

A DIFFERENT DANCE

David Leavitt's family drama The Lost Language of Cranes receives a surprisingly effective—if less-than-literal—TV translation.

By Gerard Raymond

It isn't often that an author promotes the film version of one of his novels, but David Leavitt is brimming with enthusiasm for the BBC/WNET production of *The Lost Language of Cranes*, his first novel. Considering that the movie, which airs Wednesday, June 24, at 10 p.m. on KPBS-TV, changes the location of his story from New York to London and turns the central characters from American to English, Leavitt's praise is recommendation indeed.

Philip, the young protagonist of *The Lost Language of Cranes*, announces to his parents that he is gay. His mother, Rose, refuses to discuss the matter. But his father Owen's reaction is completely unforeseen. After a severe emotional trauma, the middle-aged Owen announces that he, too, is gay. His son's coming out has forced him to reassess his own sexuality.

Four years prior to the novel's publication in 1986, Leavitt had been hailed in the literary world as a boy wonder. He was a 21-year-old student at Yale when *The New Yorker* published his short story "Territory" in 1982. This debut was conspicuous not only because of his age but for the subject matter of the story. Its theme—of a mother's adjustment to her gay son's life and loves—recurs throughout Leavitt's writing. Family relationships and homosexuality were also featured in his first book, *Family Dancing*, a collection of short stories, published in 1984.

Leavitt was raised in Palo Alto, California, "your basic assimilated Christmas Tree Jew."

"In retrospect, I'm amazed at how young I was when my first book came out," says the 31-year-old author. Being the youngest child, with a brother and sister nine and 10 years older, he grew up, "the child in the room whose presence everyone forgot about. By the time I was 20, therefore, I had absorbed an enormous amount, but I had experienced almost nothing. As my shrink put it to me at the time, I was like a perfectly unclouded mirror that reflected everything I had seen and heard." *Equal Affections*, Leavitt's second novel, followed *Lost*

Language in 1989, and the following year his second collection of short stories, *A Place I've Never Been*, was published.

A few years ago, Leavitt recalls, there was an unsuccessful attempt to bring *Lost Language* to the screen in America. "The big studios wouldn't touch it, so it was going to be an independent film. There was this almost utopian idea to try and create a corporation of wealthy gay and lesbian business people who would kick in money for the film, but it collapsed." Then the British Broadcasting Corporation approached him for the film rights, but

Leavitt had great misgivings about their idea of transferring the action to London. "It just seemed impossible to me, this book is so much about New York. I couldn't see how they could possibly make this in England."

But once he met Sean Mathias, the Welsh-Irish playwright, actor and director who was writing the screenplay, Leavitt became less apprehensive. Mathias convinced him that London equivalents could be found for the very specific New York neighborhoods described in the novel. And Leavitt agreed that the central characters also could be Anglicized. The family, he explains, is "bookish, and old-fashioned." The father teaches in a private school, the mother and son are copy editors. But other characters weren't so willing to be translated. "What finally convinced me was when Sean suggested keeping some of them American," Leavitt says. "Suddenly you have a new dynamic—an English-American interaction—which I think is really interesting and fits in very well with the psychology of the book."

"I was very pleasantly surprised when I read the script," he adds. "I think what surprised me the most was how loyal it was to the book. I had expected many more diversions, and I thought a lot more changes would have to be made in order to accommodate the shift to London." In keeping with the Anglo-American dynamic of the film, WNET, New York City's public television station, came on board as co-producers with the BBC.

The movie was also cast on both sides of the Atlantic. Owen and Rose, the father and mother, are played by veteran British stage actors Brian Cox and Eileen Atkins. Their richly detailed performances form the emotional core of *The Lost Language of Cranes*. Eliot, Philip's unreliable boyfriend, is played by *Thirtysomething*'s Corey Parker. The part of Philip is played by English newcomer Angus MacFadyen.

The title of Leavitt's novel is derived from a metaphorical story told by one of the characters. Left to his own devices, an



Anglo-American partnership: David Leavitt and Sean Mathias.

abandoned child imitates the movements and noises of the construction cranes operating in a building site he can see through an open window. The child is attempting to communicate in the only language he can learn, the language of the cranes. Leavitt's novel is about communication—between lovers, between husband and wife, parent and child. The varying affections between people as they conduct their family dances is the author's favorite theme.

Are there any autobiographical elements in *The Lost Language of Cranes*?

"I would say I identify more with Philip than with Eliot, but my father wasn't gay, if that is what you want to know," Leavitt answers. "It was such a psychologically fascinating situation, this idea that both father and son are gay. As soon as I thought of it, I realized it would make an interesting novel. I never knew any situations like this before I wrote the book, but subsequently I received letters and calls from many people telling me that it is not uncommon.

"It's a story about a family," Leavitt continues. "It's about what a friend of mine once called a *pas-de-trois* between these characters. The family is always the core. The other characters orbit around them." Although the story is principally about the father coming out as a gay man, Leavitt was most fascinated by "the dependency that is created once you enter a relationship which consumes your life, like a marriage or a family relationship."

When Philip comes out to his parents, the moment is liberating for him, but it throws his parents' entire 20-odd years of marriage into confusion. "I'm interested in that interdependency between people," Leavitt says. "Owen's coming out is not only a matter of liberating himself. What I think is so tragic for him, and what, in some ways, held him back for so long, is that he knows that by freeing himself he will kill Rose, his wife. Or at least suddenly destroy the illusion of her entire life."

Although Leavitt is far too sophisticated a writer to offer any simple solutions, his message isn't all that complex, either: A family can survive almost any crisis. What is important is that the dance goes on, that they are willing to continue the *pas de famille*.

Great Performances: The Lost Language of Cranes airs Wednesday, June 24, at 10 p.m. on KPBS-TV. Repeats Saturday, June 27, at 11 p.m.