an interview with Paul. I just wanted to have it, because I didn't know what was going to happen to him. [The original interview] was scheduled to go for an hour. We went for three hours, and it was magical. He was so articulate, so bright. Lesli and I watched the dailies the next week, and I looked over at her and said, "Do you really want to haul your butt around the country in a van?... I think we have a film right here if we set our minds to it." And she, with a great sigh of relief, said, "Oh, thank heavens." [Laughs.] So we put together a proposal, and we sent it off to Paul. About a week later he called. He was very, very cute about it. He said, "I've read your proposal; I accept the part."

**What is it you proposed?**

Quite honestly, I can't remember, and it probably bears no relationship to the film we have now. I was afraid to admit to myself—let alone to Paul—that I wanted the film to cover the end of his life. I wanted him to see it. I wanted to bask in his praise for a job well done. But along the way, we realized that it was probably going to be a much stronger film if we took it through the end of his life.... [At some point] I said, "Well, you know, you'll never see the movie." And he said, "Oh, that's all right, Monte. That's not what's important." That was a little hard, because that was the first time it was really acknowledged up front.

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**conversations with family and friends following his death. What about the archival material: the childhood photographs, the home movies?**

He was always very generous with all this material. In fact, one day he said in an offhand way, "You know, Stevie [Kolzak, Monette's lover after Roger Horwitz] and I shot a bunch of videos of our trips. That wouldn't be of any interest to you, would it?" I nearly fell off my chair and said, "Oh, do let me have a look at them, won't you, dear?" And he brings out a pile of them. I took them home, and they were utterly fascinating. Not just from the point of view of somebody who's making a film, but from the point of view of a gay person who'd never been in love. I was watching these two men who were just terribly in love. They were giddy, silly, stupid in love. It was the most thrilling thing to watch because it was so intimate. They were addressing each other through the camera in these exotic locations—Bora Bora; Hawaii; Venice, on the Grand Canal, in front of Marco Polo's house. It was just these very romantic adventures on board ships, steaming through the South Pacific. They were just gorgeous.... Then we started collecting more and more photographs of Roger and everything. Paul always intended that we would have access to all of his photos [and family home movies].

**How did Linda Hunt become involved?**

Linda was a friend of Paul's. She spoke at his

memorial. Actually, we met her at a birthday party for Paul, and she was wonderfully, wonderfully sweet. I just thought, "Oh, my God. What a coup if we were able to get Linda Hunt." She's just got the most glorious voice. We approached her, and she was very, very sweet about saying, "I'd love to." This is a person who works all the time. I can't even imagine the kind of money she must get paid. Why would she care about doing our film? Obviously, because she loved Paul very much. She was the first and only choice for that. If she had said no it would have been a huge heartbreak to me. But fortunately she said yes.

She was so glorious to work with because, first of all, she's such a total professional and perfectionist. She wanted it to be as good as it could possibly be. At first, I thought, "She's so used to doing this, she's probably only going to want to do one take. What will I do if I don't like it?" [But] she was the one who was saying, "Are you sure you like that, because I'll be happy to do it again. Just tell me what you want me to do."

**What was it like to screen the film for such large audiences at Sundance?**

That was absolutely thrilling. You know, you live with a project for four and a half years and you watch it by yourself and you wonder, "Is this communicating anything to anyone? Will anyone be moved by this? Will people laugh at it? Will they think it's dreadful?" You just don't know. You get so close to it you can't see it anymore. [Sundance] was the first time I'd seen it with a real audience.... And those audiences were very, very warm, very receptive. I mean, there were so many people weeping at the end of the movie. I didn't quite expect that. People would come up to me and say, "I've lost a brother," or "I've lost a lover," or "My son is sick." These weren't people who were asking "How did you get your funding?" or "What kind of camera did you use?" They weren't even asking questions as much as they were trying to somehow relate their own experience, their own grief. I had one boy come up to me and say, "Can I hug you, because I want to touch somebody who touched him." And I thought, "Well, OK. Maybe it's not so bad. Maybe it really is working." [Laughs.]

**The film is set to air on Cinemax in June. What do you hope it will achieve?**

I hope it's a commercial for Paul's books. I would love to see *Becoming a Man* go into another printing. I would love to see [Monette's posthumously released fable] *Sanctuary* do well because of it. I really think they are great books. Timeless books, in a way. The viewership of Cinemax is huge. If it plays in the middle of the night, it's going to be seen by unbelievable numbers of people—more than will have ever read all of Paul's work put together. And that faintly horrifies me. But what it might do is cause somebody to go out and pick up a copy of *Becoming a Man* or *Borrowed Time* or *Sanctuary*. Of course, I envision a gay 16-year-old kid in some small town some place picking up one of these books. But it might be some straight guy whose kid is gay and who is trying to figure it all out. It might be that kid's mother, or a friend. I'd feel like it really did something wonderful if it did that.

**What would you say to Paul now?**

Oh, God.... I guess if he were sitting here now, I would just say, "Thank you for letting Lesli and I tell your story." It's not like we had Academy Award-winning films under our belt. It's not like we were [Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, creators of] *Common Threads* and *The Celluloid Closet*. It's not like we had any kind of track record other than the fact that we worked in film and were very hopeful about what we could achieve. We were determined to do a good job. If the film painted a poor picture of Paul it wouldn't be helpful to his memory. So it dawned on me what a great act of trust that was on his part. He didn't know us from Adam.