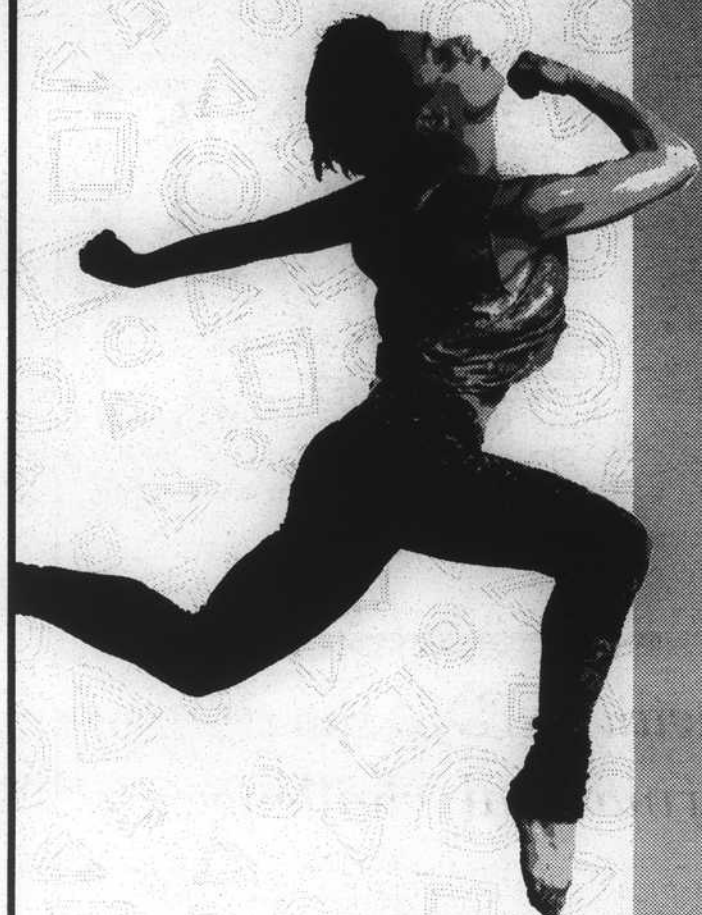


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The Man Behind To Wong Foo
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much more about the heart and connection and warmth. [Priscilla] was about shocking and great costumes and music.

When I first heard about it, I said, 'It's in Australia. No one will see it.' But when it became successful, I went, "Well, it is inevitable that they will be compared." Amblin actually took a meeting with Mr. Elliott, and they literally went over each other's script and said, "They're different. We're fine." Which makes me very happy.

DV: So if someone thinks they don't need to see *Wong Foo* because they've seen *Priscilla*...

DCB: Oh, no, they're totally different movies. And I think the *Priscilla* people would say the same thing. Absolutely. I mean, if nothing else, this is about America. This is very much about what it is to be gay in America.

DV: Did you write the screenplay with three specific actors in mind?

DCB: I wrote Chi Chi for John Leguizamo. The other two, I had different actors for different scenes. I was amazed when Wesley wanted to do it. And equally amazed with Patrick. We had some amazing people try out for Vida Boheme. It was outrageous.

DV: Tell me about the casting process.

DCB: Well, they had to do drag. They had to do drag screen tests, which was great. I've seen every major Hollywood actor in a gown. Some of them were wonderful, and some of them literally fell off their heels.

DV: Name names.

DCB: Name names! Who fell off their heels? John Turturro was pretty bad. [Laughter.] But he's a great actor. It doesn't mean they're bad actors, it just means as drag queens, they're not making it happen. Some of them were just so beautiful. James Spader, my God, he was breathtakingly gorgeous. And Matt Dillon—forget it! And every damn Baldwin, I saw in a skirt. It was like, "Which one was that again?" [Laughter.] And John Cusack looked exactly like Joan Cusack, which I thought was amazing. I said, "Why don't we just hire Joan Cusack and say it was John Cusack." [Laughter.]

DV: What role did you have in the casting process?

DCB: Beeban, our director, was really wonderful. First thing she said was, "How do you feel about straight men?" I said, "I have no problem with straight men playing these roles. I will have a problem with famous closet queens doing the roles." And she agreed, so we did not [audition] them—or people who were very homophobic, who *did* want to play the roles, which amazed me.

DV: Why do you think homophobic actors would want to do *Wong Foo*?

DCB: It's a well-written script. You've got a lot of great lines, a lot of sad scenes. It's a great role. I don't think they necessarily got what it was about, you know. That those big speeches that they got to say were actually about gay issues. Honestly, I think it was just because it was a chance for them to put on a dress and get an Oscar nomination.

DV: Some members of the gay community are clamoring, "Why don't we have three gay actors in these roles?"

DCB: My feeling is, "How would we know they're gay?" I mean, I don't know how you audition that. "You call that a blow job?" [Laughter.] I come from the theater. Theater is about acting. What can you do? What do you bring? What are the qualities that you bring? I mean, by that same flip of the coin, am I not going to cast a gay actor in a straight role? That would be a horrible thing to do... It is called "acting," it is not called "being."

This film hired so many gay actors and performers, it's outrageous. And it was never an issue. What Beeban wanted to do was—just as the script is about bringing to this world people who normally wouldn't be seeing it—bring audiences. People are going to go see this movie who would never see *Priscilla*, *Queen of the Desert*. Who wouldn't go see *Philadelphia*. Wouldn't see anything that touched on a gay issue. There are people who are going to go see this movie because they saw the trailer, and Wesley looks like fun. And he is fun.

DV: Any funny anecdotes from the location shooting in New York City or Lincoln, Nebraska?

DCB: Beautiful, gorgeous Lincoln, Nebraska. God bless it... One thing that was hysterical is

"I've seen every major Hollywood actor in a gown. Some of them were wonderful, and some of them literally fell off their heels."

that we became this gay pilgrimage spot for everything in the Midwest. Suddenly, lesbians in Volkswagens were coming from Minnesota. [Laughter.] What I also thought was hysterical is when they said, "We're casting for extras," and like, 500 drag queens showed up from like every place in the Midwest. It was like, "No, we *have* the drag queens. We want your standard issue middle American." [Laughter.]

DV: What makes you proudest about *Wong Foo*?

DCB: What I'm proudest of is that at no point does

anyone have to explain why they're gay, or what makes them gay. They just are; it just is. They never for a moment doubt it—they just do it. I have sensed a tremendous release in the sneak screenings that we've done. When Wesley checks out a guy as he goes by, or when the police pulls them over and Patrick looks in the rearview mirror and says, "What in gay hell!"—when they say, "We're gay"—there's a release in the audience. They laugh and they applaud, like, "Oh, thank God." We're talking about it. We're saying it. We're not *Some Like It Hot*. It's not like, "Oh, but they're really straight." No. They're gay, and that's what it's about.

DV: Which of your upcoming film and TV projects are gay-themed?

DCB: The television show obviously is. I mean, I'm gay. I will bring that to anything I write. That is understood. I *don't* get jobs because of that. I also *get* jobs because of it. People have to understand that I'm not going to *not* write gay. I mean, there is a gay aspect to everything I'm writing. It's part of my understanding of life, so it's going to be in my scripts.

DV: Do you feel a responsibility as a successful, openly gay screenwriter working in Hollywood?

DCB: Yes. To be honest, I do... It's to show that, yes, we are everywhere. It's a part of everyone's life. Everyone knows someone who's gay. You may not know they're gay, you may be in denial about it, but you know someone who's gay. In all my writing, that's what I'm trying to say.

DV: Any desire to move to Hollywood?

DCB: No. Not really... I go there for a visit, and I have a nice time, but I'm a New York person.

DV: What if *not* living in Hollywood impedes your screenwriting career?

DCB: Fine. Fine... I'm a New York fag writer. That's from David Mamet's play *Speed the Plow*. I'm Hollywood's biggest dream. If I come onto a project I've got class written all over me. [Laughter.] It's like, "He's from New York. He sleeps with men. He's a real writer. He's not one of these Hollywood closet queen writers." [Laughter.]

DV: How would you describe your ideal career?

DCB: Kind of what I'm doing. I get to write plays, I get to write great television shows, and whenever I write a screenplay, people want to buy it. It doesn't get better than this.