

# The Man Behind *To Wong Foo*

Screenwriter Douglas Carter Beane on bicoastal success, *le tout* Hollywood in drag, and the role of the responsible "New York fag writer"

The Front Page Interview by Daniel Vaillancourt

On September 8, Universal Pictures released the long-awaited *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*. The comedy, written by openly gay playwright and screenwriter Douglas Carter Beane, stars Wesley Snipes, Patrick Swayze, and John Leguizamo as Noxeema, Vida, and Chi Chi—three New York City drag queens who revolutionize the tiny fictional town of Snydersville, Nebraska, when their cross-country trek to Tinseltown is derailed. According to Universal, America is about to learn a thing or two about being fabulous. "During one incredible weekend," reads a recent promo piece, "eyes will be opened, broken hearts healed, and hair teased within an inch of its life."

The film, produced by Steven Spielberg's Amblin Entertainment, was directed by Beeban Kidron (*Used People, Antonia and Jane*). Openly gay Bruce Cohen (*The Flintstones*) served as executive producer. Academy Award nominee Stockard Channing (*Six Degrees of Separation*), Arliss Howard, Blythe Danner, and Melinda Dillon co-star as Snydersville locals.

Ever since Spielberg showed interest in Beane's original screenplay—his first—the confirmed New York writer has been busy in Hollywood. Current Beane film projects in pre-production include *Father's Day*, a remake of the French comedy *Les Compères*, with Robin Williams and Billy Crystal slated to star, for Joel Silver at Warner Bros.; *This Could Be the Start of Something Big*, a comedy for Oliver Stone; and the screen adaptation of Beane's first stage play,

*Advice from a Caterpillar*, which deals with bisexuality.

Best of all, Beane is creating a sitcom for Carsey-Werner (*Roseanne, Grace Under Fire*). The untitled show, a vehicle for up-and-coming actress Parker Posey, revolves around the relationship between a gay man and his best friend, a straight woman. If all goes well, it will hit the airwaves by mid-season.

Holed up in the hot, humid Big Apple, the 35-year-old scribe recently took time out from his hectic schedule to answer questions. His most pressing inquiry: "*Wong Foo*-mania ... Do you have it yet?"

DV: Tell us about *Wong Foo*.

DCB: It's about the difference between what is supposed to be middle America and what is supposed to be the gay community. It's about learning and helping each other... You will have a good time. You will laugh. It's a fun movie. And when it's all over, you'll feel proud, which is my favorite thing... This is for everyone. I wanted a film that straights could go see, and "get," and have a good time. But I also wanted gay people to go and at the end, say, "That is so cool." I mean, it is a mainstream film. There's no denying that. It is Universal. I mean, there is something about seeing that huge globe on a big screen that says, "Universal," and then the next shot is Patrick Swayze quoting *Gypsy* and putting makeup on his face. You just go, "Wow!"

DV: What inspired you to write the screenplay?



Douglas Carter Beane

DCB: I actually wrote it as a writing sample... I got the idea when I was with my mom on Easter vacation [in 1993, in Cape May, New Jersey]. It was spring break and RuPaul was on MTV. My mom was watching, and said, "She's a lovely girl, but she has terrible proportions." And I thought, "That's what they think of drag queens?" [I'd also seen clips from] *The Gay Agenda*, in which there's a line that says, "These so-called drag queens want to take over your town." And I just thought,

"That's something to be afraid of? I think in most towns it would be a plus."

DV: How did the script find its way to Steven Spielberg?

DCB: I wrote it very quickly, in about a week and a half. I just locked myself up and went days and nights without sleep and food just because I wanted to get it out. And then I gave it to my agent, Mary Meagher. She had some suggestions, and I rewrote it in about three days. And then it went out to about five or six studios, and they all passed. Some of them were really rude about it, and offended we'd even showed it to them. One studio said, "This is not a suitable subject matter for a film." ... So I was getting all these passes the first day, and I thought, "That's it, it's over, back to macaroni and cheese for you, Doug." Then my agent called and said we had a bidding war between Disney and Spielberg, and I was like, "They know they're drag queens, right? They don't think they're dragons or dragoons or drag racers?"

[Spielberg] had been looking for a long time to address homophobia in America. It's something he'd had his eye out for. [*Wong Foo*] was exactly what he wanted... He wanted to show that there was a place for everyone in America... He also said he'd just come back from concentration camps in Poland and needed a laugh.

DV: What would you say to those who will immediately compare your film to Stephan Elliott's *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*?

DCB: God-bless. I mean, it is an amazing coincidence to me that I would go off and write this and then find out that there's another script in Australia which is about three drag queens driving across [that country]. I mean, honestly, our film is not about preaching to the converted. Our film is

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