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The Best & Worst of Gay Cinema

By Steven Madison
Q-Notes Staff

One of the most distressing aspects of gays in the films of 1987 was their lopsidedness. From England, we had the romantic and beautiful infatuations of "Maurice" and the stirring autobiographical tragedy "Prick Up Your Ears." The best America could come up with in 1987 was the unbalanced Will Patton character in "No Way Out." That's truly a sad commentary about what's going on with gays in American films.

Not wanting to spoil "No Way Out" for those who didn't venture into a theater to see this well-praised (but not by me) suspense thriller, I will simply say that one of the key characters in this movie about murder and cover up in the higher echelons of the Pentagon is Gene Hackman's extremely loyal aide, played by actor Will Patton. The movie appealed to a great many people for several reasons. Current heartthrob Kevin Costner plays the leading role of Navy commander Tom Farrell, framed by Patton for the murder of Hackman's mistress (Sean Young). The movie does manipulate the audience in true thriller fashion with a series of chases and narrow escapes. And, in a startling shift,

the film treats us to one of the best surprise endings in several years.

All of these are enticing reasons to be drawn to the film, and yet it left me cold almost from the start. I'll deal with its treatment of the gay character momentarily, but just as distressing is the movie's handling of its other people. The film's few black characters are embarrassingly slow-witted. All of the senators have deep Southern accents (they are being made fools of by Hackman as Secretary of Defense), and the few women who are involved are portrayed either as prostitutes or bitchy, passionless professionals.

Will Patton's character, though, is admittedly the most offensive. It is not giving away a major surprise to reveal that his character is homosexual (gay is hardly the correct word in his case). At one point, when another person in the film is shocked to find out about Patton's sexual preference, he utters, "Well, I'm damned." The cutting response to that: "If the Old Testament's right, they are." The theater audience roared at this charming remark.

It was at this point that I wanted to leave, but professional moviegoer that I am, I remained to see what other horrors awaited. Patton's approach to the part was to play this unbalanced person with the most absurd wide-eyed pleading for affection imaginable. He is obsessed with Hackman (why, one wonders?), and will do anything for him. Naturally, the road he chooses for himself makes for a truly infuriating conclusion when he kills himself to save his

Civilized Behaviors

boss. After the wonderfully upbeat gays that Robert Preston, Daniel Day Lewis and Frank Ripplloh have enacted in the past few years, Patton's character is a disturbingly giant backward step toward the lonely, self-loathing gays of several decades ago.

It's not Patton's fault, of course; he didn't write the role or direct the movie (blame there goes to Robert Garland and Roger Donaldson). But it just gives modern audiences one more reason to be suspicious of gays and to use them as objects of scorn or pity.

A gay friend of mine admitted to liking the film and Patton's role. He insisted that Patton actually was cleverer than everyone else in the movie; he was able in the end to save his boss by diverting suspicion to himself despite our knowledge of what really happened. It was the police and Washington officials, he insists, who were the fools. Sorry, but that's too easy a way to ignore the homophobia (and homosexual ignorance) present in this movie. One may applaud the plot tricks of writer Garland, but his social consciousness needs a large injection of humanity.

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