

GWEN WYNNIE AND JAMES EGAN ON FILMMAKING AND FIGHTING HOMOPHOBIA

MONA DE CRINIS



The Making of an *American Primitive*

Talking with writer/director Gwen Wynnie and her producing partner James Egan about their important film, *American Primitive* (see review on page 56), is like chatting up old friends: intimate, honest and free of false pretenses. Maybe that's what happens when people create something they truly believe in instead of blindly seeking fame and fortune. Of course, a little recognition and offers of funding wouldn't be turned away, but their project was truly a labor of love.

American Primitive is a story about relationships and family, sexuality and secrets, and all that can go wrong—and right—in between. Madeline Goodhart is a teenage girl who discovers that her father, Harry, is gay. The time is 1973, the place is Cape Cod, Massachusetts and the gay rights movement, spurred on by Stonewall a few

years earlier, had just begun to crest.

Based on her own life, writer/director Gwen Wynnie has captured the journey in a fictionalized, character-driven drama that explores the issues of parenting and homophobia in our culture. But the road has been long and hard, fraught with disappointment and friction due to the sensitive subject matter.

"We were peddling this around 15 years ago and it was really difficult because people just weren't interested in the story because it was taboo and it's a girl protagonist," Wynnie recalls. "And then Hollywood began to change, realizing that girls DO buy tickets, women buy tickets, and then *Brokeback* [Mountain] came out, yet we still get the [message] that the male heterosexual community—the buyers of movies—feel that straight men won't respond to this movie

so they're afraid to get behind it."

But Wynnie and Egan, a USC professor with roots in the desert, persevered, believing that this film needed to be made and most importantly, needs to be seen.

"I've come to the conclusion is that it's homophobia in the society, that's what makes growing up in a gay household difficult, because you ARE rejected," Wynnie notes. "But that's certainly not the reason to not allow gay parenting—because kids get teased. Homophobia has to be eradicated, and that's why I wanted to make this movie."

Wynnie wrote the first morsel, a disco scene she says was influenced by John Schlesinger's *Midnight Cowboy*, while still in film school at USC. "It was really an exercise, and then I decided to drag that out when I graduated," she recalls, smiling. After witnessing the work of some of her

(Opposite page) Behind the scenes with *American Primitive* director Gwen Wynne (standing left) with Tate Donovan who portrays Gary Goodhart (sitting) and Adam Pascal who portrays Theodore Hilly (standing).

peers, who were creating documentaries about children in gay households, Wynne realized that she had to write the entire story. "I saw this one filmmaker that really kind of white-washed the difficulties. And I thought, you know what? Don't white-wash it. You need to show the conflicts."

Growing up in a home where the primary parent is struggling with the expression of his sexual identity is by its very nature conflicting. It was a house where sleepovers—a rite of passage for teenage girls—were non-existent and friends were discouraged from coming over at all because to be found out might mean the dismantling of the family, especially in an era when there were no protections in place for queers. It was a time when homosexuality was a topic discussed only in disapproving whispers and acted upon in seedy underground clubs or behind closed doors.

"Having to live with someone who's living in fear, that's a terrible way to live," acknowledges Wynne, who is straight and happily married, as is her real-life sister—a fact which directly confronts the concept embraced by the Religious Right that gay parents churn out gay babies (not that there's anything wrong with that). But educating the ignorant who believe such fallacies, which only serve to feed homophobia, is a large part of why she and Egan made this film.

"That's the greatest fear, that we're going to raise gay children," says Egan, who is openly gay. "The real issue is that gay people come from straight people, so if there's going to be a law then let's stop the breeders, if you want to get rid of gay people," he adds with a sardonic laugh.

A core belief in the intrinsic value of this film's message of equality and acceptance landed *American Primitive* smack in the middle of the Palm Springs International Film Festival rather than Sundance.

"This screening at the Annenberg [Theater] is really critical for us, because it's the world premiere," Egan explains. "We decided that Palm Springs, where there is tremendous support for this particular political message, would be an ideal place for us to do our premiere, because you can get lost in Sundance. This city is so conscious in a way that will bring this film the attention it deserves. That kind of response will give us the platform we need to go out to distributors and say, 'Look, 400 people showed up and loved the film. The press turned out and the response has been very positive' and use that

to leverage a distribution deal."

"The whole market has changed so drastically," Wynne agrees, "and now with the economy, there are fewer independent distributors. Our goal is to try to get this to mainstream commercial multiplexes. We want to go to Middle America with this movie."

Both Wynne and Egan are hoping that their presence at PSIFF will help secure a large distributing group, like Sony Pictures Classics or Fox Searchlight. They even have plans to bring *American Primitive* into high schools and possibly churches.

"My greatest hope is that it reaches a wide audience and it gets people talking about these issues, about gay parenting, and that if you have a parent who loves you that's what matters. That's who should be raising children—parents who want kids. It has nothing to do with your sexual orientation," Wynne stresses. "That's the hope, that it reaches an audience worldwide, because there's certainly prejudice about gay parenting throughout the world; it's not just here."

In the meantime they're going to shop it

around at festivals and continue to have test screenings, which have been encouraging. At a screening for gay youth, Egan recalls how the kids talked back to the screen, shouting things like, "That's right! That's so accurate!"

They've also recently screened the film in San Francisco as a fundraiser for an organization that is very near and dear to Wynne's heart: COLAGE, a national movement of children, youth and adults with one or more lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer (LGBTQ) parent. "A lot of people came up to us afterward who were children of gay parents," says Egan. "One girl shared in the audience—it was so moving—she was in tears, thanking Gwen for making this movie and for telling her story, a story that had never been told."

"We really want to support COLAGE's efforts in bringing light to kids growing up in gay families," Wynne continues. "We want to be able to have them use the film as a fundraiser and also to generate information about the organization, because I'm sure there are still going to be people who are secretive about their gay parents. Now they have a place where they can call and get some

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information and resources. I wish it had existed when I was growing up. I was always searching for information.”

The goal of accessing American youth with a film of such controversial subject matter may be closer than one might think, thanks to the popularity of teen sensation Josh Peck, who starred in Nickelodeon's successful series, *Drake and Josh*, and more recently, the film *The Wackness*.

“Josh Peck has millions and millions of fans. He can really carry a message to teenagers across the country just by being in this film,” says Egan. “I think every girl in the country is going to want to see it once they find out Josh Peck is in it ... even though they may not realize all the importance of it [the message].”

“We really think that a girl audience will bring boyfriends or a gang of friends to this film. We're already getting really terrific response from teenagers because of Josh Peck,” Wynne agrees. “And because they identify with Danielle [Savre, who plays the lead character Madeline]—not because they necessarily have gay parents, but because I think every teenager feels like there's an embarrassing ‘something’ about their parents.”

Both Wynne and Egan applaud Peck in taking on the role of Spoke, Madeline's love interest in the film. “After doing *Drake and Josh* on Nickelodeon to doing this film, where he stands up for gay rights, was a big deal,” Wynne acknowledges. “He is a very courageous young man to choose this. To go from being a mainstream teen hero to doing a gritty film like this...”

American Primitive also features Susan Anspach as the concerned grandmother; Tate Donovan as Harry, Madeline's conflicted gay father; Adam Pascal as Theo Gibbs, Harry's lover; and Anne Ramsay, as the nosy neighborhood woman intent on playing Cupid for the ‘single bachelors.’

“She's a great actress,” Wynne says of Ramsay. “I'd love to cast her in more roles.” Openly gay on the set, Ramsay was very adamant about how important this film was politically, Egan observes. “It was just really refreshing to see an actress so politically aware and open, because it's not easy to be that open.”

Wynne admits that she wishes her father had been able to be more open about his sexuality—and how that might have changed their lives—instead of merely seeking to survive under the heavy cloak of secrecy and fear.

“They really tried to keep it undercover. My father didn't officially tell me he was gay until I was 28,” she says with a laugh. “I just kind of guessed ... the parties my father had were all men and I began to wonder. We just sort of figured it out over time, but it was never talked about, which is really sad.”

“Now in hindsight I understand what he was doing, but as a young person I didn't understand any of it,” Wynne continues. “My father was very British and never revealed what was really going on for him feeling-wise.”

Wynne's father died in 2000, living an openly gay life with his last partner, whom he met after Phipps passed away.

“He was very monogamous, my father, so he had another life partner after Mr. Phipps. But he began being out and shared the same bedroom with his new partner; he didn't have to hide it anymore,” Wynne concludes thoughtfully. “When you're not able to be open about who you really are, it's incredibly sad.”

If You Go—*AMERICAN PRIMITIVE* screens on Saturday, January 10 at 7 pm at the Annenberg Theater and on Tuesday, January 13 at 1:30 pm at Camelot Theatres 1. For tickets and information visit psfilmfest.org.