Party Planner

Gregory Hinton brings a new AIDS film to the screen

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I checked my T-cells before we started last year and now that we're finally done with post-production, I'm afraid to check them again," says Gregory Hinton, the exhausted executive producer of MGM/United Artists' upcoming film *It's My Party*. Written and directed by Randal Kleiser (*Grease, The Blue Lagoon, Summer Lovers*), *Party* is the fourth major studio movie that deals with AIDS and the only one slated for release in 1996.

At 42, Hinton speaks enthusiastically about Hollywood and his career as a producer who happens to be openly gay and HIV positive. "When I arrived in LA in the early '80s, it was a dream town. In New York, people ask you where you went to college, who your family is -- they want references. In LA no one cares. I thought it would be impossible to get into the industry, but I went from handling a hotel renovations business deal to raising money in Texas for a horror flick called *Initiation*, which starred Vera Miles and introduced Daphne Zuniga [now of *Melrose Place* fame]."

Hinton discovered that he loved producing and being surrounded by an eclectic cast of characters. His early projects included the Roger Corman film *Vendetta, Mistress* featuring Robert DeNiro, and his personal favorite: *Reform School Girls* starring mohawked Plasmatics lead singer Wendy O. Williams. "She was sweet, polite and tough," Hinton gushes fondly, "she wanted to do her own stunts."

It was shortly after he wrapped that soon-to-be cult classic in 1986 that Randal Kleiser, who was finishing up Disney's *Flight of the Navigator*, hired Hinton to manage his business affairs, sight unseen. Hinton came very highly recommended by a mutual associate, decorator to the stars and Kleiser's ex-lover -- Harry Stein, whose life inspired the story for *It's My Party*.

Thus began a wonderful 10-year professional relationship managing Kleiser's multi-picture contract with Disney (a contract that has produced films as varied as *White Fang, Honey I Blew Up The Kid* and *Big Top Pee-wee*). Kleiser's non-exclusive deal with Disney has also allowed him to collaborate with Hinton on independent projects like 1987's *North Shore* and 1989's *Getting It Right*. But when Kleiser decided to take on what some have called the biggest risk of his career -- bartering on his reputation and clout to bring *It's My Party* to the big screen -- Hinton was thrown for a loop.

"The truth isn't always entertaining, but the movie -- which is really less about AIDS than assisted

death -- is testing incredibly well," says Hinton with a touch of pride. "I really want people to see the movie, but..." he adds with a sigh, "I considered leaving the film because I was and still am extremely uncomfortable with the ethical issues surrounding assisted death."

In *Party*, the fictional character of Nick Stark, a successful HIV positive architect played by actor Eric Roberts, decides to end his life the way he's lived it -- with vitality and joy, surrounded by loved ones (played in the film by a diverse cast including Lee Grant, Marlee Maitlin, Margaret Cho, Olivia Newton-John, Bruce Davison and Roddy McDowell) at a two-day farewell party. He ties up all his loose ends and takes his life by swallowing a handful of Seconals.

"Ultimately, I stayed with the film because it advocates choice, but what is shocking to me about the movie is you have a completely physically well HIV positive person whose doctor tells him that he has PML. He decides on assisted suicide because he will not allow the disease to 'take his dignity' -- this is a phrase we hear a lot and I'm deeply disturbed by its implications.

"PWAs are a community that has to keep going. How does the film inspire that?" As Hinton begins to open up, it turns out that not only is the subject very emotional for him, but it's one he can speak about with an acute sensitivity born of experience. He's asymptomatic, runs daily around the reservoir in LA, and has had no major opportunistic infections, but Hinton lost both his father and, more recently, his mother to lung cancer.

"I abhor physical suffering of any kind and I'm against life support systems which prolong life in a vegetative state. My own philosophy concurs with that of the hospice movement where a terminally ill patient can opt to abstain from further treatments in a pain-free and emotionally supportive environment. Hospice care is not an exact science, but assisted suicide is far less so. I admit to thinking about suicide, but desperation would be my motivating factor and this enrages me. As assisted suicide pertains to AIDS, I am fearful that certain political agendas in this country prefer that PWAs take their lives. I'd rather have a cure."

Now that *Party* is complete and touring the festival circuit, Hinton can relax and focus on his latest project, the novel he's always wanted to write. "I've been out because I've wanted more people to know someone with AIDS and I haven't been hurt by it -- it didn't prevent me from having my career or the love I wanted. I've done my work, so now I can write my book because I finally feel like I have enough life experience."

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