

The Rupert Report

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regional queer publications—to make ourselves cheerful and amenable to the film. We also met the Rupert, for about 90 seconds each, as his handler herded him around the room.

The lighting was very dim, and the star's attire was casual. Nightclub ambience is designed to make everyone attractive, so it was difficult (and a little intimidating) to study Everett's up-close looks. In the darkness, his most striking quality was his height—relative to mine, anyway. My secondary impression, not fully understood until later, was of a warm, friendly, normal person—where was the celebrity arrogance, the bitchy attitude? A little disappointing for my amorously star-struck inner fag.

There was nothing disappointing about the film, however. *The Next Best Thing* takes full advantage of the screen chemistry between real-life friends Everett and Madonna, and it offers a pleasing combination of comedy and drama. The story—about a gay man and a straight woman, close friends who, in a fit of drunkenness, conceive a child and agree to raise the baby together—is very timely and issue-oriented, with plenty of laughs along for the ride.

The Next Best Thing thoughtfully handles hot topics, such as the legal issues related to gay parenting, while avoiding most of the clichés associated with the more passé but still sometimes touchy matter of just plain being gay—thanks in part to Everett, who added more than two cents to the screenplay.

Next morning after seeing the film, I and 10 other writers attended the second of two one-hour panel interviews with the star in a lovely poolside bungalow. Like my upstairs room with a view of the beach, the bungalow was decorated all in white, the only color—aside from the motley crew of journalists—was the elegant *ikebana* flower arrangement on the coffee table.

Everett arrived looking much the same as the previous night, casual and reasonably well-groomed. In the morning light, I noticed he has wrinkles I've never seen on-screen or in a magazine—which is not to say there was any-



Daddy's roommate, Abbie (Madonna), gets wooed by Ben (Benjamin Bratt) and leaves Robert (Rupert Everett) at home with the kid, Sam (Malcolm Stumpf)

thing at all unattractive about him. On the contrary, this bit of humanness gave him a congenial, datable quality and made him seem less the iconic Hollywood sex symbol who can be touched only in dreams. He was earnest but not overly serious; his remarks were intelligent and sometimes eloquent. (His tag-along PR

person stayed quietly off to the side and let Everett be himself.)

One of the first things we discussed were the contributions he made to the finished script, most of which had to do with changing the nature of the relationship between the main characters, Robert and Abbie.

"The original screenplay,"

Everett began in his alluring English accent, "was about a very, very hard, bitter woman and a flubby, asexual queen who's an interior decorator [panel members moaned] who'd given up sex years ago...the idea being that he could be a father because he's not dabbling in the hideous art of homosexuality."

Although one of his goals was to make the character less stereotypical, Everett insisted he had no reservations about a scene in which Robert pretends to be a flaming queen in order to embarrass Abbie's ex-boyfriend.

"It was kind of irresistible," he explained flirtatiously. "I don't think John [Schlesinger, the director] would have done the scene that way. I was very much into going into character."

In order for his character, Robert, to be more of a hero in the film, Everett felt it was important for the audience to see "that he was a practicing homosexual, not

just a stately homo with no other life and basically a nursemaid."

But Everett didn't want Robert's heroism to come at Abbie's expense. *The Next Best Thing* reaches its climax when Abbie moves away and Robert has to sue for custody of their child. In such a context, giving Robert a sex life endangers his parental rights, and Abbie comes off as a Grade A bitch for taking advantage of the legal system's conservatism.

"She instigated the whole thing of having the kid in the original story," Everett said, leaning forward and gesturing with his hands—as if he were in a creative meeting with the director and screenwriter. "I thought that if she spontaneously had sex with him, then it really did make her into a villain by the end because she forced him into the situation and then forced him out of it.

Whereas, if two friends spontaneously had sex, then she has a much better foot to stand on."

Speaking about pal and co-star Madonna, Everett said: "The project was brought to me, and when I knew originally that I wanted to make the sexual act in it a spontaneous one, I thought she was the ideal person—apart from the fact that we're friends—because she's one of the few women you could put into a gay club and everyone would still want to fuck her."

Asked exactly how intimate his relationship with Ms. Ciccone is, Everett's response—"Have I boffed her?"—drew raucous laughter from the circle of journalists. Turning serious a little later, he added: "Madonna's got a sexual appeal that crosses the board, which I think is part of her fascination, for me."

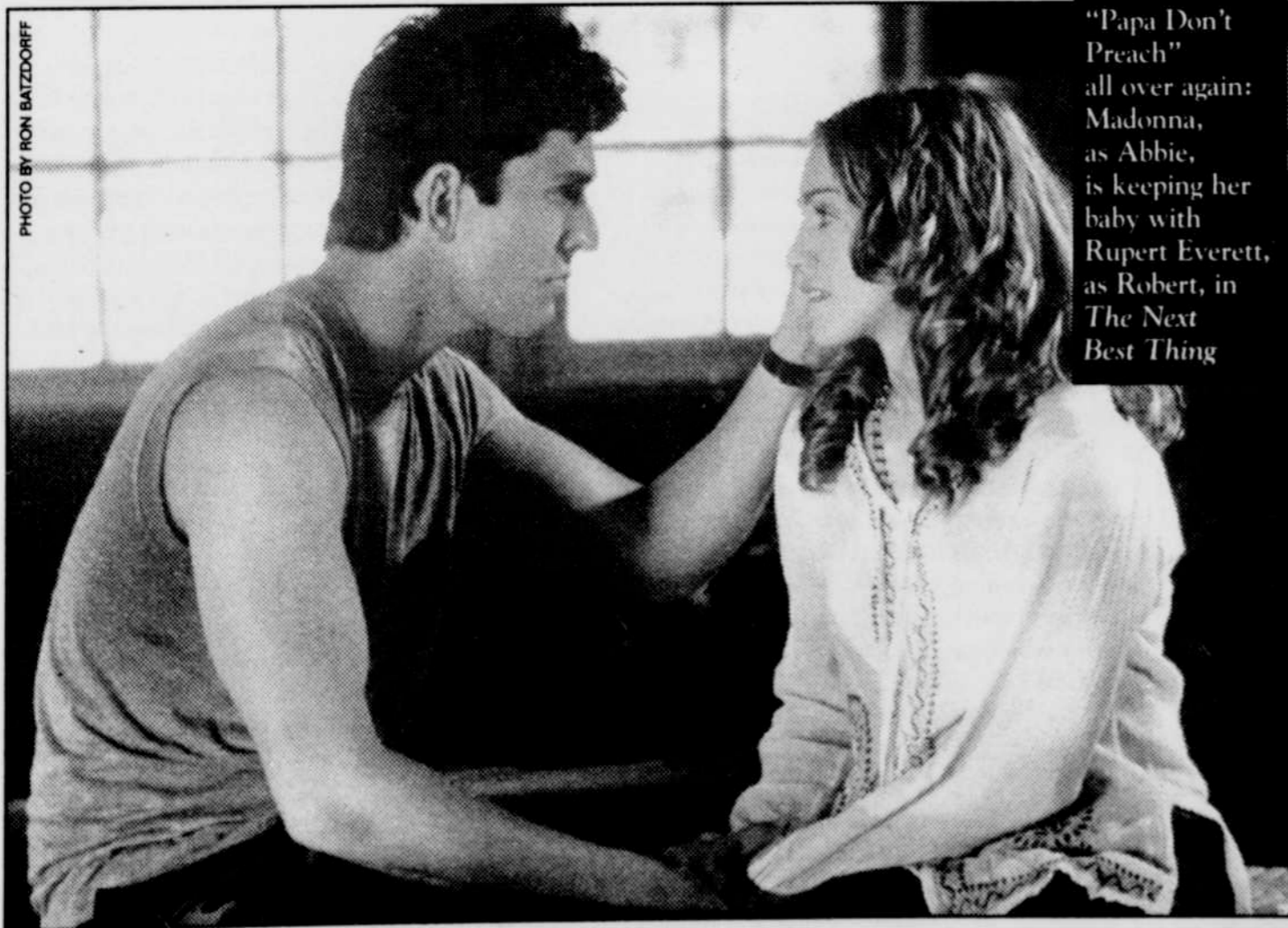
True enough. Although Madonna is at long last beginning to show her age in small ways, she's hip to that yoga thing now and still looking mighty sexy. Also, her acting ability is continuing to mature; this graceful and unaffected performance is perhaps her best work yet.

Everett's efforts to revise Abbie and Robert's relationship make the conflict between them less black-and-white, more realistic. Since he and Madonna are longtime friends, it was easy for them to add another layer of *verité* to the characters' friendship.

"I loved all those TV shows where the lead character has the same name as the actor, and the character is half the actor and half made up," Everett explained enthusiastically. "So, I wanted very much for my character and for Madonna's character to have a lot to do with us as people, and then maybe you could think that the story could have happened to her and me."

But there are some significant differences between *The Next Best Thing's* upstanding gay dad and the actor who plays him, as Everett glibly pointed out: "I thought about having kids until I was about 25, but not in a very serious way. You think of those things in a kind of romantic way when you're a kid, but they don't probably mean anything. I'm not very good at responsibilities of any sort. I have a dog." (Yes, it's his black lab in the movie.)

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"Papa Don't Preach" all over again: Madonna, as Abbie, is keeping her baby with Rupert Everett, as Robert, in *The Next Best Thing*

PHOTO BY RON BATZDORFF

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