

film

# Reviving the Marquis de Sade

*Quills* screenwriter Doug Wright talks about capturing the notorious libertine in a controversial new drama

By Gerard Raymond

**W**hen people say exposure to violent work induces violent behavior I stand a glowing testament to the power of decency and restraint. I have yet to commit rape, incest, violent sodomy or any other overtly destructive behavior," claims playwright-turned-screenwriter Doug Wright. He's talking about the research for his screenplay of *Quills*, the current Fox Searchlight movie based on his 1995 award-winning off-Broadway play, which required the 37-year-old New Yorker to spend eight years immersed in the noxious writings of the Marquis de Sade.



Wright's erotically charged tale of lust, power, and destruction could have spewed from the fevered imagination of the notorious 18th-century French pornographer himself. "Doug's script is a brilliant fable. It's witty, complex, juicy, bold, subversive, and sexy," says *Quills* director Phillip Kaufman, who has directed his share of witty, juicy and sexy scenes in films such as *Henry & June* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. "When I first read it, I savored every moment and enjoyed the journey, and when it was over I was quite stunned. I hope we have been able to reproduce that feeling.

"It really is Doug's dream, sprung from what I call his terminally naughty mind. This is the beginning of great things for him," predicts the director.

"My lover at the time gave me a biography of the Marquis de Sade as a



*Quills* author Doug Wright (left) found parallels between the persecution of the Marquis de Sade (played by Geoffrey Rush, above) and modern-day censorship of artists.

Christmas gift. I worried that this meant the quick demise of our relationship," Wright says with a laugh. It did—he's currently single—but Wright was hooked. "Sade's life was so extreme. Then I turned to his fiction, and that really unnerved me. This was the most toxic prose I had ever encountered, beyond anything by our contemporary shock jocks. Liberal as I happen to be, it challenged my tenets about freedom of expression.

"When I started writing the play, the [National Endowment for the Arts] was under siege, and the Mapplethorpe controversy was still smoldering," Wright continues. *Quills*, about the repeated attempts to ban the salacious writings of the Marquis de Sade, presents him as a representative of artists everywhere whose work is silenced by moralists on behalf of the public good. "Now there is this political war being waged on Hollywood. I think what makes the debate so potent is that all the arguments carry an element of truth," he says. "We have to

write about human behavior in all of its manifestations, and we have to share that information. Conversely, as artists we flatter ourselves that art can transform people. If that's true, can't it also do so destructively? Of course it can."

Although Wright graphically depicts the corrosive effects of the marquis's writings, he believes that artists have an obligation not to censor themselves: "At its best, art can challenge the institutions that govern the culture. It's a kind of collective conscience, and it has to be allowed to operate unchecked."

Also flourishing is Wright's film career—he's moving from perversity to surrealism, with a screenplay on Salvador Dali. "I'm absolutely terrified of the kind of offers this film might breed," Wright quips. "*Quills* makes promises I can't possibly keep!" ■

Raymond also writes for *The Village Voice*, *Performing Arts*, and *Stagebill*.

For more information on *Quills* and the Marquis de Sade, go to [www.advocate.com](http://www.advocate.com)

QUILLS: DAVID APPLEBY/FOX SEARCHLIGHT; WRIGHT: SULLIVAN STUDIOS