



Patrik-Ian Polk. Photo by Anthony Caravan

MOVIES

Patrik-Ian Polk's Blackbird screening at local film festival

BY TERRI-LYNNE WALDRON

Chicago's Black Alphabet Film Festival presents *Blackbird*, a film directed and co-written by openly gay filmmaker Patrik-Ian Polk. *Blackbird* is a coming-of-age story about a 17-year-old choir boy in Mississippi who struggles with his sexuality while living in a conservative religious community.

The film stars Oscar winner Mo'Nique, Isaiah Washington and newcomer Julian Walker, and is based on the novel *Blackbird*, by Larry Duplechan. In an email interview, Polk discussed turning the novel into a film, breaking ground with the TV show *Noah's Arc* and what a blackbird means to him.

Windy City Times: The film is based on the novel *Blackbird*, by Larry Duplechan which was first published in 1986. When did you read the book?

Patrik-Ian Polk: I first read the novel as a freshman in college in Boston. I was a young kid from a small town in Mississippi, away from home for the first time. And I was amazed to see an actual 'gay and lesbian' section in a bookstore in Harvard Square. Skimming the shelves, there was one book that I could tell from the spine, had an illustration of a Black person on the cover. That book was *Blackbird*.

WCT: Did the novel resonate with you in any way on a personal level?

PP: The story resonated with me because it was the first book I'd read about a young Black gay person coming of age. And it's a richly told story with wonderful characters and music.

WCT: Why did you want to turn it into a film?

PP: I just knew instinctively that I would one day make that book into a film. That was 1989. Twenty-five years later, here we are.

WCT: Mo'Nique co-stars in the film and she is the executive producer along with her husband, Sidney Hicks. How did the two of them come to work on the film?

PP: Isaiah Washington is my favorite male actor and was always my first choice to play the main character's father, Lance Rousseau. Once he signed on, he suggested Mo'Nique for the mother, Claire, and sent her and Sidney the script. The rest is history.

WCT: Julian Walker plays the main character, Randy Rousseau, and this is his first

film. Was it daunting for him to play the lead in such a dramatic role, and have that be his film debut?

PP: I think he was nervous at first, but everyone embraced him and made him feel comfortable. And he took to it immediately. He's a real talent.

WCT: What was it about Julian's audition that led you to cast him in the film, where there must have been more experienced actors who auditioned?

PP: We went through quite a few actors out in Hollywood, but there was no one fearless enough to take on this challenging role. When I saw Julian's first audition, it was amateurish, I could tell he had little to no experience, but there was a spark of something there. Something worth examining. I'm glad I took a chance. All that searching in L.A. for the perfect actor and he was right there in Hattiesburg, Mississippi—a junior at the University of Southern Mississippi! And he's openly

gay—which is so refreshing.

WCT: You got many accolades for the 2005 groundbreaking Logo series *Noah's Arc*, which centered around the lives of gay, Black male characters. Why do you think that, almost 10 years later, there is not one show on TV with multiple gay Black characters?

PP: I certainly wish there were more. But I don't waste time questioning why. I just keep pushing to make more and more films and more television shows. I'd rather continue being part of the solution than expend precious energy griping about the problem. I am excited for Lee Daniels' new series *Empire*, which debuts next year on Fox and promises to explore some gay issues within a Black family drama.

WCT: Why is Spike Lee an inspiration?

PP: Spike Lee came onto the scene when I was around 13, at a time when I was just starting to formulate ideas about what I wanted to be, what I wanted to do with my life. I think I always knew, but the first Black face I could put on that job—that title of filmmaker and director—was Spike Lee's. He wrote books about making his films and those books taught me how movies get made, how people become filmmakers. I learned about film school reading his books. So I knew I wanted to go to film school. And I love his films because his films are truth and they never lack vision.

WCT: What does "blackbird" mean to you?

PP: In the book, the title refers to the Beatles song, which was a big hit in the '70s. The book is full of '70s musical references that I knew I would never be able to afford in a film. That was one of the reasons why I wanted to do this as a modern-day story.

But I think the lyrics of that song resonate no matter when the setting and whether or not the song actually appears in the film: "Blackbird singing in the dead of night, take these broken wings and learn to fly." I think Randy Rousseau is learning to fly. He even talks about flying as a metaphor in the film. So that's what *Blackbird* means to me—taking whatever broken wings life has given you and learning to fly.

Blackbird will be screened at the Black Alphabet Film Festival July 2. For more info, visit <http://blackalphabet.org/>.

Event focuses on trans military service

"We Have Waited Long Enough: Open Transgender Service in the U.S. Military," a discussion with Aaron Belkin of The Palm Center, will take place Wed., Aug. 20, 6-8 p.m. at The Keith House, 1900 S. Prairie Ave., Chicago.

After Belkin's talk there will be a book-signing by Diane and Jacob Anderson-Minshall, authors of *Queerly Beloved: A Love Story Across Genders*.

Windy City Times newspaper is hosting, and the event is free; however, RSVP to editor@windycitymediagroup.com.

President Obama made history this year when the White House said it is open to a review of Pentagon policies banning transgender troops from serving. In the history of the republic, no president has ever signaled a willingness to consider transgender military service. "When we win (and we will win), we will look back on the White House statement as the the beginning of the end of the ban," Belkin said. But what will it take to cross the finish line, to convert the President's general openness to reconsidering discriminatory policy into actual political change? Come discuss the prospects for change with some of the participants in process.

Belkin is a professor, author, activist and dancer. Since 1999, Belkin has served as founding director of the Palm Center, which The Advocate named as one of the most effective LGBT rights organizations in the nation. He designed and implemented much of the public education campaign that eroded

popular support for military anti-gay discrimination, and when "don't ask, don't tell" was repealed, the president of the Evelyn and Walter Haas Jr. Fund observed that, "this day never would have arrived (or it would have been a much longer wait) without the persistent, grinding work of the Michael Palm Center." Harvard Law Professor Janet Halley said of Belkin that, "Probably no single person deserves more credit for the repeal of 'don't ask, don't tell.'" Currently, the Palm Center is engaged in a long-term initiative to address transgender military service.

As a bonus, there is also a book-signing after Belkin's talk. Imagine if, after 15 years as a lesbian couple, your partner turned to you and said, "I think I'm really a man." For Diane and Jacob (nee Suzy) Anderson-Minshall this isn't a hypothetical question. It's what really happened. Eight years later, the couple not only remains together, they still identify as queer, still work in LGBT media, and remain part of the LGBT community. They paint a portrait of love, not only to each other, but to the San Francisco Bay Area, LGBT publishing, and the queer community. *Queerly Beloved* is a love story that flies in the face of expectations and raises questions about the true nature of identity, sexuality and love.

'Normal Heart' DVD out on Aug. 26

The *Normal Heart*—HBO's adaptation of the Larry Kramer play about the early days of the AIDS crisis—will be out on DVD (\$19.97) and Blu-ray (\$24.99) on Tuesday, Aug. 26.

The all-star cast includes Academy Award nominee Mark Ruffalo (*The Kids Are All*

Right), Academy Award winner Julia Roberts (*Erin Brockovich*), Matt Bomer (*TV's White Collar*), Emmy Award winner Jim Parsons (*The Big Bang Theory*) and Taylor Kitsch.

Ruffalo portrays Ned Weeks, who witnesses first-hand a mysterious disease that has begun to claim the lives of many in his gay community and starts to seek answers. Matt Bomer plays Felix Turner, a reporter who becomes Ned's lover.

The release includes an exclusive behind-the-scenes look at the true story that inspired the film, featuring cast and crew interviews, and the Blu-ray & DVD also include a Digital HD copy.

July 10 discussion to look at house music

The status of house music will be examined in "Old School/Future Classics," a discussion and group-listening session the Illinois Humanities Council is hosting and which will take place Thursday, July 10, at 7 p.m. at The Silver Room, 1442 N. Milwaukee Ave.

Guests include: Craig Loftis (Grand High Priest), who has been DJing in the Chicago music scene since 1979, and who became Frankie Knuckles' personal sound engineer, opening DJ and general manager; Tess Kisner, resident DJ at The Silver Room; and vocalist, DJ and producer Shaun J. Wright. Micah Sal-kind will lead the discussion.

The event is free to the public, although reservations are required. Email events@prairie.org or visit www.prairie.org.