

Old dog, new trick

Under Stephen Fry, glamour never looked so good

BY EVAN JAMES



Stephen Campbell-Moore (left) leads a pack of *Bright Young Things* in Stephen Fry's directorial debut

Scathing gossip columns, sprightly socialites and sinuous pansexual liaisons color *Bright Young Things*, the bedazzling directorial debut by gay novelist/actor/etc. Stephen Fry. Inspired by Evelyn Waugh's novel *Vile Bodies*, the film delves into the spectacular world of 1920s British socialites. And who better to portray this era than a prolific British writer who claims the U.K. record for saying "fuck" the most times in a single live broadcast and narrates Harry Potter audio books?

The film follows Adam Symes (played by the dashing Stephen Campbell-Moore), an aspiring novelist whose manuscript is confiscated at customs by officials trying to keep "pornographic" materials out of the country. Upon his arrival in London, he takes a job as a gossip columnist for a major newspaper in order to pay off the debt to his publisher and make enough money to marry the gorgeous Nina (Emily Mortimer).

But money and status change hands fast in British society's upper echelon, and Adam's bipolar bank account leads him from one wild goose chase to another. (Incidentally, the goose chase involves a fair amount of cocaine.)

Loving cinematographic attention is paid to the lush, hypnotic aesthetic of the 20s: the glamorous fashion; the opulent,

overcrowded parties; the splendid interior decorating. The film is ripe with memorable performances and complex characters split between the breakneck voyeurism of the society columns and the imminent dangers of war.

Fry complements surface beauty with visionary commentary on the vagaries of celebrity and scandal; furthermore, he effectively counterpoints his focus on fame with an abrupt transition into wartime disenchantment. The political and cultural climate of the time lend themselves to an alluring story, but it's Fry's skill as director and narrative engineer that gives the piece a ritual potency—he honors classical plot elements with original content, which makes for a film that is both traditionally engaging and surprising.

Bright Young Things has a shining surface. Some critics have opined that the ending is excessively sentimental and "untrue" to the novel and that Fry's cinematic mutation of *Vile Bodies* should prove altogether offensive to literature majors and other purists. But the film is not the book, and that's OK—who wants to watch a book, anyway? **JM**

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Jacob has two daddies

Mean Creek writer and director draws from personal experience

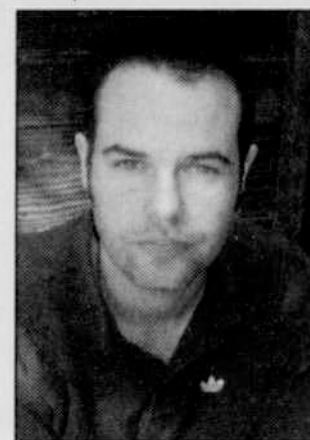
BY J.B. RABIN

You'll be hearing a lot about Jacob Aaron Estes. He wrote and directed *Mean Creek*, the final version of which earned him the Humanitas award at the Sundance Film Festival; its screenplay, the highly sought-after Nicholl Fellowship in Screenwriting; and its wide release, the fawning adulation of Hollywood.

He is experiencing the not-so-subtle transformation from a guy who tries to get meetings with other people to a guy who accepts meetings with other people.

You've probably already heard a lot about how he shot *Mean Creek* in Oregon—more specifically in Estacada and Troutdale—and that most of the secondary characters were played by Portland or Seattle natives. You also might know that his second full-length screenplay, *Nearing's Grace*, is being filmed in Portland.

It's what you haven't heard about the Los Angeles filmmaker that will likely be of most interest, though.



Jacob Aaron Estes loves Oregon

After Estes wrote the first draft of *Mean Creek* but before he was invited to the O'Neill Playwrights Conference to polish it up, the 31-year-old was putting the finishing touches on a short film called *Positive*. This film—which is getting no press, even on the tails of Estes' rise—is about two men dealing with HIV and AIDS in 1984.

"It's a true story based on my father's experience," Estes told me when I spoke with him on his 10th straight day of promoting *Mean Creek*. "In 1984 there was a huge resistance to getting tested because everybody was afraid that Reagan was going to send people to some island if they were even tested...especially if they found out they were positive."

Estes' dad was a doctor and, he says, "knew how to administer the test and [have it] not show up on a national database."

Though he regularly administered HIV tests to patients, Estes' father made an agreement with his partner that neither of them would get tested. At the time, the prognosis was dreary; as Estes puts it, "Who wants to know they're going to die in a month?"

But his father did eventually test himself and came up negative. Although his father's partner "freaks out," shares Estes, "my father insists that he just get it over with and just get tested. They had been in the relationship at that time for five years and eventually close to 20."

His father does the test on his partner and "finds out himself that his partner has HIV and spends like a week unable to tell him," says Estes.

Estes also managed to reference his personal life in his feature directorial debut. "I put that into *Mean Creek* a little bit—just having one of the main characters have two dads—and played it off-handedly," he says.

Perhaps now we can add the queer community to Estes' growing fan base, which also includes indie film lovers, for persevering to get his little movie made, and the Oregon Film & Video Office for managing to make a visually stunning film...in Troutdale.

For that, he deserves an Oscar. **JM**

J.B. RABIN is a Portland free-lance writer.

An udder delight John Waters gets back to the business of freak show

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

If John Waters' recent work—the charmingly autobiographical *Pecker* and the fun, if half-baked, *Cecil B. Demented*—has been a little too PG-13 for your tastes, take heart! With his new *A Dirty Shame*, the infamous gay director returns to his extraordinarily tasteless comedic roots, leaving us to wonder whether we're laughing so hard because what we're seeing is so hilarious or because we can't believe we're seeing it at all.

Produced by queer indie film godmother Christine Vachon's Killer Films, *A Dirty Shame* is the story of sexually repressed Baltimore housewife and drugstore clerk Sylvia Stickles (Tracey Ullman); her sexually unfulfilled, nice-guy husband, Vaughn (Chris Isaak); and their sexually

boisterous, gigantically bosom-enhanced stripper daughter, Caprice (Selma Blair), also known by her marquee name, "Ursula Udders."

Sylvia and Vaughn are more or less content as "neuters" (Baltimore slang for vanilla-sex squares), but when Sylvia is hit on the head and knocked for a loop, she's lured into a cult of sex addicts led by the lasciviously messianic Ray-Ray (Johnny Knoxville).

In the liberated company of Ray-Ray's apostles—whose sexual preferences (intricately detailed by Waters in panting, grimy Technicolor) include everything from bear threesomes to infantilization to the scatological—Sylvia learns that sex addiction is brought on by freak-accident concussions, that she's quite the extroverted



Tracey Ullman is a girl gone wild in *A Dirty Shame*

"cunnilingus bottom" and that she and Ray-Ray's disciples will face off with the decency-mongering neuters for a showdown in which a new sex act will be discovered, bringing humankind the orgasmic salvation it's been waiting for!

The scenario is ludicrous, obscene, sacrilegious and effluvial, and the fun Waters and

company have with it simply spills off the screen (not literally, thank goodness). Waters' appetite for nose-thumbing taste-violation is fully, hysterically evident; both Patricia Hearst and David Hasselhoff appear in *A Dirty Shame*, and they seem right at home.

Waters retains his endearingly cheap, grade-Z grindhouse style of yore; the nonstop parade of deliciously tacky, cornball visual gags makes Tarantino's *Kill Bill*-isms seem positively reputable in comparison.

Shock value might be more elusive now than it was in Waters' 1970s heyday, but his sense of the absurd interrelationship between the everyday/"normal" and the grotesque/"abnormal" remains timeless, and that's what makes *A Dirty Shame*, for all its encyclopedic, eagerly displayed knowledge of unusual sexual practices, so genuinely good-natured, entertaining and funny. **JM**