

CRIMES OF PASSION AND PROSE

'Quills' Director Philip Kaufman

By Michael Ventura

December 22, 2000

It is no coincidence that film director Philip Kaufman's offices are a five-minute walk from the City Lights bookstore in San Francisco's North Beach, the neighborhood with the most famous and notorious literary reputation west of Greenwich Village. "This neighborhood was *made* by writers! You used to walk around here and people always had a *book* in their hands. You just never left home without a book in your pocket." The films that carry Kaufman's most personal stamp are about his kind of people, those who walk around with books in their hands.

The Wanderers (1979) is about Bronx street gangs, yet when Karen Allen meets gang leader Ken Wahl, she's carrying a book -- D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. It's the centerpiece of their first conversation and marks Karen Allen's character both as a budding intellectual and as everything the gang leader will never be. In *Henry & June* (1990), the principal characters are Henry Miller (Fred Ward), Anaïs Nin (Maria de Medeiros), and the woman they both write about, June Miller (Uma Thurman); as in *The Wanderers*, again Henry and Anaïs' first conversation is about D.H. Lawrence. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1988) is not only based on a superb novel by Milan Kundera, but the film's first conversation between Daniel Day-Lewis and Juliette Binoche is also about the books they are carrying: she, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*; he, Sophocles' *Oedipus*. He's a doctor and she's a waitress, so neither is merely doing their homework; their reading identifies them as people who delve into the depths of life. In that film, Day-Lewis will get into trouble not for his sexual escapades, or even for his and Binoche's participation in street protests, but for an article he writes comparing Oedipus to the Soviet oppressors of Czechoslovakia -- which is Kaufman's way of saying that the written word has a power that even sex and street action don't.

In these films, as in Kaufman's new *Quills* (from Doug Wright's play about the Marquis de Sade), the written word propels the story forward. For Philip Kaufman's characters, books are the centrifugal force of their lives. Most people remember *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Henry & June* more for their daring nudity than their literary concerns, yet to watch these films is to see a startling fusion of literature and sex. It is as though Kaufman is saying that literature is sexy, and that sex can have all the subtleties of great literature.

In *Quills*, the first time we see Kate Winslet, a priest (Joaquin Phoenix) is teaching her to read Augustine's *City of God*. The priest runs an insane asylum in which Winslet works as a maid. As she's reading *City of God*, the Marquis de Sade (Geoffrey Rush) is locked in a cell writing *Justine*. His writing implements are, of course, quills -- and the power of his writing will acquire the force of fate in the lives of everyone around him. Winslet's character will say, "Reading is my salvation." (It may also be her doom.) Kaufman didn't intend *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, *Henry & June*, and *Quills* as a trilogy, but thematically they work that way.

Michael Ventura: *Quills* opens during the French Revolution -- a beautiful and frail woman is manhandled by a gruesome executioner, then she graphically gets her head sliced from her pretty neck.

Philip Kaufman: You think you're in a Sadean porno film, but it turns out it's just history. Which is much more pornographic than anything Sade could ever have thought of. It's a statement to the audience: If you wanna leave, now's your time -- go into some other screen at the multiplex. *[laughs]* At a preview, I was sitting next to a guy who, before it started, kept trying to pick up this blond babe. They're talking, getting it on, and then the film starts running and he's having a great time, she's laughing. But when it comes to the scene of the Marquis spitting on the Bible -- she gasped, she was shocked by that, but he was laughing at it. And that was the end of that -- this guy was not gonna score there. She was obviously somebody for whom fucking on film was not a problem but spitting on the Bible was horrific.

Yet in some ways this film is religious. It's meant to, in some way, expand religious belief. Geoffrey Rush, as the Marquis de Sade, asks the priest, 'Can not your God include me? Is he that flimsy? For shame.'

MV: Do you think the Marquis de Sade was an important or merely sensational writer? Do you think he was an artist?

PK: Here's a guy, for 40-odd years he got up every day and *wrote*. It's an extraordinary feat, regardless of the quality. We're not saying that the Marquis de Sade was a great writer, but he was a *writer*. There was something Herculean about what he did. You have to approach him as an artist. He was fighting what he perceived to be hypocrisy. And he did stimulate a lot of writers. And he brings up important questions: *Are* there limits? What *are* the limits of free speech? Where do we start crossing the boundary? When do things get dangerous?

In the film the Marquis says, 'My glorious prose has become circulated through the mouths of the insane -- who knows, they might improve it!' He chuckles about it. But in fact he's very shocked by the consequences himself.

MV: When you go to the set, what's primarily on your mind -- the primary concern that everything else spins around?

PK: The main thing is the actors. It's about acting, ultimately.

MV: You consistently get memorable, even extraordinary, performances from your actors. How much rehearsal do you do?

PK: Two weeks prior to shooting *Quills* I pretty much stopped everything else and brought the principal actors into my office for hours each day. We read through the script and discussed scenes. And then, about the beginning of the second week, we had a reading of the entire cast, all the small parts -- everybody hears everybody else's voice, though we don't dramatize it as much. And Geoffrey Rush said, 'I think I'll give it a little bit of a ride,' and he just gave us a little intimation of what the Marquis would be like, and everybody was electrified by that.

MV: What kind of direction do you give an actor?

PK: There's a direction where you explain the scene to everybody, so that everybody understands where they are in the scene. And then there are secrets that you have with each actor, where you have your own private dialogue -- everything is, in a way, kept private between you and that actor. I try to have something secret to say to each actor. Geoffrey Rush always tells people I whisper to him before each take, and somebody asked me, 'What did you whisper?', but I'm not going to say what I whispered.

You get on the set, and with all the preparation you still want actors to create, to "improvise," because you want to maximize the amount of energy. Some discoveries you couldn't have planned in your office. You want every surprise possible to be there.

MV: In The Unbearable Lightness of Being, Henry & June, and now Quills, you've directed some of the most explicitly sensual scenes in contemporary cinema. How do you direct those scenes?

PK: You have to approach such a scene with extreme caution. You have to realize that everything has to be exactly right for the actors who are doing it. It has to be valid for them, true for them. It's my job to explain to them what I have in mind. For example, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* I shut down the set for a day or two days, just stopped everything, because I realized the extreme sensitivity of the scene with the two women [Juliette Binoche and Lena Olin] photographing each other. It was a matter of really making sure we had the playfulness, the sensuality, the humor, the awkwardness, the tension, all of those things working. I stage the scenes, but you can't do those scenes without the complicity of the actors, and you can't really go beyond what they feel is right to do. In *Unbearable Lightness*, the most erotic moment was the close-ups of the eyes, the actresses looking at each other -- all of the other stuff is there so that that moment can jell. If people are just looking for the nudity, they're missing the heartbeat, the vitality, the passion of the scene.

And you have to hope that the actors'll go as far as you want them to and as, ultimately, is right for the project. When you cast, you have to make sure your actors are very brave. I mean, imagine you or me being seen [in sexual situations] by millions of people. When you're doing it, it's a closed set -- me, the two actors, the cinematographer, the soundman, and virtually nobody else. Cut to a million people watching that moment! In *Quills*, Kate Winslet -- she's a very brave and very daring person as an actor -- she doesn't approach a thing by putting rules around it. She just wants to make sure that it's the right way to do it.

MV: Quills goes into the still-taboo territory of male nudity. Geoffrey Rush is stark naked for the last 15 minutes or so of the film.

PK: Geoffrey's externals are being stripped away until he arrives at his final costume, which is nudity. And Geoffrey carried that off so beautifully. Nakedness is still a costume with him. How many actors could do that? His backside, when he gets up to walk to the door, he's got the red marks of the cold stone on his cheeks -- the dignity of how he carries that off.

MV: And the other actors in Quills?

PK: When Joaquin Phoenix came into the rehearsals he had the entire script memorized! He knew every line in the movie, everybody's lines. And Michael Caine -- I joked with Michael Caine. I said, 'Michael, how am I ever gonna get to know you? You do it all on the fuckin' first take!' Michael Caine comes prepared, he works hard at getting it right, he's done a lot of thinking about it, and he makes it appear effortless. He makes it appear like he's not doing it at all.

MV: You go from an innocent-ish game of strip poker in The Wanderers to the priest in Quills [Phoenix] making love to a cadaver -- that's quite an arc.

PK: People will say that, but in a way -- she comes alive, so it's almost like a fairy tale: He kisses her, she comes alive [in his fantasy, hence on the screen]. How many fairy tales are like that? What is Orpheus? Orpheus is going into the netherworld to rescue Eurydice -- she's dead, right? Some people will say it's necrophilia and stuff, but it's not. I mean, it is, in some ways, but it's not really.

MV: What do you think of American cinema in general these days?

PK: I'm sort of not a theorist about these kinds of things. I take 'em as they come. I'm consumed with the daily struggle of trying to get onto film the things that I'm thinking about. There are filmmakers who are really adept at staging things in ways that not everybody used to be -- a kind of visual excitement. But too often things are being made bland for the lowest common denominator. If you're just trying to please everybody you come up with a mixture that's boring, simplistic, and -- unholy.

MV: Could you define 'unholy' a little bit?

PK: Anything that's a trick -- that doesn't have the breath of spirit and soul in it. A lot of films, even though they may be frenetic and frenzied, they don't have an inner energy. There's a lot of nervousness, which is a substitute for energy. Energy, as we all know, can be a very calm thing, where a glow emanates. A film by Buñuel can be, like, absolutely thrilling -- it's maybe quiet and doesn't move around, but there's an energy that just radiates out of the piece. Whereas, as I said, a lot of modern film is just nervous, fast cutting. When you talk about modern movies -- can they really get adults into that dream world for two hours? Can they really create a world? They're just sort of laugh-track entertainment where you're idling away your time rather than absorbing yourself in an experience.

I see film as a chance to create -- whether the truth or the lie of it. If you can create a good enough lie you can get at the truth.

MV: What turned you toward directing?

PK: In high school, we, this whole crowd, we went to all the movies together. Every Friday night at the Granada Theater, in Chicago, we shouted at the movie, we made fun

of the movies, we had a great time, we sat in the balcony, we made out, we did everything within the atmosphere of movies, but I never thought of making movies. Then I started seeing Pasolini, the early Fellinis; I saw Shirley Clarke's *The Connection*, I saw Cassavetes' *Shadows* -- and I just decided that was what I wanted to do. I was turned on by the vitality of having a camera. We all believed in the principles of Godard, Truffaut -- I was inspired by the French discovery of American movies.

MV: What would be the principles of Kaufman?

PK: You tell me. *[laughs]* I don't know what I work from. I try not to write a manual for myself to behave by. I don't feel this is a religion I'm involved in here. This is moviemaking. Hopefully, it's an art. Hopefully, it's a search for dreams, beauty, laughs -- laughs are a big part of it. Each day you wake up, and you say, 'What are the values that we're going for?' Hopefully you can get 'em all in one shot! The main requirement for any artist is, do you create a world in which all the characters are believable, and they relate in a believable way, and are you swept up in that world?

Allan Dwan, John Ford, Howard Hawks, they never went out with a book on how to do the thing. They went out and, somehow, *that's* the way you shot it. *And* they shot it in Hollywood, a contract that they had with the studio, X number of days, X amount of money. And that's what you have to do. And I buy that. The last three or four movies, they're all on schedule, on budget. I buy into that. I don't believe in extravagance, extreme fussiness -- sometimes that's a substitute for preparation. You don't get four free throws. You get one or two, and that's it. You get the ball in the basket, or you don't. The game goes on. You gotta get the ball in the basket. You gotta get the vitality. Each movie has its own rules. And you discover them along the way.

What is that disease, that germ, that one writer passes to another? If *Quills* can create something that stimulates something ... if in 50 years somebody sees this movie and is inspired to take out the quill and write something ...

... Kaufman's voice trails off. It is a mark of his work -- his signature, in a way -- that the greatest compliment he could give his own film is that it might somewhere, someday, inspire someone to write a book.

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