

Remembering *Andre*:
(left to right)
Hayland Morris,
Richard Thomas, and
Sada Thompson
in a scene set at
the memorial
service

Mothers and Other Strangers

PBS Movie *Andre's Mother* Deals With
A Family's "Missed Opportunities"

by GERARD RAYMOND

It is a freezing December afternoon in New York City, and only a foolhardy Manhattanite might be found taking a walk in Central Park. But on the bank of a frozen lake, two men and two women stand in the bitter cold holding white balloons. Another group of people, all bundled up, record this scene for a television movie.

The movie, *Andre's Mother*, is a bittersweet story of denial and acceptance following the death of a young man with AIDS. It will air March 7 at 9 p.m. on most PBS stations around the country. (Check local listings, however, as the program will

to be able to make a contribution. *Andre's Mother* is a really wonderful opportunity to give something back."

A MOTHER'S DENIAL

The film opens at a memorial service for Andre, an actor who has died of AIDS. His lover, Cal (Richard Thomas), conducts the service. Andre's mother (Sada Thompson) has made a special trip from Dallas to attend the ceremony. She sits in the church with a frozen look on her face as various scenes from the past pass through her mind. The flashbacks reveal her refusal to



Letting go: (left to right) Thomas, Thompson, and Sylvia Sidney

be broadcast in some cities on March 14.)

American Playhouse commissioned the project two years ago in order to rectify the glaring omission of gay people and their concerns on television. "We wanted material with specific gay characters, [something] that approached AIDS differently than as the TV disease of the week," says Lindsay Law, the executive producer of American Playhouse.

"*Andre's Mother* reflects my feeling about what AIDS has done to our society," explains playwright Terrence McNally, whose work includes the gay bathhouse comedy *The Ritz* and the recent off-Broadway hits *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* and *The Lisbon Traviata*. McNally developed the one-hour television script for *Andre's Mother* out of a 15-minute scene he had originally written for a revue at the Manhattan Theater Club.

While AIDS has touched everybody in one way or another, particularly men and women in the entertainment industry, the tragedy is very personal for Deborah Reinisch, the director-producer of the film. "I lost my very best friend in the world, film producer Mark Silverman, to AIDS," she says. "I am not yet ready to make a film specifically about the day-to-day suffering of someone with AIDS, but I want so much

acknowledge her son's homosexuality, her hostility toward his lover, and most of all, the great barrier between mother and son.

"Life is too short for us not to communicate with each other," Reinisch says. "It's a crime for a sibling, a parent, a child, or a friend to be consumed with disapproval, especially now. The AIDS crisis has brought this home clearer than any other national situation I can imagine."

In *Andre's Mother*, AIDS is a mirror in which the full tragedy of what McNally describes as "missed opportunities" and an "inability to connect even in the most primary relationships" is reflected. McNally emphasizes his point by presenting a chain of denial that is forged over three generations. Andre's grandmother (played by veteran actress Sylvia Sidney) cannot communicate with her daughter—in the same way Andre's mother has failed her son.

"What is so wasteful about Andre's mother's attitude is her inability to participate in Andre's life with Cal," Reinisch points out. "Here is a functioning adult relationship, a healthy, stable marriage. She has a son-in-law and could become integral to their relationship, but she makes a foolish choice because she is unable to accept that her son is gay."

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Richard Thomas

An Actor At Ease

Richard Thomas looks at least a decade younger than his 37 years. A talented actor with a forthright manner and an appealing personality, he began his career on Broadway at the age of 7 and has worked steadily ever since.

He has a wide television following, having achieved national recognition in the 1970s as the eldest son in the long-running series *The Waltons*. He has been critically acclaimed for his stage performances as well, playing the title roles in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*. Thomas, who is also a published poet, currently lives in Los Angeles with his wife and four children.

He recently spoke to *The ADVOCATE* about AIDS, his gay fans, and his work in *Andre's Mother*.

Why did you decide to do *Andre's Mother*?

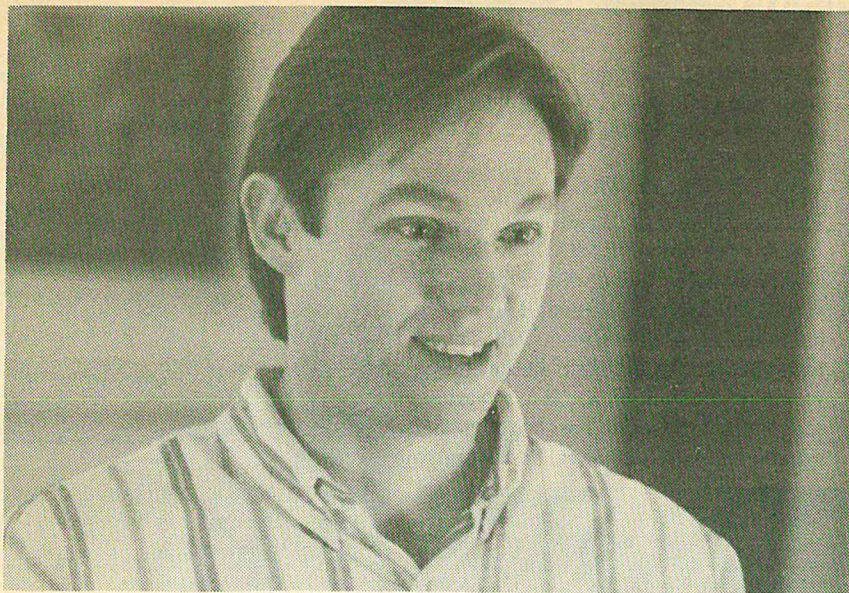
For me it all starts with the material, and the script was really quite beautiful. It took a very complicated subject and told the story in an extremely concise and highly compressed way without being exhaustive or heavy-handed about it. It's like the short-story form: More is implied than is stated.

You've been very vocal on the subject of AIDS.

I made a film about AIDS for CBS last year called *Go Toward the Light*. It was a true story about a 10-year-old hemophiliac boy who contracted AIDS and about how his family dealt with the child's illness. A very different kind of story but important because it sent the message across the country that AIDS is a disease for which we all have to feel responsible.

But after the CBS film, I felt I had dealt with only one part of the issue. When Terrence's play came to me, I thought, *OK, here's a chance now to do a film about AIDS and deal with what I didn't get to deal with in the other picture.*

The thing about *Andre's Mother* is that AIDS is its salient feature, but it is by no



PHOTOS COURTESY AMERICAN PLAYHOUSE

Thomas says that playing his role in Andre's Mother is a way to "give back something to a community that I feel close to."

means the exclusive theme of the piece. It's not a story of a man who died of AIDS. It's the story of his mother dealing with his gay life-style and coming to terms with his past through the figure of his lover, Cal, the man I play. AIDS is not the main issue here, and that's what makes it so exciting. It keeps it from becoming an issue-oriented show, and I like that.

You have recently given readings of an AIDS-related piece by the playwright Lanford Wilson, both here and abroad.

It's a wonderful monologue called *A Poster of the Cosmos*. He did not write it for me, but when I said I was going to China and wanted to take a piece by an American playwright, he gave it to me. I've also read it at the Kennedy Center [in Washington, D.C.] for an educational forum on AIDS.

Is this your way of contributing to the various efforts to combat AIDS?

Absolutely, no question about it. It's a paltry contribution, but my acting is what I have to offer. I think everybody has got to do something. My work is what speaks loudest, and when there is an opportunity, I can stand up and say, "Here's my actor's gift to this."

Are you aware that many young gay men grew up in the '70s with erotic fantasies about John-Boy Walton?

I used to get a lot of letters. In fact, I gave an interview to *The ADVOCATE* when I was doing *The Waltons*. I was 22 at the time. If you make somebody happy, that's the only thing that matters. Mothers, daughters, boys, girls, I don't care. I am an

actor. I aim to please.

You played a gay character in Wilson's *The Fifth of July* both on Broadway and on television for American Playhouse. How do you feel about playing gay men, and has it affected your career in any way?

It doesn't make any difference to me that the character is gay. There are just two kinds of parts—good parts and bad parts. For me it doesn't have anything to do with whether they are gay, straight, funny, dramatic, villainous, or heroic. I am attracted to the role itself and the way it has been created by the writer. I like the part of Cal. He is so straightforward, honest, and sensitive. I think he is a really lovely character.

One of the things that is liberating about playing a gay character is that you have an opportunity to get in touch with a part of yourself that so much of our society says you have to stay away from. That's very satisfying.

As a matter of fact, I think it is good for somebody who has the kind of image that I have to play a gay character. I think it's good for my career. Also, there are people who might conceivably be turned off by a story about a gay man, but, because of the work they have seen me do in the past, maybe I can take them on that trip. It's presumptuous of me to assume that, but there is that possibility.

This film is like giving back something to a community that I feel close to and comfortable with. I feel very supported as an actor by the gay community, and that gives me a very warm feeling.

—G.R.

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In the scene that was shot in Central Park, Andre's friends each let loose a white balloon after the memorial service. As Cal explains to Andre's mother, the balloons represent the soul, and the act of releasing them symbolizes the mourners' willingness to break all earthly ties, letting the soul ascend to Heaven.

On film, the letting go of the balloons comes across as a moving gesture, but in real life it is an environmentally hazardous act. (When the balloons deflate, they become a threat to the health of small animals.) Since the release of helium-filled balloons is illegal in New York, the crew had to attach fishing lines to the balloons and reel back each one after every take.

Despite the complications with conservation laws and the blistering cold, Reinisch and the crew spent four days shooting in the park. "New York is a key element in the film, and it was worth that extra effort to shoot in Central Park to make this a New York story," explains Reinisch.

McNally makes clear that Andre had lost himself in the city because he was unable to bridge the gulf that existed between him and his mother. When Cal later confronts Andre's mother, demanding to know the cause for her silent condemnation, he cries, "God, how many of us live in this dreadful anonymous city because we don't want to hurt our mothers and live in mortal fear of their disapproval! We lose ourselves here. Our lives aren't furtive, just our feelings toward people like you!"

The final flashback in the film shows a little boy playing on the beach. He is knocked over by a wave and cries in fright. His mother picks him up and comforts him; she is there for her son when he needs her. But *Andre's Mother* ends on a tragically different note.

"Because there is no Hollywood-type catharsis with Cal and Andre's mother going off into the sunset, I think the ending is very compelling," says Reinisch. "Perhaps they will have some sort of relationship in the future, based on honestly knowing themselves, but it still does not take away from the tragedy of the fact that Andre has died a stranger to his mother."

McNally would like *Andre's Mother* to be "very simple and very powerful." He hopes it will get audiences to "communicate and be open to other human beings, [to stop] the bullshit, the games, and the denial. If one person picks up the phone and talks to someone else about the issues that they have avoided or denied, I would feel the piece has succeeded." ■