

(Mostly) Full Interview Transcript with Richard Lindsay and Stephen Cone, Director of *Princess Cyd*.

Richard: Whatever I may have said, it was obvious there was an appeal of *Princess Cyd* to a certain audience, and I'm wondering how much of it had to do with that publicity shot of Cyd in the tuxedo. Cause they *loved* that.

Stephen: Yes, they loved it.

Richard: Have you gotten that kind of response before from audiences?

Stephen: There were a lot of responses I got last night that I haven't gotten before. I haven't gotten the sort of catcalling of Cyd—which was *incredible*.

And the most surprising takeaway from last night—we've now screened three times in Baltimore and once in Brooklyn—to full houses of mostly I would say straight people. This was our first gay audience. And my biggest surprise last night with how engaged the gay audience was with Miranda and Anthony's subplot. Sort of rooting for them to get together or whatever. And I was sort of moved by that, by this gay audience cheering on this heterosexual relationship, and also just the general emotional engagement through the whole thing was really exciting.

One of my favorite facts about this film is that it just so happens to have been funded by a ton of gay men. And I like that. This movie about women was funded by gay men.

Richard: Miranda has a really good explanation [in the film] about fiction and where it comes from. Was there something about you that said, 'Okay I want to make a movie about women now?' Or is it something where this was just the way these characters grew out of your brain?

Stephen: It was just the way the characters grew out of my brain. I'm not consciously thinking, 'Okay let's move on from gay boys.' I love women's stories; I've always loved women's pictures. A year ago if you had asked me to jot down my favorite five ideas for a film, I think they were all female-led.

I gave a somewhat convoluted answer at a Q&A in Baltimore, it was something about growing up, maybe even growing up queer in the church setting, and there's so many fascinating wonderful women to be drawn to. I don't know, something about that sympathy of the son of a preacher's wife, and the relationships formed with the various middle-aged to senior women very early on, that I'm sure has to do with it.

Richard: I was wondering about the guy who stands up and asks the question [of Miranda, in the film] where he says I just wanted to say how much these women [in her book] meant to him and how much this book spoke to him, I wonder if you were kind of speaking through him a little bit.

Stephen: He was sort of a mouthpiece. I mean I told Brian the actor who played that role, this is in some ways my voice.

It's just that the stories I happen to be rolling around in my head right now happen to be about women.

During the Q&A with Stephen at Frameline, he mentioned that the Miranda character was based on the liberal Christian writer Marilynne Robinson, and may even have been based on speculation about what the love relationships of long-divorced, single woman writer might look like.

Richard: Does Marilynne Robinson know that you made this character based on her?

Stephen: No.

Richard: And the second question is have you asked her about her sex life?

Stephen: (Laughs) I have no access to her. I hope that she would like the film.

Richard: You need to have a precocious teenager move in with her and ask all the inappropriate questions.

Stephen: I'm sure I'm like one degree away from her somehow, and I do think she's referenced in interviews of late that she needs a very simple life and keeps to herself. She *seems* to be someone who's living alone in a house.

Richard: The first two films of yours that I've seen had a very strong religious message, we're dealing with a more strict form of Christianity—evangelicalism. So this character (Miranda) is more of what I would think of as my type of churchgoer—Mainline Protestant. She's kind of integrated it more into her life a little bit; it doesn't define everything that she does. So how do you see religion continuing to be a part of your films? Are we going to move onto Unitarianism in then agnosticism?

Stephen: I would hope that specific religions and faiths and sexual identities will maybe even become more seamlessly integrated into the whole, as opposed to being *about* that. And I hope that this movie is a step forward in that direction: a movie in which a character just happens to be a Christian.

Richard: Which is nice. You still get this thing where somebody admits that they pray. And how weird is that? I mean it just never happens in a film. In that speech that [Miranda] gives Cyd in the kitchen when she says I wish I could tell you how much fulfillment these things bring me: including prayer, including being in church, and things like that. Why is that so rare? It's such a normal part of human experience. So it is nice to see that. And she's very tolerant of Cyd [who expresses her atheism]. It's like just, 'Whatever.'

Stephen: I mean it was a half-conscious attempt to get out of the slightly more uptight repressive evangelical world and into something more open and accepting, so all that is pretty deliberate. It's not just a love letter to Chicago, it's a love letter to the general political, social, spiritual landscape that is a city like that.

Richard: We're out of the South; we're out of the Deep South.

Stephen: Yeah we're out of the South, and kind of megachurch territory.

Richard: Although there are definitely some there—the largest one, what's it called?

Stephen: Willow Creek.

I was going to say there's one exception to the answer that I just gave. Because one area that I haven't tackled or one group of people that I haven't tackled are urban evangelicals, which is an interesting subsection of people. Because they're integrated into a largely liberal culture.

So for instance, within the large canvas of the Chicago theater scene, 95% of the actors and directors and artists are liberals but there are about 5% of them that are born again Christians. They do the same plays, they're friends with each other—with the liberal people, it's kind of wonderful. But I often wonder how they navigate that fully.

Richard: I'm thinking about the guy in *Arrested Development*.

Stephen: Tony Hale, yeah he's a Christian.

Richard: He holds Bible studies and stuff like that, but he seems like the coolest guy you could ever want to talk to.

Stephen: I like that. I'm not sure that kind of person has ever been represented in cinema—you know like smart, savvy, funny, urban...evangelical. Can you think of one?

Richard: No.

Stephen: So maybe I have one more movie in me about city-dwelling Christians. But then the challenge becomes how do I keep it from getting too heavy. What are their struggles and how do you present them lightly and fluidly, still telling a story?

On party scenes in Stephen's movies and the subtheme of the power of narrative

Richard: I was also thinking about how there are some really wonderful set pieces in *Princess Cyd*. The scene where they're slow dancing together on the roof, then the party scene—the soiree. And I have to say out of all of your films this was the most successful party in that it didn't break down into an evangelical version of who's afraid of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* It was successful for the people at the party.

Stephen: (Laughs) It was an actual successful party.

Richard: Obviously it plays differently in terms of its role in the film, but what do those characters know that the party-goers, in say, *Henry Gamble*, don't know?

Stephen: I think they have their antennas out, and I think they have some sense of the world as it is, as opposed to the world as they would like it to be. They're grappling with the history of thought, philosophy, literature. They're just facing things. I'm sure each of those characters is in denial about something, but for the most part they're not in any sort of dome or behind barriers. They're not keeping themselves hidden from the world. They're interested in art beyond their own worldview. They're not just reading the liberal's guide to humanism or something like that.

Richard: It's interesting that the soiree started with a ghost story or a murder story or an urban legend.

Stephen: That's sort of a party game that they do where they tell stories and you have to guess whether it's true or not. That's the idea—they just like to talk to each other and tell stories.

Richard: Part of what I liked about *Princess Cyd* was there was some layering of themes. You obviously have this generational thing going on with an older woman and a younger woman, this coming-of-age theme, and the sexuality piece—the coming-out theme, but you also have this undercurrent of narrative and the importance of narrative.

Cyd is kind of taken aback when she sees how people react to Miranda's books. When people just come up to her and say, "Oh my god you changed my life." We also don't get the full narrative of Cyd's story until after she and Katie have had sex. And it's in that moment of openness that she's able to tell her what happened [when her mother was murdered] and then we find out what happened. Was that [narrative theme] part of your thinking or did it just work its way in?

Stephen: Probably halfway. More than other things we talked about, this was probably the most subconscious. There was an ever-present constant attempt to link their interior lives to the created fiction and then kind of back to their real lives. There's this constant kind of triangle going from inner experience to fabricated stories back to the full life stories of each person. Yeah that was ever-conscious, and also just this running theme of telling stories about women. ...So this circular thing of how we put ourselves into our work (pauses). Yeah it's tricky for me to answer that.

Richard: It seemed really present to me.

Stephen: Yeah it's very present but it's, but it's kind of like when you're trying a new recipe, you know you're layering things but you're not sure what the final taste is going to be. So some of the layering is conscious, but you don't quite know what you're getting at,

and then you look at it and you go, oh this works, in this fashion. And then you accept it and take the credit for it.

*Stephen and Richard discussed that independent film advocate Bob Hawks was present at the Frameline screening, and expressed that Stephen's work showed growth and maturity. Stephen also discussed the "burden" of having his first feature film, *The Wise Kids*, being so well-received.*

Stephen: So [Bob Hawks] is just kind of a famous guru in independent film and he's always here (at Frameline). He's been tracking my career since *Wise Kids*, and has always been a fan. But I knew he didn't like some of the follow-ups as much as *Wise Kids*, so to hear him say it showed growth is a big deal.

Richard: I thought that sounded like a really good compliment.

Stephen: Well I've lived kind of under the burden...well not really the burden...but I've been haunted for six years by a lot of people not feeling that I quite matched the power of *The Wise Kids*. That's kind of a stressful thing to live under. You hear people saying, "I really like this," but then you hear them say to someone else, "I like this, but you *have* to see *The Wise Kids*, I love the *The Wise Kids*. Years of that can get a little annoying.

Richard: So do you feel like that maybe with this film you might have overcome the burden?

Stephen: I think so. There's no objective truth here.

Richard: I love *Henry Gamble* and I think it's a better film than *The Wise Kids*.

Stephen: Thank you. There are some of you. Thank you.

I think maybe what *Princess Cyd* does is in some ways combines the best of both of those. The confident pacing of *The Wise Kids*—just trusting the moment—with some of the production value and narrative balancing and ensemble work of *Henry Gamble*.

On mentors

Richard: I think part of the reason why the audience was engaged in *Miranda* was that she is just such a good character. You talk about safe spaces in adolescence. It seems to me that she plays a role that a lot of queer people play in their families—that safer other adult that's not a parent. They're either unattached or they don't have kids or whatever. They live in a house, and they have a nice life on their own. And that's a safe place where younger members of the family can go and try to figure stuff out.

Stephen: Try to figure out how to have sex with a girl?

Richard: Yes. Or just talk to somebody about that, where Mom and Dad would just be freaked out. And the aunt just says, "Google it."

Stephen: And [Miranda] didn't ask for that either, she hasn't put herself out there as this person, it accidentally happened. Otherwise no one would have been able to take advantage of that safe house.

Richard: So I wondered, did you have anyone like that in your life? Were there any of those safe spaces? *Or*, like, for Cyd, when Cyd tells her life story, this is going to be one of those moments she talks about—that summer she spent with her aunt, and she met her first girlfriend.

Stephen: Hundred Percent.

Richard: So, did you have somebody like an Aunt Miranda, and/or, did you have one of those experiences where you got to go away and do something and be yourself in a way you hadn't been before?

Stephen: That's a really interesting question and it's probably a complicated answer. Because before you realized some things about yourself you had those people but you may learn something about yourself that makes it no longer safe. So there's those versions of people in high school but you don't have a ton to talk about yet. I've had some cool family members that created a safe space for discourse to a certain extent, up to a point of my growth and development as both a queer person and an artist.

But the closest equivalent to Miranda is probably my mentors in college. Especially because I lived in a dorm you had to apply to it was kind of a communal residential college. We had Friday teas, and we had mentors. So you had religious professors and philosophy professors and English professors all inhabiting this place with you. That was the most mind-blowing, transformative, transitional phase of my life. And so those were probably my Mirandas, those college mentors. I do have like one or two token liberal Democrats in my family, but in terms of like really finally being able to breathe, to connect and ask questions, I think it's those college mentors.

And also younger people that you meet at camp when you're finally starting to tell people that you think you might be queer or not believe in God the same way that you used to. That tends to happen in maybe like senior year of high school. So [at that time] I was attending church camp, meeting people slightly older than me who were secretly starting to experience similar things. Because even when you're eighteen, a twenty-year-old can still be a mentor.

Richard: It's interesting how church camp serves all the same functions as regular camp. You end up doing all the same things you do at any other camp. There's Jesus songs, and Jesus crafts, but there's also sexual discovery.

Stephen: Yeah even if the sexual discovery is just going to the canteen or going to lunch and seeing the person that you decided the day before was going to be your camp crush. You may never even talk to them; that still counts as a discovery.

Sometimes I'll just have like Proustian moments of smelling a breakfast and it takes me back to getting excited to wake up the next day at camp to go to the rec hall or whatever to see that person. It all comes swirling back. The feelings are intense, but especially between like twelve and eighteen.

Richard: Love and bug spray.

Stephen: Yeah, Love and bug spray.

Stephen and Richard talk about some of the mentors Richard had in college, including a Franciscan nun named LaVerne.

Stephen: It's so important to have that person, and so sad to think about the people who don't. It almost challenges you to try to be that person for somebody.

On Coming-of-Age Films

Richard: Your films are so much more than coming-of-age films, because there is the coming-of-age that's going on, but then the adults also go through a process. Rather than being these flat characters that the main character rubs up against or is opposed to whatever they're doing, the adults are always going through a process as well. Would you see yourself moving away from the coming-of-age genre? Is there still more to do there?

Stephen: Yeah there's still more to do. I'm not obsessed with coming-of-age films, I never thought I'd make them, I don't care about them, I'm just making what I'm making. When I read in the synopsis that something is a coming-of-age film I just roll my eyes. I don't want to see it, I don't care, I don't need another one of these. So it's very odd to be making these things that are described as coming-of-age movies.

I prefer to think of it more in the context of adulthood, and comparing and contrasting younger experiences with older experiences. And I'm also interested—and this is so pretentious to say—in this classic almost Victorian idea of spiritual education. Of people coming to a certain knowledge, of passing through something and coming out the other end, and I think my interest in coming-of-age has a lot to do with that.

I mean subtle transformations happen throughout our lives, but this passing through from age 16 to 24, is so profound. I mean almost the entire chemistry of the body is altered and the soul is altered, during that becoming. So that's what interests me when I tackle it. It's not like I think, 'Oh, you know this could be a really neat coming-of-age movie!' It's like, 'Let me tell this tale of transformation, and tell it cleanly and interestingly. And the age is almost irrelevant.' Then it will be defined how it's defined for marketing purposes.

The big ensemble movie I want to make next summer called *Nudes*, which is kind of a sprawling Southern small town movie about a middle-aged photographer doing a nude series, in conservative South Carolina. It has a parallel estranged family story, and those main characters are in their 60s and their 30s. There're some peripheral characters that are young that are around Cyd and Henry Gamble's age. But that'll be a grown-up family.

You know I'd like to say I'll just take a break from [coming-of-age films] for a while, but I also have this idea for kind of a companion piece to *Cyd*. There's a girl, a young actress I've been wanting to work with in Charleston, South Carolina ever since I met her on the *Wise Kids* set. I don't know, maybe in between now and *Nudes* there's an opportunity to do something very small and experimental. You can almost imagine *Princess Cyd* and this other project as like two novellas of these two young women that are squeezed between these more sprawling projects.

Richard: You were talking about spiritual education. What do you think is the spiritual education that either character receives in *Princess Cyd*?

Stephen: A deeper knowledge of themselves. And an ever-so-slightly expanded circle of awareness. It's almost just like a moral shock to the system, where it's like, 'Oh, I didn't see that over there, now I do.' So a slightly expanded world and worldview I guess.

I don't think Miranda has ever considered the spiritual dance that sexual health and sensual pleasure can have with intellectual stimulation. They're both learning that you can bring in other things into your circle, and they just add to the tapestry. They just add to the pulsating life. But you know all these movies are about baby steps. [At the end of the film] Cyd is basically the same person, but she's learned a lot about herself, and she's not going to make fun of someone for reading ever again.

Richard: She might even start to pick up some books herself.

Stephen: She may be on some stupid reluctant business trip/vacation with her dad and walked past a used bookstore, and maybe she goes in. So yeah, little gradual shifts, that's the story.

On Netflix, longform streaming television, and the future of cinema.

Stephen: I would hate for the DIY movement to switch over into episodic before cinema even reaches its potential.

Richard: You don't feel like cinema has reached its potential?

Stephen: I worry about after only a hundred years of movies existing, us just suddenly moving into episodic television.

Richard: What's the difference for you? The episodic television, a lot of it's really good.

Stephen: A lot of it's really good, but rarely is it masterful in terms of interesting bold cinematic choices. It's all over-covered, there's tons of cameras. Well, now I'm just talking about television.

I think the goal is different with episodic. It's to keep the viewer interested and to tell a story. In many ways it's the difference between a series of paperback mystery thrillers where the goal isn't interesting prose, the goal is to keep that page turning, and a long languid book like *Look Homeward Angel*, or *Anna Karenina*, or *Lolita*, where the objective is very different.

So to me episodic is largely just delivering stories to masses. And movies are a little more like sculpture: 'Here is a thing I made for you, it stands on its own.' It might be circular it may not even be forward moving. Episodic by its nature is forward moving. It's just two different goals. If someone's interested in great storytelling, then there's not much difference. But I'm still interested in a few people, relatively few people, making an object together, and just presenting it to the world.

Richard: Well not to mention the group experience, like going and seeing a film with a group of people. Movies are much more event-type things, like everybody has a show up at the same time, everybody has to put their lives on hold, their phones on hold, whereas when you're watching television you're not necessarily paying attention. My husband just binge-watched all of *Sens8* over the weekend. I think he was interested but I'm sure he was doing other stuff.

Stephen: You're also not experiencing the shape of the thing, it's almost like you're going from room to room seeing a piece of sculpture here and another piece of a sculpture somewhere else. You're not really seeing a specific shape.

On what would happen if Stephen was given a big Hollywood project.

Richard: What I also worry about with someone like you is that sooner or later someone in Hollywood is going to figure out that you know how to direct and tell stories. And they're going to come to you with \$20 million dollars (maybe this is a good problem to have) and say make this movie. First of all would you do that? And secondly what would have to look like for you to do that project?

Stephen: I would totally do that. I would do that before I would write a \$20 million screenplay for someone else. I would rather direct someone else's screenplay. There's a lot of small movies being made for 20 million. It would need to be... this is a weird thing to say... it would need to be like flimsy or loose enough for me to play around in. I wouldn't want to make something that is premade on the page. So in some ways I wouldn't want to take a script like, say, *Chinatown*, because that's the movie. I would almost want it to be flawed and kind of messy for me to be able to pull something out and make it into a thing. In a similar way that, say, Cronenberg goes into generic scripts, and turns them into something very interesting. So I would love the challenge of the \$20 million movie that's maybe not quite there, that I could kind of explode and make something of.

Richard: So you wouldn't want to go into something where the writer already had a very clear vision of what they wanted?

Stephen: If I looked at it and I thought, 'This is going to look like that movie that I saw once,' then I don't think I would do it. Some people would say they have to be able to see it [in the script, on the page] whereas I would say I would have to be able to *not* see it, and find my way. It would have to be open; it would have to have a sense of mystery. This is another weird comparison, but David O. Russell goes in and just kind of shakes things up a little bit. Probably when you read *Silver Linings*, or *American Hustle*, or *Joy* even, I don't think those final films were dictated on the page. I think it was like David O. Russell being like, "Okay this is weird, but I can do something to this," and then he made his own thing. I like that.

Stephen throws some shade at *The Handmaid's Tale*.

Richard: This is an interesting question because you were talking about some of the cinematography of television. What is it with this Instagram filter where you can't see anything? I don't know if you've watched any of *Handmaid's Tale*?

Stephen: Oh I turned off the first episode of *Handmaid's Tale* ten minutes in because of how it looked.

Richard: So it's like why are there no lights here? And it all looks like it's in Instagram filter. And everything is like that now. It started with that gay film, *Weekend*. And now it's in *Big Little Lies* and all these TV shows. Like if you're doing serious TV you're supposed to have no lighting.

Stephen: It's like remember in the old days when that's what flashbacks in a movie looked like? Now everything looks like a flashback. Remember the flashbacks in *Man on Wire*? It's like oh, now this is serious, this is heavy, because it's saturated and dark. *I hate that*. Because they're not trusting the narrative and they're not making interesting decisions.

Richard: A good example of this is *Moonlight*, because as they're telling the different elements of the story, they use different filters, to set up the three parts of the story and to set up the three stages of growth of the character.

Stephen: That's great. But it's like everything is the 'Prestige Filter.' How do I make this heavy and important? How do I make it look like this is worth watching, like it's 'adult'? Apply this filter.

Richard: That's a good name for it: the Prestige Filter.

Stephen: I try to even imagine what's the equivalent of this move towards generic prestige content? What's the equivalent of that in painting and sculpture? What are we doing to this form? When I get despairing about it I just remember the printing press. I remember that

the printing press did not destroy literature, it just made a whole lot more shitty books. And this immense wave, this overwhelming bin of content that's being dumped on humanity is not going to stop great visual art from being made. It's just annoying.

Richard: Well you can compare it to the studio prestige films of the 50s and 60s, which pretty much destroyed the studios. They were so big and the budgets were so massive the studios eventually went under. Which ended up being good because then you have the seventies wave of personal filmmaking.

Stephen: It's similar, but a lot of the reason for the mass of content today is that things *aren't* expensive. You can make a really good-looking thing with very little money. So, maybe the images are the currency that's going to crash. Maybe the glut of good-looking stuff—eventually, everything's going to look good—but then none of it has value.

Richard: So then we're going to go back to the crappiest-looking 16 millimeter films?

Stephen: Well, hopefully people will just start playing again.