

## INTERVIEW

## THIS STRANGE SENSATION

*Sparks fly during the chemistry lesson a closeted high school teacher learns from a TV journalist in In & Out*

by Dale Reynolds

comedy *Kiss Me, Guido* this year). With the central elements in place, getting the other stars was easy. Filming began last October within a 60-mile radius of New York City, the small towns successfully standing in for Indiana.

*In & Out* is to comedy what *Philadelphia* was to drama: an expensive (around \$35 million) homosexual love story, in which the stereotypes surrounding gay men are exploited for humor as well as insight. Not so surprisingly, the creative folk deny that it's a "gay" story; why allow the obvious when you can put a more salable spin on it?

Oz, 53, a genial and quiet gentleman, says, "It's not a gay comedy—to me it's a screwball comedy with an edge and underbelly to it. I didn't make it as a [film] for either heterosexuals or homosexuals; if I'd made it to say, 'it's OK to be homosexual,' that would be too narrow; I want to

Tom is handsome and kind of loopy, a guy with a *menschy*, human quality. We also strongly needed someone who could get the joke, and Tom really wanted to play this role. Frankly, I really couldn't judge if they'd be romantic together, only if there'd be some rapport between them; I'd be unable to judge if there'd be romance between a heterosexual couple, either. They looked cute together, and it worked. I wanted that Cary Grant/Doris Day quality they brought."

It is the critical kiss between the two men which propels the plot into full gear. To Selleck: "Howard needs a slap in the face as a wake-up call, and we spent time on that. Yes, it was awkward kissing Kevin, but it's often awkward kissing actresses—you meet someone, shake their hand, and crawl into bed with them. That's the nature of this business, [and] you gotta get past that."

But the kiss is a solid laugh as Howard takes it

kiss for the first time, and the look on his face was pure 'what the hell are they doing there?'"

Publicly Selleck keeps his own counsel on his views of same-sex marriage, political protections for gay people, or any other controversial topic on the subject: Once bitten by the press, twice shy about public pronouncements. He legitimately feels that his private life is nobody's business: "When you're married with a kid, it's turning it up about 10 notches saying [in print] that you're leading a secret [gay] life. People write lies all the time—but when they write lies which hurt other people, that's where I draw the line."

Apparently he no longer minds being a sex-symbol for gay men, and as he plays his gay role with humor and love, it will thrust him once again into gay popularity.

"I never was closed-minded on the subject [of homosexuality]," he says. "I'd have played gay 10 years before, but no one ever asked. My wife saw the movie and she doesn't see Kevin as a threat to our marriage!"

The kiss plays an important emotional—and comic—part in the film. But earlier none of the creative staff, save Rudnick, thought very much about it—proof positive that Kline, Oz and Selleck are hets, because for the rest of us it's a major event. Selleck shakes his head: "The issue for me

in this movie was not could I kiss Kevin Kline—I'm an actor, and if the script says kiss him, I will—the issue for me was could I kiss him and make it look real enough to make people buy it?"

Rudnick's script itself is hysterically funny—a gay man's take on what happens when you deny an essential reality to try to fit into others' more traditional vision. In the plot, Howard is marrying Emily (Cusack) in a week's time. But after he's outed in front of a billion people, things get stickier. Debbie Reynolds as Howard's mother brings a necessary steel-beneath-the-Midwestern-stucco exterior in explaining how she doesn't care if he's gay, straight or neutral, but by God, there will be a wedding! So poor Howard gets to the altar with his exposed secret hanging all over him, when fate allows him an out.

Before that he attends the traditionalist bachelor party ready to rock 'n' roll like one of "da guys"—except it's with a group of straight men who have been convinced by him about the righteousness of Barbra Streisand as a cultural icon. (The 55-year-old comes in for a series of comic batterings—the sole use of the

word "fuck" in the film is at her expense—and no one has heard her reaction as yet.) Howard also buys a tape of "How to Be a Real Man" and tries to follow it in order to fit in, only to blow it when tricked into dancing to Diana Ross. It's this kind of loopy satire which elevates the film.

It's tough discussing this fine and funny comedy without wanting to give away all of Rudnick's jokes and Oz's inventive direction; a couple of the highlights concern secondary characters such as the model who lives with the film star played by Dillon, played by Shalom Harlow, a beautiful, Canadian-born, hugely successful fashion model in her own right. Rudnick gets off zingers about models' aversion to food when Dillon castigates her for looking "like a swizzle stick." He demands that she eat something, and Harlow's reaction to just the word "food" is drawn out into facial and bodily revulsion, which brings the house down. Queens around the world will be mimicking it at Halloween this year.

This is a wise and goofus film, cleverly acted and a boon to gay people all over the world.

Paramount Pictures has joined a growing list of the major Hollywood players who are putting some big bucks behind gay material. The industry has begun to see that films which show gay people as normal as well as amusing—quel concept!—can make money beyond the gay and lesbian communities as they cross over to mainstream U.S. society (and the rest of the world).

Last year *The Birdcage* made a fortune for

## Cinema

MGM/UA—a surprise because it dealt with a middle-aged gay couple. But because it was funny as only Mike Nichols and Elaine May can make 'em (based on a pretty funny French script of 18 years before), it succeeded with both straight and gay audiences. And didn't *Bound*, a hair-raising Mafia caper, succeed in part because of the steamy lesbian sex between the principals? The 1993 Demme/Nyswater drama *Philadelphia* was also successful, brushing aside fears that an AIDS/gay love story would scare audiences away. Most of the other queer-positive films in recent years have been low-budget U.S. independents and foreign-financed films, presented in a wide variety of levels of quality, but many lack the necessary big bucks to create momentum for high ticket sales.

Now Paramount has joined in with the search for gay hits with *In & Out*, the Paul Rudnick and Frank Oz upbeat and screamingly funny film which deals with a closeted gay man (Kevin Kline) who is outed on worldwide television by a former student (Matt Dillon) as he collects an Oscar for Best Actor. When the press rushes to tiny Greenleaf, Ind., to interview this unknown teacher of high school English literature, his fiancée (Joan Cusack), parents (Debbie Reynolds and Wilford Brimley), friends, students and principal (Bob Newhart) sit in shocked wonder at just what has come over their beloved Howard Brackett. This central act of coming to grips with an essential reality in the face of adversity and fear is the gist of the comedy, which has some of the best comic, even farcical, moments to be found in any film this year.

The original idea came from filmdom's strongest out gay producer, Scott Rudin (*The Addams Family* and *Ransom* on screen, Sondheim/Lapine's *Passion* on stage), who approached one of the best comedy writers around, Paul Rudnick (*Addams Family Values*, *Jeffrey*), who is refreshingly out as a perceptibly-gay man. They based it on Tom Hanks' careful outing of his high school drama teacher three years ago when Hanks won his first Oscar, for his brilliant work in *Philadelphia*.

Rudnick's strength as a writer lies in the well-wrought gag and the off-beat situation, and *In & Out* is blessedly filled with them. Director Oz, married with four kids, has always exhibited a keen awareness of social comedy and the tensions which crop up when folk come into conflict with their well-honed lies. (Check out his directorial work in *Little Shop of Horrors*, the Muppet films—he originated Miss Piggy—and *The Indian in the Cupboard*.) With superproducer Rudin at the helm, the project took off quickly, enlisting the gifted comic actor Kevin Kline straight away as Brackett, which made the sale to Paramount a snap (the studio also distributed the sour gay



Kevin Kline (left) and Tom Selleck star in *In & Out*

say it's OK to be whoever you are—don't hide. It's controversial in an acceptable way; I like subversion."

The subversion comes in as Rudnick has written a contemporary romantic comedy between two men in a film style popular 60 years ago—the screwball comedy—and the surprise comes from the casting of the fellow who brings Howard fully out as a gay man. The troika of producer, director and writer spent a lot of time on the pivotal character of Peter Malloy, the TV reporter played by Tom Selleck. For it is Selleck—long known as a political conservative uncomfortable with gay rights who has fought off rumors of being gay himself—who as Malloy plants a great big wet kiss on frustrated Howard, at 40 still in denial about his essential sexuality. The scene is a brilliant shocker, guaranteed to raise the temperature of the movie house at least 5 degrees Fahrenheit.

So, how do you go about casting such a pivotal couple? Oz remembers: "Kevin was already on board when I was hired. We needed somebody really handsome—a hunk—to play Malloy, and

and realizes the implications. It's also where Kline gets to bust out as a physical actor, a talent for which he was awarded an Oscar (for *A Fish Called Wanda*) almost a decade ago.

Selleck had a grand time with the scene: "Acting is basically doing, so we rehearsed it on a Friday night—we were concerned with tone at the time, not the mechanics—and Frank likes spontaneity, which I'm quite comfortable with and which Kevin is brilliant at. We played around with it to see where [the kiss] fit—or even if it fit. Paul was there and we adjusted some things. Then we returned Monday morning, laying it down in the wide shot. Well, after that you think you're winding down and you'll just be matching what you did in the mid-shots. But Tuesday we started over—which is very Oz; he's sly—just when I'd let my guard down, we found new stuff."

The scene is destined to be a classic, but Oz insists that it wasn't anything special. He lets slip, however, a reaction which should have tipped him off: "There was a cop, a sergeant, who was holding traffic for us, and I saw him when Kevin and Tom

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