





Matthew McConaughey as a closeted journalist into S&M, Nicole Kidman as a nymphomaniac Death Row groupie, and Zac Efron as a horny ex-swimmer who walks around in his underpants? Say hello to *The Paperboy*, Oscar-nominated director Lee Daniels' (left) follow-up to the career-changing *Precious*. The African-American film-maker's latest is already legendary for a scene in which Kidman squats down and urinates on Efron's leg after he's been stung by a jellyfish.

Daniels might originally have been outed by someone else but these days he is, unquestionably, out and proud. He adopted and raised his biological niece and nephew with long-term partner Billy Hopkins (they split in 2009, although Hopkins still casts his films) and made his name as a producer first, helping guide Halle Berry to her *Monster's Ball* Oscar before hitting the mother lode with *Precious*. He's a bold, unflinching risk-taker who gives voice to people who rarely have one in mainstream cinema, and while *The Paperboy* is far from perfect, some of the critical vitriol heaped upon it has had a distinctly unpleasant edge. Still, Daniels' florid, salacious approach was always going to find more favour with gay moviegoers anyway.

A PRECIOUS VOICE

MATT MUELLER TALKS TO THE OSCAR-NOMINATED, OUT DIRECTOR LEE DANIELS ABOUT HIS LATEST, THE PAPERBOY

THE PAPERBOY IS AN INTERESTING CHOICE AFTER PRECIOUS. WHAT WAS THE HOOK?

The instant hook was damaged souls trying to find their way in life. I don't know how to tell a story if I don't know every character intimately. With *Precious*, I knew those girls, I knew that world. The same with *The Paperboy*: Matthew McConaughey's character was someone I knew. I dated many men in New York and Los Angeles in the 80s and several of them were white men from the South who were dealing with, first, coming out, and then with the fact that they had an attraction to black men. In West Hollywood and New York City it was almost a fantasy then to sleep with a black man, but you couldn't be seen in public with one. Matthew's character is based on a guy I dated who told his family that he was gay and dating a black guy – me – and something tragic happened.

WITHOUT GIVING TOO MUCH AWAY, THAT'S REFLECTED IN THE FILM. WHAT ABOUT THE OTHER CHARACTERS?

My sister dated men in prison and knows that whole world, so I sat Nicole Kidman in a room with her. Macy Gray's character is someone that all of my aunts were like, and my mom, like in *The Help*. And Zac Efron's character was me growing up. Much is made about Zac walking around in his underwear. At Cannes I was asked about it and I said I was a gay man, so why not? But I was irritated by the question. When I was a teenager, I remember my mother saying, 'Would you put some fucking clothes on?'

HOW DID YOU FEEL DATING THOSE MEN BACK IN THE 80S?

I think the deeper question is, why would I go out with

somebody who didn't want to be seen with me? It goes back to *Precious* looking in the mirror and thinking that it's better to be white than to be black.

MANY ACTORS WOULD CONSIDER THESE ROLES RISKY. WAS IT A CHALLENGE CASTING THE PAPERBOY?

Matthew's only concern was that he saw his character as bisexual whereas I looked at him as homosexual. And a homosexual guy who liked black, uncircumcised cock [laughs]. But, you know, we got around it and he ended up on the floor with several black men over him. This film is told from a gay man's perspective. I'm winking at the camera the whole time.

ARE YOU INTERESTED IN TELLING ENTIRELY GAY STORIES?

I'm a gay man so the stories I have are our stories. I was involved at one point with *Brokeback Mountain*. I would have done it differently, but whatever... I have my gay story and it's coming soon. I have to get up the courage to do it.

WHY DO YOU THINK THE PAPERBOY SPARKED SUCH VITRIOLIC REACTIONS?

I do think that if I were a European film-maker this movie would have been more lauded in America. I think American critics simply couldn't understand the world I created. Really, I believe that if I had been Pedro Almodóvar, or even Quentin Tarantino, it would have been a different reaction. But from me, what they want to see is African-American cinema.

ARE YOU FEELING ENCOURAGED ABOUT GAY RIGHTS IN THE US?

Hell to the yes! If the Republican Party is going to get

into office, it has to embrace the people of colour and it has to embrace us. Oddly enough, there are some gays who are Republicans.

HAS IT EVER BEEN AN ISSUE FOR YOU BEING GAY IN THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY?

I definitely think an African-American who's gay can never come out. Look, I'm more man than half of these straight men in Hollywood. For me, it just got too complicated, too cumbersome lying – and I lied for so long about my drug [habit] and shit like that. But when I got sober, I also became clear about my sexuality. Life's too short to bullshit. Look at Whitney Houston: when you have a lifetime of the Church saying, and your momma saying, and your co-workers and family and neighbours saying, you end up living a lie and being sad. There are people living lies because they are afraid, and that's a sad place to be. I know several directors and actors who will never come out because it's just too hard for them.

BUT EVERY ACTOR AND DIRECTOR WHO DOES COME OUT HELPS BREAK DOWN THE BARRIERS.

Some of them do now, but it doesn't really help with the ones who don't want to. I've also seen gay people in the industry be prejudiced against those who have come out. There's even gay-on-gay crime.

THERE'S NO ACCOUNTING FOR HUMAN NATURE...

It's true. And can I just say: there's gonna be some gay-on-gay crime if you put an ugly picture of me in your magazine!

The Paperboy is out on March 15