

# The Brains Behind Nobody's Fool

By Steve Warren

Robert Benton is a modest man who makes modest films. He's been deservedly Oscar-ed for his hits *Kramer vs. Kramer* (as writer and director) and *Places in the Heart* (writer) and nominated for co-writing *Bonnie and Clyde*, his first produced screenplay. He's also been overlooked for such gems as *The Late Show*, *Still of the Night*, and *Bad Company*. It remains to be seen which category his latest, *Nobody's Fool*, will fall into.

I would describe the bearded, 62-year-old Benton as "sweet," but that might be misinterpreted. A friend to the gay/lesbian community but not a Friend of Dorothy, he's been married to the same woman for 30 years. He congratulates me on making it to six years with my current lover ("The first seven years are the hardest," he offers encouragingly) and says he wishes his 28-year-old son could make it past a year and a half with *someone*.

"It's still an extraordinarily homophobic country," Benton notes. "In women's rights and gay rights we're seeing an enormous backlash." That could be good news for how lesbians and gays are portrayed in the movies, he says with his customary optimism. "I think there'll be a backlash to the backlash...Even in the Reagan era they didn't come down hard on movies. You always have room for a certain freedom of expression."

"I'm old enough to remember the McCarthy era," the filmmaker adds. "I lived through it. It was frightening, but I don't think we'll see anything like that again."

Before getting into film, Benton—then art director for *Esquire* magazine—co-authored *The IN and OUT Book* with composer Harvey Schmidt (*The Fantasticks*), a friend from their senior year in high school in Waxahachie, Texas, until today. A precursor of the non-books currently in vogue, it was, Benton says, the work of two "poor kids from Texas trying to figure out how to live in New York."

How, I ask Benton, do screenwriters know what's IN and OUT in Hollywood? Is there a grapevine that says "This is a good time for gay scripts" or "Don't bother submitting anything about gays this week"?

He replies sadly that he still hasn't figured it out. "I've lost that instinct," which he used to have as a journalist whose work reached the public within weeks or months of being written. "If I write a movie it's two years out of my life."

"I'm 62," Benton goes on. "If I'm lucky, I'll make five or six more films, and I don't know what I want them to be. I know I want them to be personal, and I think I'm better off writing my own scripts." An exception, however, is that he'd like to collaborate on a screenplay with Richard Russo, whose original novel was the basis for *Nobody's Fool*.

Benton became involved with the project after openly gay producer Scott Rudin showed Russo's novel to Benton's frequent producer Arlene Donovan and she passed it on to him. He loved the fact that the story was character-driven, a relative rarity in movies today, and the small-town setting made him nostalgic for Waxahachie.

Observing his son has made Benton realize that "young people write about the present and the future. They can't write about history because they don't have any." It's his job, therefore, to evoke, if not write about, the past.

Speaking of history, I've been waiting for this opportunity to clarify something about *Bonnie and Clyde*. In *The Celluloid Closet* Vito Russo quoted Benton's writing partner David Newman as saying their first draft was true to biographies that indicated Clyde Barrow was bisexual and had affairs with several of his male drivers, who were turned into the composite of C. W. Moss. The gay aspect, according to Russo, "was erased when director Arthur Penn and producer-actor Warren Beatty joined the project."

Contrary to the obvious interpretation, Benton says Beatty wasn't afraid to play gay. "It was Arthur, not Warren. What happened is, we had done this script for Truffaut, but he did *Fahrenheit 451* instead. We went through a period of not getting it made, then Truffaut showed it to Warren."

"One day Warren called me: 'I'm on Page 15. I wanna buy it.' I told him, 'Wait till you read Page 45.'"

"He called back later and said, 'I'm finished. I see what you mean but I still wanna buy it.' I said, 'Just understand, Warren, that's not coming out.'"

After Penn signed on as director he called the writers in for a conference and presented his case: "Whatever these characters were, everything in the public's mind is going to be a gay issue...If you're going to make a movie about gays, that's fine; but don't make them killers." We could have used Penn's thinking 25 years later, when *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Basic Instinct* were made.

"Arthur's argument was so eloquent," Benton says, "that we made the changes. When the movie came out we heard from Godard, who had also wanted to direct it. He called to say, 'Now let's make it the way it should be made.'"

Benton believes that because the characters were sympathetic, they could have been made gay without triggering homophobia in the audience; but he admits that he may be too trusting: "When you're dealing with violence and murder and gay issues it's very complicated. I don't know if I'm the one to say how it should be done."

The next screenplay he and Newman had produced was *There Was a Crooked Man*, a Kirk Douglas western set in a territorial prison and directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz (*All About Eve*). It had three gay characters—a sadistic prison guard (Bert Freed) who is killed in a riot sparked by his whipping of the hunky inmate (Michael Blodgett) who resists his advances; and a bickering couple (Hume Cronyn, John Randolph) in a long-term relationship, which remains one of the rare instances of a gay couple presented naturally and as a non-issue in a mainstream film.

"I love those two guys!" Benton says. "Those two guys were great. That's one of the few parts of the movie I still like...It was the only love story in the movie," he points out.

Whether or not Benton was aware that gay



Writer and Director Robert Benton. His newest film, *Nobody's Fool*, opens January 13. Photo by Steve Warren

characters were OUT in Hollywood for the next two decades, the next significant one to appear in one of his films (unless you read between the lines of his buddy movie *Bad Company*) was Xander Berkeley as Nicole Kidman's husband in *Billy Bathgate*.

Sadly recalling his most visible flop, Benton notes that it was "the only time I didn't write the screenplay," and that he "didn't tamper with" the one Tom Stoppard adapted from E. L. Doctorow's novel. In the film Berkeley is caught in bed with Christopher Ruben. Ruben's character had another scene in the book, Benton recalls, involving the title character.

No characters in *Nobody's Fool* are identified as gay, but Benton reveals that in Russo's novel, Toby, who is played by Melanie Griffith, is bisexual. Whatever affairs she has with women in the book "take place offscreen," he says, and when he changed the ending, in which she had an affair with Paul Newman's son (Dylan Walsh), it made sense to change that too.

While he's too chivalrous to admit Griffith had given bad performances in answer to the question of how he got a good one from her, Benton blames it on typecasting. "Actors who achieve a certain success in a role are asked to repeat themselves with increasingly diminishing results. People have tended to cast her in caricature roles," he observes. "You can only lift the material so much if you're an actor."

"I wanted Toby to be like Jean Arthur in *Only Angels Have Wings*—a guy among guys, but not too tough. I wanted a certain frailty from Melanie, but not that 'little girl' thing. On the first day of rehearsals, I had her and Paul switch roles so she could see the rhythm was the same. We did that for half a day and she gave me just what I wanted."

Jessica Tandy's line, "God's zeroing in on me. I have the feeling this is the year He lowers the boom," came right from the book, Benton swears. He realizes how bad it sounds in light of the actress's subsequent death, and blames himself for being in denial about how sick she was during the filming.

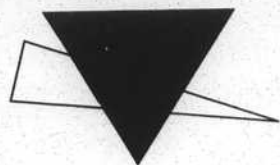
There may also be denial in Benton's appraisal of the current situation for lesbians and gays in Hollywood, but I prefer to think he's merely prophetic.

"I think Hollywood has become really relatively free of cant and hypocrisy," he says. "A huge amount of the talent in Hollywood is gay, and I think it's treated fairly. I don't think anyone refuses to hire gays now."

With such openly gay men as David Geffen and Scott Rudin in positions of power, that may be true behind the scenes. But what of closeted actors afraid of never getting a straight role once their true orientation becomes known?

"I swear I don't think that it is going to matter very soon," Benton says.

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