

Low budget Goldmine

Todd Haynes explains why he hates big budgets and loves the '70s

BY TIM NASSON

After watching openly gay writer-director Todd Haynes' latest film, *Velvet Goldmine*, one might assume that he was raised in London during the early 1970s glamour rock era.

Surprise, surprise! Haynes, 37, grew up in Los Angeles and now resides in Brooklyn, New York. He has never lived across the pond.

"I wrote the film for a number of reasons," says Haynes, seated comfortably on an oversized couch in a suite at the Four Seasons Hotel in Boston, sipping a cappuccino. "I loved and still do love the music of that era. I grew into it after the fact. I grew into it as many others did during the '70s. We were aware of a new face of rock 'n' roll creeping into suburban record stores. Instead of Simon and Garfunkle, the new rage was David Bowie and Elton John."

From there, a seed took hold. "It was over 10 years ago that I thought about doing a film about this era," says Haynes. "The part of the '70s explored in *Velvet Goldmine* had never been explored on film before. There was such a preoccupation with style and self-preservation."

Speaking about the stars in his film, he insists, "I always knew I wanted Ewan McGregor in the role of Kurt Wild. When he read the script he was excited by the adventure."

And about the scene in which he shucks off all of his clothes and bounces around the stage? "Ewan had no inhibitions about taking off his clothes. The problem was trying to keep them on him. He is remarkably well equipped to play the role, wouldn't you say?" asks Haynes. "He has a very versatile penis," he adds, laughing.

"The glam era was a very brief moment when gender bending was not only acceptable but encouraged," Haynes continues, having crossed the line into *Velvet Goldmine*'s sexuality. "It did not last very long. I wanted to re-examine the period because I think the '70s was a unique era—not because it was kitsch, but for an extremely radical spirit we've not seen since. The dressing up and performing draws a direct relationship to sexuality and identity which was about the individual and nonconformity."

After asking Haynes why he chose a film with limited appeal—when having directed many successful and award-winning films would allow him to direct a bigger-budgeted and higher-profile film—he answers, "I'd rather die. I'd rather work at McDonald's than on a big budget film."

He has a reason: "Once one starts making big budget films they become the property of the studio. I have no aspirations to make a lot of money. I do not need a lot of money. I love making the kinds of films I have made."



Ewan McGregor (left) and Jonathan Rhys-Meyers



Todd Haynes (right) and Jonathan Rhys-Meyers

The films Haynes is best known for include *Safe* and *Poison*.

What does Haynes hope the release of *Velvet Goldmine* will accomplish? "My goal for the film," he says through an evil grin, "is that it turns every gay person straight and every straight person gay."

He continues: "It is kind of sad that people here, in the United States, try to keep things so black and white. England allows so much more individuality. People in the United States obviously think about a lot of things even if they do not talk about them. Look at *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. For 20 years it has been the most popular late night film for younger people—and what is the film about?"

Since *Velvet Goldmine* has taken nearly 10 years to make, Haynes is going to take it easy for a while. "I might travel a bit," he guesses. "Read a little and catch up on some of the films I have missed."

One last word from the director: "Put a little note in your article and tell all the cute guys to come find me sitting on my steps on the corner of Bedford and Ninth."

Stardust memories

Todd Haynes' *Velvet Goldmine* revisits the glitter rock roots of queerness

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

On first impression, Todd Haynes' new film *Velvet Goldmine*, a lovingly rendered tribute to the glitter rock of the early 1970s, doesn't seem to fit easily into his body of work. However, like his previous films *Poison* and *Safe*, *Velvet Goldmine* is—underneath the metaphorical imagery and the immaculately accurate soundtrack—an exploration of the terrors and pleasures of Self, and the ways in which one's times and environment can accentuate and/or steal it.

The film centers around three characters with heavily coded names: Brian Slade (Jonathan Rhys-Meyers), Jack Fairy (Micko Westmoreland) and Curt Wild (Ewan McGregor). Though each character—and indeed the film itself—is a composite, a perfect amalgamation of its era, it becomes clear that these characters

are meant to approximate David Bowie, Brian Eno and Iggy Pop, respectively. (The title of the movie actually comes from a Ziggy Stardust-era Bowie B-side.)

Christian Bale, meanwhile, plays Arthur Stuart, a reporter circa 1984 whose assignment is to write an article on the shadowy disappearance of Slade in the mid-'70s. As he investigates, he reflects upon his teen-age years, when the glam rock sounds and visions of Slade, Fairy and Wild changed his life, and how grim the world has become since his idols faded. Things take on a dreamlike, fantastic quality as Stuart realizes that it is not just the history of Slade, but the history of himself, that he is searching for.

Haynes uses decadently colorful, bewitching imagery to visually represent the romanticism of the most quixotic pop music ever produced.

Especially moving are the scenes in which Slade and Wild's onstage displays of affection—as seen in a newspaper photograph under shocked headlines—inspire teen-age Stuart, alone in his bedroom with Brian Slade posters gazing down upon him, to new heights of sexual and spiritual awareness.

Haynes gracefully accomplishes the presentation of glitter rock—for the first time in a fictional work—as a crucial force in banishing the shame of homosexuality. Back in 1991, when his film *Poison* was released with the help of funding from the National Endowment for the Arts, the religious right wing whipped itself into a furor and, as usual, got it all wrong. What conservatives saw as publicly funded homoeroticism was a brilliant, though hardly erotic, depiction of a predatory, fever-dream homosexuality born of repression.

Velvet Goldmine is Haynes' first film to even verge on the erotic: Slade and Wild's love is real, affectionate, passionate. After an initial jokey kiss—like the one in the popular film *In & Out*, which came off as a manipulative thrill—the kissing and touching depicted here seems truly revolutionary simply because it is not gratuitous; it is as integral to the film as it is for us to see Harvey Keitel kissing Holly Hunter in *The Piano*. It's actually romantic and touching in quite an old-fashioned way, a truly unself-conscious gay love story that refuses to wink and nudge. Slade and Wild are allowed the complexities of emotion, sensuality and heartbreak—just like real people!

The story of Stuart's exhilaration over his icons' unabashed affair, his parent's shame and condemnation of his homosexuality, and his flight to London (where his identity is acceptable) is an honest, empathetic portrayal of the personal evolution of many gay men.

To round the film out to Haynes' usual level of objectivity, Toni Collette (*Muriel's Wedding*) plays Mandy, Slade's consistently spurned wife, who faces the trials of her rocky marriage with buoyancy and fierce pride. Mandy is a figure who reminds us that there came a point in glam rock's revolution when one had to choose whether to keep one's head in the clouds or crash back to earth—and her fall is a real, painful one that doesn't spare us the selfishness of our hero as he shuts her out of his world.

Toward the end of the film, as the present-day Stuart confronts Wild in a bleak 1980s juke joint, Wild looks around at the downcast, cynical children of the Thatcher years and says, "We wanted to change the world. Instead, we changed ourselves." Stuart replies, "What's wrong with that?"

This is Haynes talking; his films have presented to us vast worlds in an almost overwhelmingly detailed way, and challenged us to take it personally. Ultimately, in Haynes' vision, the world is personal: Each individual's experience as a human being is a world of its own.

His aptitude for presenting this vision so effectively on film positions him as an eminently important artist. By rejecting the conventional, and combining technical and intellectual virtuosity with a deep love of humanity, his work actually alters the way we view our worlds and ourselves.



Toni Collette

■ *VELVET GOLDMINE* opens Nov. 6 at Koin Cinemas, 222 S.W. Columbia St. in Portland. Call 225-5555, ext. 4608, for show times and prices.