

One Does Want a Hint of Color

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Abstract

Mike Nichols' 1996 feature adaptation *The Birdcage*, based on a Broadway hit two decades before it - *La Cage Au Folles* - continues a thread in theater and film, exploring the comic and tragic conflicts in social treatment of homosexuality. From the initial source material contemporaneous with the earlier days of the gay pride movement, through its release at the time of the DOMA legislation, screening *The Birdcage* is freshly relevant as the Supreme Court looks at gay marriage. This short paper will look at how art imitates life and how the principals in the creative process create entertainment out of social injustice. The discussion focuses on a male-male relationship and how homophobia, sexual inversion and sexual orientation come into play with this modern family. The discussion is in chronology similar to the movie itself. It shows the development of key characters, and how their accommodation, understanding and views change as the story reaches its ultimate goal; attempting to influence the acceptance of committed relationships, regardless of sexual orientation.

Keywords: DOMA, homophobia, sexual inversion, sexual orientation

The 1996 release of *The Birdcage* (Nichols, Machlis, Nichols, May & Poiret, 1996) explores the pressures that society has placed on a gay couple and the personal values of their soon-to-be-married 20-year-old son. Director Mike Nichols excels at taking controversial subjects and applying comedy, wit and brilliant casting to this story. *The Birdcage* is a Hollywood remake of the 1978 French-Italian film adaptation of the 1973 play *La Cage Aux Folles* written by Jean Poiret. The story revolves around eight people. Val Goldman; the son, Armand Goldman; his gay father, Albert Goldman; his father's long time lover (and Val's "mother"); Republican Senator Kevin Keeley; his wife, Louise Keeley; and their daughter, Barbara Keeley. In addition, there is Katherine Archer, Val's biological mother, and Agador, the Goldman's butler. The sexual orientation of key characters, the conflicts of the relationships, and the pseudo-political statements of the characters make *The Birdcage* a gender communications topic worthy of discussion.

The crisis begins when Val returns home to Miami to tell his father that he has fallen in love and engaged to be married to Barbara Keeley. He announces that she and her parents were coming to Miami to meet his family to discuss the wedding plans. Barbara's father, Kevin Keeley, is a senior ranking Republican Senator from Ohio and founder of the Coalition of Moral Order. Her mother, Louise, is the stereotypical submissive, Midwestern homemaker for a powerful man, who can at times appear to be naïve and uninformed.

Armand Goldman, a fifty-something Jewish gay man, owns The Birdcage, a popular nightclub in Miami's South Beach. The club specializes in musical revues performed by men dressed in drag. While the shows appeal to both gay and straight people, its focus is primarily for their transgender clientele. In the film, Albert takes on Armand's last name of Goldman. On stage, he goes by the name Starina and is the reigning diva of the revue. He dresses in drag for

the show but also assumes a highly feminine role in day-to-day life. The film portrays Armand and Albert in very stereotypical and sometimes comical ways, with Armand in the dominant male role, while Albert assumes the submissive female role in the relationship (Logan, 2009). This is not out of order for them as they stroll along the streets of their neighborhood “hand-in-hand...” as any heterosexual married couple would. Albert could also easily be mistaken as a middle-aged woman going about town on her daily activities. His mannerisms, clothing choices, occasional hysterics, high-pitched voice, and drama over simple things all are characteristic of his diva personality—they come naturally to him. The couple and Val (prior to his going off to college) live in an apartment attached to the club.

While it appears that Val is accepting of his parents, he exhibits enough anxiety and embarrassment of their lifestyle that he asks his father to tone down the gayness of their life. He pleads with him to take on a straight role in some manner so his conservative future in-laws have no reason to believe that gay parents raised him. Val also mentions that Barbara told her parents that their last name was Coleman, not Goldman. Not only was Val asking Armand and Albert to deny their sexuality, but he also wanted them to withhold their Jewish heritage. Was Val’s time away at college so influential that now he was beginning to show signs of homophobia? Most research has looked at lesbian relationships as parental units, few look at the effects of gay fathers. However, Val is attempting to hide his parent’s sexual orientation. Julie Gottman, PhD, states, “Children might disclose to a rare few people that their father was gay. Sometimes children told no one, or they deceptively referred to their father's lover as a housemate or uncle. This again ensured that they wouldn't be seen as gay and thus become social pariahs” (Gottman, 1989).

Parents will go to great lengths to help their children, even when it causes pain and emotional suffering to themselves. Armand agrees to participate in the charade. His masculinity makes it easier for him to take on a straight role, yet there are fears that Albert will not be as convincing. The three concoct a plan to turn Albert into the uncle. This falls flat quickly when Albert appears in a well-tailored business suit accessorized with pink socks. When questioned about the socks, Albert says seriously, “Well, one does want a hint of color” (May & Nichols, 1997). Here, we see how Albert, who fills a feminine role both on stage and in everyday life, makes an attempt at role-reversal because of the love he has for his “husband” Armand, and his “son” Val. The Goldmans, who currently live in a manner in which they are comfortable, now have to reverse their roles, attempting to portray themselves as straight. The charade may not be effective despite their many efforts.

At first, it is easy to believe that this story is about politics, gays, parental embarrassment, and a clever way to introduce the controversial topic of gay marriage to the American public. Nichols cast his characters with exceptional talent. The ensemble, consisting of Robin Williams, Nathan Lane, Gene Hackman, Diane Weist, Calista Flockhart, Dan Futterman, and Hank Azaria create a cross-dressed version of *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner* and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*. By utilizing great talent, great direction, and a serious topic wrapped up into one funny comedy, we get a glimpse of what the future may hold when people regardless of sexual orientation, can live in our world without fear of ridicule or mockery. Each character has so many important things to say. However, this paper will focus on just a few.

Albert has lived his life with predominantly feminine traits for so long that the five-hour window he has to prepare to be a man is just not enough time, even for the great actor that he can be. When realizing that Val just wants him to go away, Albert refers to himself as “a freak, a

monster,” which today may seem an absurd self-description. In 1996, Albert was in his mid-50s, and was familiar with the discrimination of his homosexuality since his childhood, dating back to the 1940s. The life he lived with Armand for the previous twenty years was in a more accepting environment. Albert’s comment about being a monster dates back to theories that Freud had in 1906, which he termed *Sexual Inversion* (Ellis, 1927). Albert is a woman trapped in a man’s body. To be anything else would be unnatural to him, but he loves Val and Armand with such intensity that he would at least try.

Meanwhile, Armand, Albert, and Val create a back-up plan, with which they enlist the help of Val’s birth mother, Katherine Archer. It seems that, during a show she and Armand were playing in years ago, she ended up in Armand’s bed in an attempt to convert him. This one and only heterosexual encounter failed, yet Val was the product of it. Armand agreed to raise Val and provided Katherine with enough money to start her body sculpting empire. Now, not having ever met Val, or having seen Armand in twenty years, she will hop across the causeway and be his mother for this one evening. Albert is waiting in the lobby while Armand and Katherine are in her closed office. Armand and Katherine are reminiscing and, for a moment, she gets too comfortable with Armand just as Albert walks in on them. In a jealous rage, Albert storms out.

The Birdcage premier was a few months before President Bill Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) into law. DOMA codified the non-recognition of same sex marriages for all federal purposes. This included denial of insurance benefits, Social Security, joint tax filing status, and inheritance tax rules, as they would be applied to heterosexual married couples (Defense of Marriage, 1996). The inability to be married to each other legally is a point of contention between Armand and Albert. In this film, Nichols brings out this important problem faced by gay couples. Albert repeatedly comments to Armand that he has “no legal rights” and

that he is subservient in many ways because Armand has all the money and assets. He is concerned about what would happen to him if Armand died. When Albert attempts to leave, Armand follows him. While sitting on a bus stop bench, Armand produces a palimony contract and signs over all of all his assets to Albert. It was not a grand gesture; so much as being what Armand believed was the right thing to do. He expresses to Albert that every day of his life is filled with joy and happiness because of him, and everything they have is unimportant without each other. It is clear that, despite all of the troubles and difficulties this charade was causing, Armand loved Albert, and that love was genderless.

Back at the apartment, Val is having Agador make the final touches preparing the place so the Keeleys can be received. During the previous twenty-four hours, they had stripped all semblance of gayness from the home. Armand returns from his meeting with Albert and explains to Val that Albert will be with them this evening. He explains how it would be cruel for him to disallow Albert to be there. Armand calls Katherine's office and leaves a message that she is not to come that evening. While Armand is getting dressed, Val intercepts a call from Katherine and reminds her not to be late. The fun is about to start.

The senator, his wife, and Barbara arrive and celebrate with a glass of champagne with Val and Armand while they wait for Val's mother to arrive. They exchange innocuous pleasantries while the bumbling Agador prepares dinner. To the surprise of Armand and Val, Uncle Al makes his grand entrance dressed in drag as the middle-aged Mother Coleman. While the Goldmans are playing out their charade, Senator Keeley has his own issues to address. It seems that, just a few days earlier, the Senator's closest associate is found dead beside a black, underage prostitute. Now the press is following him to Miami and is camped outside The Birdcage waiting to catch a juicy story. Barbara's family falls in love with "Mother Coleman,"

who appears as bright, attentive, and exudes family values. Senator Keeley comments, “I have such a good feeling about you people. Not a lot of clever books on the shelves, no fancy art on the walls. Just the crucifix and a lot of good, warm, family feeling” (May & Nichols, 1997).

Ironically, lipstick and a dress create the illusion that Val so desperately wanted to achieve.

All of these good feelings go out the door when Katherine arrives. Keeley is confused; he thinks Armand has a mistress, but then Val steps up to the plate. He regains his values, understands that, for his entire life, the gender of his parents, Armand and Albert, were insignificant to the person he has really become. He announces with little hesitation, pointing to Albert, “This is my mother. My father owns the nightclub downstairs. My mother is the star. We lied to you. Barbara and I. And everybody lied for us. These are my parents” (May & Nichols, 1997). Val’s secret is now out of the closet and Keeley needs to push it back in for fear of his own potential political damage. With the press swarming outside the club, Keeley needs to find a way out without being seen.

Val asks his father, “Couldn’t the Keeleys slip out without being noticed at the end of the show?” Armand responds with, “No, they’re waiting for that. They’d be recognized in two seconds,” to which Albert chimes in with a glint in his eye, “Not necessarily” (May & Nichols, 1997). With all of the events of the day and evening, Starina still needs to do the finale of the club’s show. They dress the senator up in drag as a six-foot version of Marilyn Monroe and Mrs. Keeley as a butch motorcyclist. With the final song of the evening being belted out the entire cast including (Senator Keeley) dance out of the club to Sister Sledge’s “We are Family,” an appropriate metaphor that solidifies what Armand and Albert had been trying to teach Val his entire life. For Keeley, he escapes this potential political landmine with a hint of color and some lipstick, solidifying what people will do to protect what is of value to them.

Conclusions and Future Study

The examination of the characters in *The Birdcage* is not complete. This film covers every possible sexual orientation, lifestyle and attitude. Each character addresses the multitude of issues that cross the hurdles of sexuality in our society. In order to gain a comprehensive analysis of all of the characters, each needs to be examined in two distinctly different periods. The first would be to understand the characters based upon the social norms and political climate at the time the film was released. Then, examine those same characters based upon a more current period. *The Birdcage* was the precursor to legal same-sex marriages. The Goldmans lived their lives, as they believed they should. They surrounded themselves in a region that was accepting of their life choices. In the end, after all the failed charades and attempts to protect each other from the difficulties of relationships, as well as political and religious indifferences, they all came together as a family. Some may feel that the intent of the film was to introduce tolerance and acceptance to a non-tolerant society. However, Professor Heidi Hendershot commented, “Hollywood strips away sexuality from gay characters when it is primarily sexuality that that defines queer identities. And, we must continue to critically examine Hollywood’s construction of gay and lesbian characters, and in doing so we can map out one of the next chapters of the celluloid closet” (Hendershot, 1996).

Film and television shows that came after *The Birdcage* continue to push the boundaries of sexuality and the family relationships of those who are gay, lesbian, and transgender. These themes have filtered down from the big screen to teenage and tween television shows. DOMA has yet to be overturned; however, gay couples will continue to live their lives with each other despite the barricades society places in front of them.

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