

Screenwriter Eszterhas Dishes *Basic Instinct*

# THE ADVOCATE

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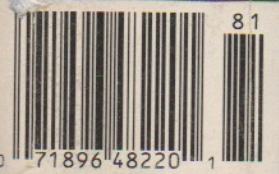
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COVER PHOTO OF WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS BY ALAN POGUE. PAINTING BY WILLIAM S. BURROUGHS: *G.O.D.* (1988; INK, COLLAGE, PAPER; 30 INCHES BY 23 INCHES; PHOTO BY PHILIP HEYING).  
PHOTOS OF ADAM BLOCK, RICHARD LABONTE, AND LARRY WAITES BY MARC GELLER

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# Double Vision

Robert and Donald Kinney Use Video to Explore Taboo Themes

BY LIZ KOTZ

“I think of my aesthetic as having been influenced by Jean Genet and daytime television,” remarks video maker Robert Kinney, who, with his twin brother Donald, has made a series of funny and very moving videos exploring gay identities and oppressively close relationships.

Their most recent work, *Stephen*, will play July 14 as part of the Los Angeles International Gay and Lesbian Film and Video Festival. In the video, the Kinneys spin off from a Thornton Wilder story to tell a tale of two twin brothers who are lovers. In the course of the half-hour narrative, the pair’s silly, intimate rapport is first threatened by jealousy over another man and then shattered by the death of one twin from AIDS.

Based in San Diego, the brothers are part of a younger generation of artists who are using video to explore narrative, gay identity, and the legacy of American popular culture. The Kinneys, now 30, began working together two years ago with a remake of Tennessee Williams’s *Talk to Me Like the Rain*, with the boyish-looking identical twins playing the estranged lovers of the play, restoring gay content to Williams’s story. “It was really a coming-out present to one another,” Robert explains. “We were in the tape admitting to one another our gayness as well as dealing with the sexual tension that exists between us.”

The video became a way of resolving the unspoken tension that had always existed between the two brothers because of their sexuality. Growing up in Burlington, Iowa, in a fundamentalist Christian family, the two had remained closeted not only from the town but from each other. “I think

Donnie and I always intuitively knew that we both were gay,” says Robert, “but we were very alienated from one another when we were younger. In high school I was very into policing every part of my body and my mind to try to keep this terrible secret. So to walk down the hallway and see this other person who was just like me—it was like seeing this crime you were always fighting to hide. It was almost intolerable. We became our own worst mirror. Even in college, when the situation was very different, we didn’t really talk about it with each other. I think part of it was the attraction, the unspoken sexual tension between us—that compelling recognition of one another’s sexuality.”

For Donald, who’d been an actor with the Geese Theater Company, performing and conducting drama workshops in prisons throughout the United States, working with his brother was a way to develop his acting in projects he cared about. “Before Bobby and I made *Talk to Me Like the Rain*,” Donald says, “I was in Los Angeles looking into the whole Hollywood arena. I was realizing I would never get the chance to do what I wanted to do. If you’re gay, there’s really nothing there for you. That whole American dream is so specific, so shut off.”

For both brothers, finding a space for their work and their lives has been a struggle. As Robert describes it, “Donnie and I were both interested in the arts back in Burlington, which meant becoming a display artist. I went to a large department store called Schramm’s—it’s the hothouse of fashion in Burlington. I was immediately put in the window, dressing mannequins. They kept stringing me along, telling me I’d get to do illustrations in the local newspapers. I was 16 or 17. Eventually I got disgruntled with fashion—it was pretty insipid. Then Donnie and I went to work in a factory before going off to school up north.”

Robert recalls, “Burlington is a small in-

dustrial town along the Mississippi River. There are hundreds of towns like it. The main industry was bombs. There’s an Army munitions plant—our mom used to make grenades. There were two theaters—one closed down in about 1968, and the other ran *Smokey and the Bandit* for about five years. It was a pretty barren scene. So when we got to Iowa City [to go to college], all sorts of things suddenly seemed possible. It was the first time we encountered even the idea of a gay community.”

After he earned his bachelor’s degree in art, Robert ended up at the University of California, San Diego, where he was drawn to video and worked with Paper Tiger Television, a progressive media collective. “It wasn’t until I started working with video,” Robert says, “that I realized I had a voice. For many of the things I wanted to deal with in my work—gay issues, AIDS activism, more narrative projects—painting was just not the medium to do that.” Donald, meanwhile, taught English in Japan for three years.

Much of the Kinneys’ work probes the emotional and cultural impact of growing up gay in a small, economically depressed Midwestern town. Robert notes, “What I grew up with, it was really the lowest grade of popular culture. It wasn’t even Hollywood really. The first time I saw a Marilyn Monroe movie, I thought, *Oh, my God, she’s ripping off Ginger Grant!* You know, the girl on *Gilligan’s Island*. I think both of us were in love with the Professor—that’s so horribly banal. It’s really embarrassing, but there was just nothing else out there, and so you’d attach yourself emotionally to all these TV shows. You’d find a way of locating yourself within TV. That’s what a lot of our work is about—locating a gay identity within these popular-culture narratives.”

The Kinneys’ next project, an hour-long version of *The Maids*, brought their fascination with Americana together with the Genet classic. The story revolves around



JEFF PALMER

**The Kinney brothers**

*They explore the relationship of twins in Stephen (inset, left) and cavort in drag in The Maids (inset, right).*

two sisters who are maids whose plot to kill their oppressive mistress ends in tragedy. Notoriously ambiguous, the story plays with densely layered games of artifice, paranoia, and conflicted sexuality. In their *faux*-opulent remake, the Kinneys up the sexual ante and decrease the dramatic realism by playing it as boys in casual drag.

Clearly, for the brothers, the process of collaborating and building their own relationship through their projects is as important as any finished work. Yet a sense of tension and attraction pervades each of the tapes, enhanced by the ambiguity and interchangeability of the two actors. Collaboration has given them a chance to deal with some of the pain of their youth.

As Robert recounts, "When we were growing up, there were fag jokes, including ones against us as twin brothers. People would say, 'Do you suck each other off?'—that kind of awful stuff. So all the videos

were a way of saying, 'Yes, this is a possibility. Now what? What are you going to do about it?' *Rain* is maudlin, whimpering, even whiny—Tennessee Williams is famous for that kind of self-deprecating attitude. *The Maids* is much more about empowerment, about playing with mirroring. With *Stephen*, we really came to terms with the intensity of our relationship as twins and were in fact ready to celebrate it."

Donald remarks, "Both of us have worked with different people, but Bobby and I have this way of teaming up, of collaborating, that's both enjoyable and a real intellectual workout. It really spoils us. It's such a close relationship. On that level it becomes very incestuous, because we're feeding off and sorting through all these things we've gone through, separately and together. There's a real blurring of boundaries. Bobby and I were talking, and one of us asked, 'Was that your story or my story?' We both take each other's experi-

ences and make them our own."

Now comfortably cohabiting in San Diego's gay Hillcrest district, the Kinneys are already busy working on their new project, a dramatic video set in Burlington about two gay couples (one male, one female) and a teenage boy who realizes that there's really no place for him there. "But it won't be maudlin," Robert asserts. "You could always fall into the anguish, but this will really be very funny."

Admitting that they've been known to wake up in the middle of the night, share a cigarette, and then go back to sleep, Donald ruminates on the nature of their unusually close relationship. "I don't think we surprise each other much," he says. "We're emotionally very attached to one another; we're very selfish with each other's time. We sometimes joke about, if there were another man, how pissed off the other one would be. But it probably won't be like this forever. We want to take advantage of it now." ▼