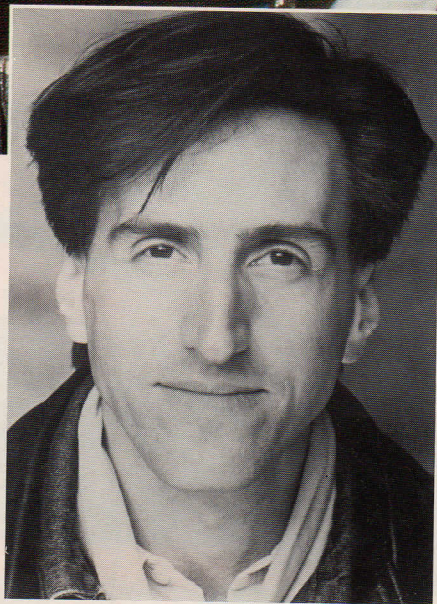


All About Paul

Rudnick's hit play Jeffrey wows audiences out West



WILLIAM GIBSON/MACHTA SWOPE ASSOC.



Playwright Paul Rudnick lives in a small Greenwich Village brownstone, in an apartment that once belonged to the actor John Barrymore. We could talk about Barrymore if there is a lull in the conversation, I think to myself as I climb to the top floor to interview Rudnick. But conversation with Paul Rudnick doesn't flag. He is never at a loss for a pithy one-liner or a clever *bon mot*. Imagine a Woody Allen with a gym body, a Woody Allen who is gay. Check out Rudnick's new play, *Jeffrey* at the Westwood Playhouse in Los Angeles

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and Theatre on the Square in San Francisco, and the you'll see what I mean.

A runaway hit since it opened in New York at the beginning of this year, *Jeffrey* is a comedy about a young, gay man who

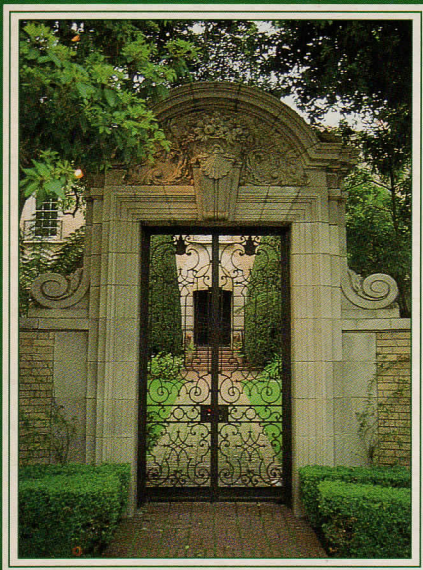
vows to give up sex because of AIDS. In a series of sketches, the celibate hero scurries nervously through contemporary gay Manhattan trying to run away from sex, love and commitment until he falls in love with an HIV-positive man. Part screwball comedy, part romance, part wicked satire, *Jeffrey* is an attempt to come to terms with the plague through laughter.

Who is this man who challenges us to laugh in the face of AIDS? The apartment I have just walked into reflects a decidedly eccentric taste. I figure it's a good place to start. "I saw this ad in *The New York Times* which said 'medieval duplex,' and the real estate agent said Barrymore lived there in 1917," Rudnick

Above: Members of the original New York cast of *Jeffrey*. Inset: The playwright, Paul Rudnick.

by Gerard Raymond

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Left to right: Patrick Kerr, Edward Hibbert, and John Michael Higgins at L.A.'s Westwood Playhouse in the roles they created in the New York production of Jeffrey.

tells me as I take in his living room, a snug garret crammed with antiques and Victoriana. "Because I am a student of the theater and a real estate romantic, I fell in love with the place immediately. It was my childhood fantasy of Greenwich Village life."

Barrymore had named the apartment "Alchemist's Corner." Now, as Rudnick himself says smiling, it looks like a stage set for a murder mystery in summer stock. There are old portraits on the walls and every available table top is cluttered with candlesticks and lamps. Heavy ungainly objects, like the wooden mantelpiece, predominate. If you said junk, I suspect he'll cheerfully agree with you. Some of the pieces, Rudnick says, are genuine antiques, but he goes for mood rather than for authenticity. "When I lie on the couch with a legal pad, desperate to avoid writing, I can look up and see a kind of furniture parade." I had to ask about the centerpiece of his living room, an ornately carved throne. "It's a real test actually," he replies laughing. "When people come in they either shy away from it or they head right for it. My mother immediately sat on it."

* * *

You won't find clues to Rudnick's wildly theatrical personality in his child-

hood. He was born thirty-six years ago in the suburbs — Piscataway, New Jersey, to be specific. According to him, New Jersey is like a "mass day-care center", a "holding pad" with malls and lakes, designed to coddle children. He had a happy and untroubled childhood in Piscataway. "The people were very kind, but I knew they were only feeding and clothing me until the people in New York came to get me."

When it was time to go to college Rudnick chose Yale over Harvard, because Cole Porter went to Yale. Harvard, according to Rudnick, prepares people to become President of the United States, whereas at Yale one learns to play the piano and mix a martini. Never mind that Yale produced George Bush, that, Rudnick says, was an aberration. "Going to Yale was like being in a Broadway show out of town. Eventually you would be moved to New York where you would be a hit!"

Rudnick moved to his dream city in 1979, and although his Broadway debut was still over a decade away, he was finally in his element. He says he met many people with no money and no access, all trying for the same life that he wanted. "There was a wonderful sense of community — the gay community and the arts community." At Yale he

had met two kindred spirits, playwright Wendy Wasserstein and costume designer William Ivey Long, who in time, were also going to make it big on Broadway. They remain his close friends today.

When he was growing up, Rudnick's parents had tried to impress on him the value of the dollar and the importance of hard work. Their efforts backfired. The young Rudnick had become convinced that he would "rather die" than have a job. Of course, this severely limited his options in the real world. "I couldn't be an heir to a great fortune because of my parent's selfishness — their refusal to be Rockefellers," he quips. Supporting himself with various odd jobs, Rudnick decided that the only profession left open to him was writing.

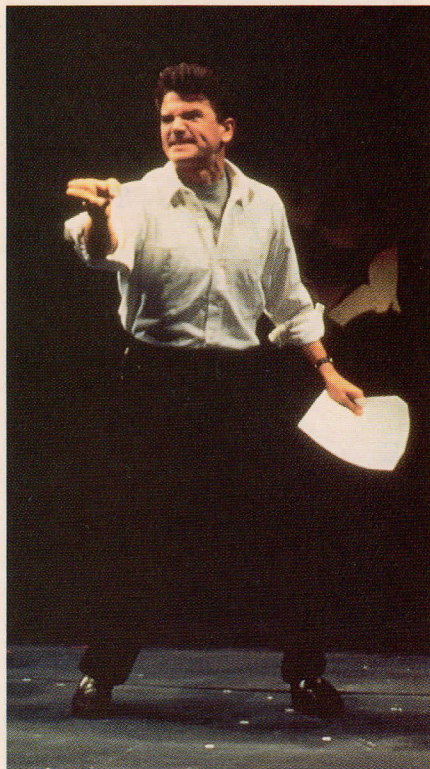
He tried his hand at journalism, but his wild imagination almost got him into trouble. "I would do interviews and if the person wasn't saying anything that was interesting or pithy — no fabulous quote or great sentence — I would think one up!" Realizing that this was a bad habit for a reporter, he turned to fiction and the theater. Now he could invent as he pleased, borrowing from real life whenever necessary.

His first play, *Poor Little Lambs*, a quirky comedy about a woman who tries to break into the Whiffenpoofs, Yale's all-male singing group, was produced off-Broadway in 1982. Starring the then-unknown Kevin Bacon and Bronson Pinchot, it generated enough interest to bring it to the attention of Hollywood, although a movie never materialized. Two very funny novels followed: *Social Disease*, which was published in 1986, is a satirical take on the New York club scene featuring a young man who has never done a day's work in his life (sounds familiar?); *I'll Take It* (1989), is about a group of compulsive shoppers, inspired by Rudnick's mother and two aunts.

In due course, Rudnick's historic apartment became grist to his creative mill. In his 1991 play, *I Hate Hamlet*, a young soap star who is playing Hamlet in Central Park, moves into, where else? Barrymore's apartment in the Village. No wonder that throne looks familiar, I realize, as we sit talking. I had seen it on stage in *I Hate Hamlet*. Needless to say,

Rudnick had to improve on real life. In his play, the ghost of the celebrated thespian suddenly materializes in his former apartment to give the soap star some pointers in the classical acting tradition.

With *I Hate Hamlet*, Rudnick finally got his name up in lights on a Broadway marquee, but it turned out to be a very bizarre experience. Talking about it now, Rudnick sees the humor of the whole episode, and I'll bet it will show up someday in one of his literary confessions. What happened was that Nicol Williamson, the British actor playing Barrymore in *I Hate Hamlet*, apparently didn't like the play. He made up his own



WILLIAM GIBSON/MARTHA SWOPE ASSOC.

John Michael Higgins created the role of Jeffrey in the New York production.

lines and made unscheduled exits during his scenes. When, on one occasion, he attacked another actor with a sword, it made headlines in the local tabloids. Rudnick's Broadway debut was effectively upstaged, and the show closed abruptly.

"People told me, 'Oh Paul, this will be a wonderful chapter for your memoirs,' and I wondered if they said that to the people getting out of the lifeboats from the Titanic," says Rudnick with a laugh. In fact the debacle actually helped his career as a writer. He found himself with work offers for both stage and screen,

and the play has since been produced all over the world. Two years later the playwright was back with his most successful work to date.

So we get to *Jeffrey*. I ask Rudnick, who has been openly gay from the beginning of his career, about the significance of him writing on a gay theme. "I always had gay characters, but this is the first time that I took the community as a whole subject," he replies. He says he also wanted to celebrate the "theatrically rich group" afforded by the gay community. "It's an extra plus when you are speaking to people about their immediate concerns." But, I point out, no one had quite presented the health crisis in these terms before. In the play's most quoted lines, a character says "think of AIDS as the guest who won't leave, the one we all hate. It's still our party." Rudnick agrees that his approach was unusual, and speculates that *Jeffrey* could not have been written in the first decade of the AIDS crisis. "Now there are all these questions, aside from the medical ones, about how we live with this particular nightmare, and especially how we achieve any kind of romance or hope for good simple cheer with this stuff going on."

In an article he wrote for *The New York Times* shortly after *Jeffrey* opened, Rudnick acknowledged that making wisecracks about AIDS could be viewed as being in the worst, possible taste. But, he wrote, AIDS is not the end of gay life or gay laughter. "If people can't giggle in hospitals or at memorials, all they can do is weep." There are no sacred cows in *Jeffrey*. Rudnick pokes fun at AIDS fundraisers, self-help gurus and memorial services at which guys cruise each other.

Rudnick tells me that he was very gratified when friends who were sick responded positively to his play. "Most of the people with AIDS refuse to see themselves as victims. Sometimes other people, even with the best of intentions, tend to pigeonhole those with AIDS, [reducing them to] just a red ribbon. They certainly deny PWAs a romantic life, treating them as if their lives were limited, as if they were already dead." Rudnick confesses that he enjoyed standing at the back of the theater to

gauge how the play was doing. Audiences in New York, both gay and straight, respond to the play with whoops of laughter, and most of the city's critics concur that *Jeffrey* is the funniest play in town.

Rudnick believes that the "essential romantic comedy dilemma" of our time is one of love and sex in the age of AIDS; *Jeffrey* is probably the first old-fashioned romantic comedy in which an HIV positive person falls in love. True to its romantic inclinations, the play begins with slides of Manhattan accompanied by Gershwin music and ends with a couple on the top of the Empire State building, kissing against a cardboard skyline and a big cartoon moon. It's your standard boy meets boy, boy loses boy, boy gets boy back story. And it takes place in the Manhattan the young Rudnick dreamt about growing up in New Jersey. "I wanted the play to have this fairy tale romance in the center of it and I wanted to use Manhattan for its enchantment in the way Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers and Woody Allen have used it."

But there are detractors. I remind Rudnick that even while finding the play funny, some people have questioned his use of age-old gay stereotypes: an interior decorator and his simple-minded chorus-boy lover; a randy, gay, Catholic priest; a caterer and a bartender. For the first time in our conversation he doesn't come up with a wisecrack, this is obviously a criticism that galls him. He defends himself arguing that it is "exhilarating" to write from a gay perspective those same characters that might have been token figures twenty years ago. "If you are writing from the inside, you find that they are very full human beings and have genuine strength," he says, warming to the subject.

"I think those people — the interior designers, florists, costume designers, pet groomers, and others who every one thinks of as the silliest of sissies — they are the ones who have done most of the marching, most of the protesting and they define the gay world," Rudnick continues. "To suddenly ignore them or act as if they were the Uncle Toms or Aunt Jemimas of our world is shocking to me. I wonder at those critics who seem to

prefer gay characters who are as straight as possible. That's a far more vicious stereotype — a kind of bland, middle-of-the-road, all-American decency. If I was a straight person I would be offended to be portrayed as that dull! So I think asking to have gays shown as such straight arrows is just a big mistake. And it sure isn't funny."

I decide to go a step further and ask Rudnick whether *Jeffrey* might be so popular because it is safe. Is a hit because a general audience only sees gay people as jesters? "In most gay projects there tends to be that moment where there is a soap opera chord or a drum roll and you see two men kissing



WILLIAM GIBSON/MARTHA SWOPE ASSOC.

Harriet Harris plays *Woman in Bed*, *Showgirl*, *Ann Marwood Bartle*, *Debra Moorhouse*, *Sharon, Mom*, and *Mrs. Marcangelo* in *Jeffrey*.

or having sex. One of the things I wanted with *Jeffrey* was to have the guys kissing within the first five seconds. There is so much open sexuality and gay romance in the play, so that far from saying we are harmless jesters, it says we are completely sexual, powerful, and very funny people. I don't think that's safe. I think it's more subversive. Because it is funny, people are disarmed and almost accept it without knowing. I haven't been to many plays about wild optimistic gay romances, and I am very pleased to have written one."

However you read *Jeffrey*, the bottom

line is that it *is* funny. Like the playwright himself. I have only to ask my next question and Rudnick is bubbling again. I mention the recent revelations that Libby Waxman-Gelmer, film critic-at-large for *Premiere* magazine is none other than our playwright. Mrs. Waxman-Gelmer's regular columns, with her idiosyncratic film reviews peppered with caustic comments about movie stars and anecdotes about her family and gay friends, are the comic highlight of the magazine. "She is a goddess, a wonderful and distinct creature and I am but a humble manservant," Rudnick exclaims. "I don't see why she should be tagged with the burden of being identified with this hack gay writer, when she is clearly a prose stylist far beyond my gifts," he carries on.

Even if he claims he's not in Goddess Libby's league, Rudnick's fame has spread to Hollywood. His first effort there however, was not a success. He wrote the original script for *Sister Act*, but it was junked when Whoopi Goldberg came on board replacing Bette Midler. He also did some uncredited revisions on *The Addams Family*. But with the sequel, *Addams Family Values* opening this Thanksgiving, Rudnick will come into his own as a screenwriter. It's easy to see how Rudnick the ex-suburbanite must have enjoyed chronicling this most unwholesome of American families. "The parents are permissive, the children are outrageous, the house is a deliriously happy wreck, and no one is ever punished," he says gleefully.

We are running out of time now, so I ask Rudnick about his next project. It's a new play due summer 1994, but he tells me he won't talk about it this early for fear of jinxing it. I subsequently learn that it's titled *The Naked Truth* and focuses on a New York socialite who wants to shut down a gallery because it is exhibiting allegedly obscene photographs. As I leave Rudnick's apartment, I realize that journalists who interview this playwright won't need to make up things about their subject. For the past one and a half hours he has given me the Paul Rudnick Show, and there were just about as many laughs here as there are in *Jeffrey*. □