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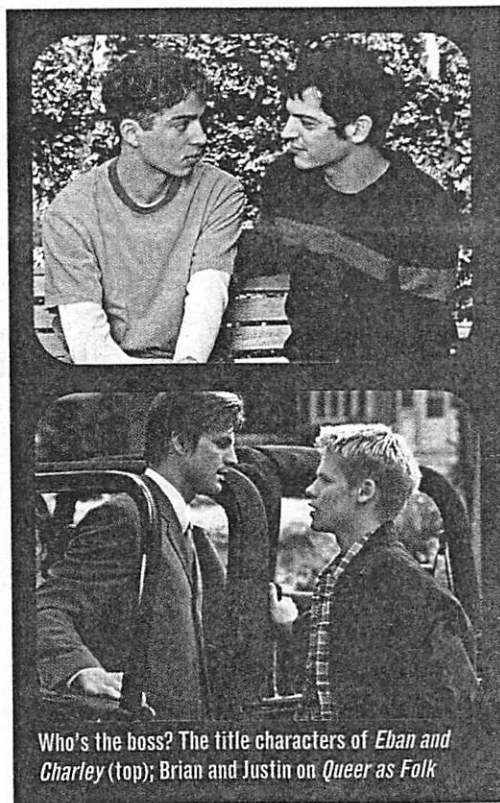
Boys to men

Filmmakers of three new films—*L.I.E.*, *Eban and Charley*, and *Our Lady of the Assassins*—talk about why they chose to portray teenage boys' relationships with older men. Is it a rite of passage or just plain wrong? **By Gregg Kilday**

As far as pop culture is concerned, if a straight teenage boy hooks up with an older woman, it's a veritable rite of passage. When Finch (Eddie Kaye Thomas) tumbled with Stifler's mom in the first *American Pie*, it was an excuse for triumphant giggles; when young Pacey (Joshua Jackson) bedded his high school teacher in the first season of the WB network's *Dawson's Creek*, it was an occasion for swoony tea and sympathy. But let a gay teen suggestively eye an older man—and let the older guy reciprocate—and the creepy music is cued. The sexual vultures tempted by the young hustlers in movies like *My Own Private Idaho* and *johns* are a distasteful lot, and even the apparently affectionate relationship between a 30-something man and a 17-year-old boy in the new thriller *The Deep End* leads to tragedy.

Advocates for gay youth have their own reservations about intergenerational encounters. "We maintain a strict policy prohibiting any relationships between the youths we serve and the volunteers and staff, partly to protect our organization but also to protect the youth," explains Bryant Hilton, a board member of the Out Youth support group in Austin, Tex. "We discourage relations with other adults as well. The kids we serve first need a safe place to figure out who they are, so [relations with older men] isn't something we see as much of an issue."

More teens are now coming out at a younger age, Hilton acknowledges, so they may well first encounter sex among their peer group rather than seeking out an older tutor. Still, if straight boys are allowed to fantasize about older women, why has gay-themed pop culture been slow to grant queer boys their own



Who's the boss? The title characters of *Eban and Charley* (top); Brian and Justin on *Queer as Folk*

Summer of '42? Showtime's *Queer as Folk* finally crossed into that territory last December when, following its British template, it depicted underage Justin (Randy Harrison) avidly pursuing 29-year-old Brian (Gale Harold); as Justin was fond of pointing out, he was in ways more mature than the perennially adolescent Brian.

Three movies are now following *QAF's* lead. The young men who encounter older men in *L.I.E.*, *Our Lady of the Assassins*, and *Eban and Charley* range from desperate street kids to suburban youths, but they speak to a universal experience: They are all sexually curious; they seek escape from oppressive surroundings; they yearn for emotional connections.

The older men they encounter are more various. In the laid-back romance *Eban and Charley*, due out November 9, Eban (Brent ▶

L.I.E.: JOSHUA KESSELER/REINA; EBAN AND CHARLEY: PICTURE THIRTI ENTERTAINMENT; QUEER AS FOLK: L. PETER WEYMAN/SHOWTIME

Telling tales out of school

L.I.E. director Michael Cuesta (center) says his film about the sexual awakening of two teenage boys—played by Paul Franklin Dano (left) and Billy Kay—was in part inspired by *Lolita*.



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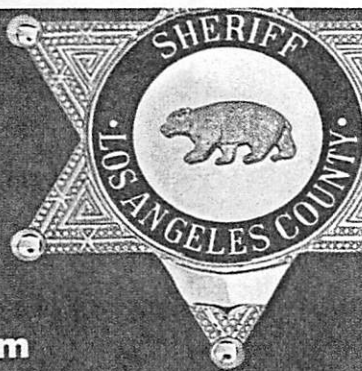
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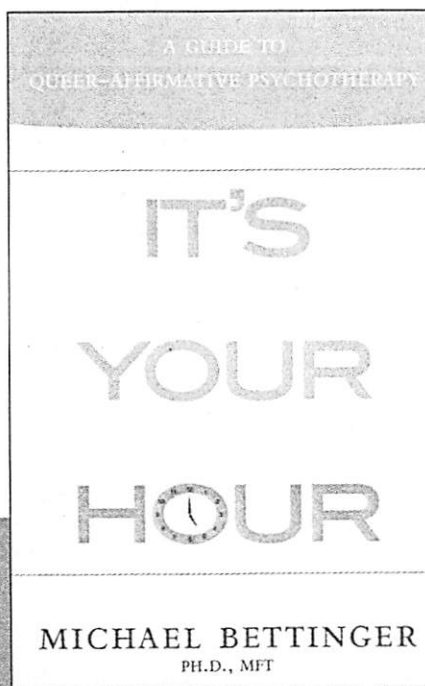
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Fellows) is at age 29 a bit of a lost soul himself—a sacked teacher with an inability to relate to anyone but younger boys. In contrast, *Our Lady of the Assassins* (which opens September 7) has as its protagonist the worldly-wise Fernando (Germán Jaramillo), an erudite, melancholic writer in his 50s; he returns to his hometown—the violent, crime-ridden Medellín, Colombia—expecting to die, only to rediscover his passion for life when he invites a young hustler (Anderson Ballesteros) into his bed and his life.

Big John Harrigan, played by the formidable Brian Cox in the Long Island-set drama *L.I.E.* (opening September 7 in New York City), is the most problematic of the lot: A bluff former marine who banters easily with the Irish-American cops in his community, he's also an admitted pedophile who uses his red Cutlass 442 to bewitch the local boys. But even in Big John's case, it's not always clear from moment to moment who exercises the control in his relationships: Fifteen-year-old Howie (Paul Franklin Dano) tests his own seductive wiles by reciting a Walt Whitman poem to his older admirer.

"When he reads that poem, I always felt he's very aware of what he's doing, the power he has over Big John," says *L.I.E.*'s first-time director and cowriter, Michael Cuesta. "When Howie starts testing his own sexual prowess, it was really inspired by the way [Vladimir Nabokov's] *Lolita* uses her sexuality over Humbert Humbert. Part of Howie's awakening is his becoming aware of his prowess over this older guy—who's a predatory, strong figure. Howie discovers an ability to manipulate John."

While there is no future to their relationship—Big John dismisses a slightly older boy whose bloom of youth has begun to fade—Cuesta presents his cautionary tale as a coming-of-age for Howie, whose ultimate sexual orientation is left ambiguous. "There are guys out there like Big John who are predatory but who are also pillars of the community," says Cuesta. "The fact that he is so human and accessible makes him that much scarier. But John is an antihero too. In a way, he helps the boy when he sends him off like a marine to confront his dad."

A dramatic age disparity between an older man and an adolescent shouldn't automatically be dismissed as pedophilia, says *Our Lady* director Barbet Schroeder (best known in this country for 1990's ►

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The truth in *L.I.E.*

The teen stars of *L.I.E.* hope their controversial film might open a few minds **By Bruce C. Steele**

When the film *L.I.E.* earned sustained applause from an overflow crowd at its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January, its two 16-year-old stars were there to soak it up. Paul Franklin Dano, who plays 15-year-old Howie, sat and smiled broadly as costar Billy Kay—who plays coquettish Gary—stood and hooted with pride in support of the film and its makers. Maybe others in the audience were silently wincing over the film's exploration of two teenage boys' mutual (but unrequited) sexual attraction and their interactions with an unrepentant pedophile called Big John, but for Dano and Kay it was simply a job well done.

The next day the boys appear for an interview, eager yet serious, two seasoned pros. Kay, who graduated early from his Long Island, N.Y., high school (and who turned 17 in April), is a regular on the soap *Guiding Light*. He didn't hesitate to play omnisexual delinquent and underage hustler Gary: "When I read the script, I said, 'Wow, this is such an out-there character. This role is definitely going to be cool.'"

Dano, a high school senior who's been acting since age 10, says what drew him to the lead role of Howie, who is just coming into sexual awareness, was that Howie "was a lot more intimate with the [other] characters, such as Gary and Big John"—something he hadn't played before.

Clearly these are not your squeamish up-and-coming actors of the past.

THE ADVOCATE: *You guys have a lot of sexually charged moments together that you both seem comfortable with.*

KAY: It definitely helped out the chemistry with me and Paul because we've been such good friends for a long time. **DANO:** I've been at his house. I've slept over there, met all his friends.

What did you each think when you first read the script?

KAY: Gary originally was supposed to be black. I went up for [Howie], and [director] Michael [Cuesta] said, "Will you read Gary for me? I see you in Gary's role." I loved it! I got to have such cool tattoos and everything—it was great. **DANO:** Howie's very innocent—in the beginning of the movie he's really lost and not grown up yet. Then he meets Gary, who becomes one of his best friends. And I think he grows a lot because of the person Gary is—streetwise, a lot more out there. Then [Howie] meets Big John, who becomes like a fatherlike figure to him. It's like a coming-of-age story for Howie. At the end he's able to take care of himself and he has confidence. He believes in himself.

Is Gary gay? Is Howie?

KAY: Gary's bisexual—he says it in the film, actually. He



Dano (left) and Kay were intrigued by their roles as sexually curious Long Island teens.

says [about Howie's dad's voluptuous girlfriend], "Hey, I'd fuck her. I'd fuck anything." He's more of a hustler than just to say he's gay [or] straight: He takes whatever he likes, whatever he needs.

DANO: I don't think Howie knows in the movie if he's bisexual, gay, or straight. I think he experiments throughout the movie, trying to find out what he wants—exploring sexually—because he really doesn't know. It's all too much for him at one time: discovering [his] sexuality, if he has one, and all the things going on with his father [who's under FBI investigation] and his mother [who has just died] and Gary and Big John. You're not supposed to know what Howie is—he doesn't know himself.

Do you guys know gay kids?

DANO: We have a few kids who have come out in our school. People respect that. One of them still plays a sport—he plays football. I mean, they take showers in the shower room. It doesn't bother people. He's a normal person. **KAY:** My school, I think it's more homophobic than [Paul's]. There's always going to be the part [of the school] that's gonna be antigay. And there's people who were like, *Hey, whatever, I'm fine with it.* I mean, just let the people live their life—it's ridiculous. That's what I think.

*What would you say to people—gay and straight—who find *L.I.E.*'s subject matter disturbing?*

DANO: What it deals with is real. It's not something that doesn't happen. There are people out there like [Big John], and just because a person's like that, you can't... **KAY:** You can't deny them their rights. **DANO:** It is a film, a form of entertainment, and it's a form of knowledge. It's both. And I think it was written that way too—for you to go in there and enjoy yourself, challenge your mind, and to let you see things that you haven't seen before. And learn something. And I think the film is going to do that, if people open their minds. ■

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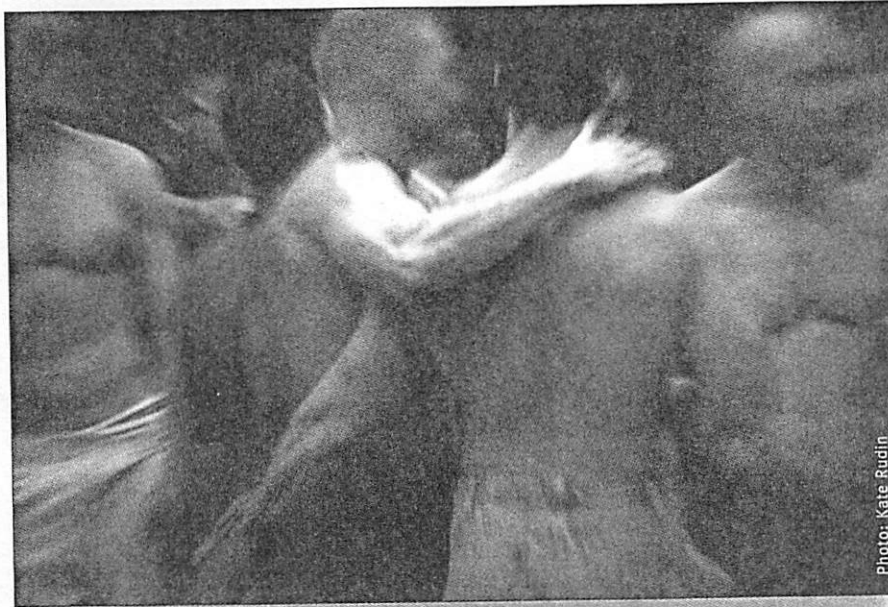


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Reversal of Fortune): "Pedophilia," he insists, "has nothing to do with this story."

Upon meeting street-savvy, hair-trigger teenager Alexis (Anderson Ballesteros), the older Fernando first strikes a financial bargain—offering meals, a place to live, CDs—but it leads to a deeper attachment. "An adolescent [like Alexis] is completely aware of the world and of himself," says Schroeder. "It's really an impossible love story—they come from very different backgrounds, but they learn from each other. Fernando learns about the new realities of his town—the paradise of his childhood that has been transformed into some kind of hell. And the boy has an admiration for this adult who is an iconoclast and a rebel. It's a learning situation for both of them. It's deeply homosexual to the core—after all, [such relationships were] one of the bases of Greek culture."

While *Our Lady* takes place in a shadowy, almost operatic world, the Pacific Northwest setting of *Eban and Charley* is deceptively casual and drably commonplace, making its love story, between the 14-year-old Charley (Giovanni Andrade) and the older Eban, all the more subversive. Inspired by a real-life incident—first-time director James Bolton cites a young friend of his who was dumped by an older boyfriend because the older guy's

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I love you to death

By Jan Stuart

Fernando, the middle-aged gay writer who propels *Our Lady of the Assassins*, raises morbidity to an art.

When asked why his apartment has no stereo, he says, "I'm training for the silence of the grave." Asked why he has returned to his Medellín birthplace after 40 years, he replies, "I've come home to die."

Such old-toad whining could almost be funny if Medellín were not the hellhole we see in Barbet Schroeder's darkly alluring new love story, adapted from Fernando Vallejo's semiautobiographical screenplay. One would be hard-pressed to think of a more conducive environment for dropping dead than this scenic but explosively violent Colombian city, where all the wrong people (they are

pals disapproved of their age disparity—the film is moonily romantic, with Charley ardently pressing the affair even when Eban tries to cut it off.

Argues Bolton, “Some boys mature faster than others—they know they’re gay, they want to have relationships, and they do. Charley is definitely aware, and he pursues Eban. This whole age-of-consent thing is really all about a number. It’s possible for these kinds of relationships to work. Sure, a lot of them don’t, but that doesn’t mean they can’t.” Bolton admits such partnerings are often “demonized, but that’s all because of fear, motivated by misunderstanding. It’s important to work these issues out.”

The notion of underage teens having gay sex—whether with their peers or with someone older—may be disquieting to many, but sex itself isn’t really the point of this trio of films, all of which are relatively chaste. *Our Lady* is the only one to actually follow its lovers into the bedroom, for some discreet lovemaking. In *L.I.E.*, Big John, though a threatening presence, never quite makes a move on Howie. And in *Eban and Charley*, Bolton purposely cuts away from actual sex so as not to lose the film’s focus on the couple’s underlying emotional drama.

The filmmakers all seem to borrow from E.M. Forster’s famous dictum: “Only connect.” In *Eban and Charley*, that connection is so immediate it echoes many a past romantic melodrama: Two lovers buck the odds and ignore social proscriptions. In *Our Lady*, connection gives way to metaphor: The young hustler actually serves as a tour guide through the living hell of Medellín. “Instead of discovering death,” explains Schroeder, “Fernando discovers something worse—a horrible pain. And through his pain we discover the pain of the whole country.”

And in *L.I.E.*—potentially the most controversial of the three, a possibility Cuesta will face head-on when the film opens at strip-mall multiplexes along its titular Long Island Expressway—a pedophile is nearly redeemed as he redirects his seduction scenario to become a positive father figure for Howie. “It really is a film about the need to connect,” says Cuesta about his film’s daring gambit. “Love comes in many faces.” ■

Kilday is film editor for The Hollywood Reporter.

Find more from the *L.I.E.* stars’ interview and links to related sites at www.advocate.com



Fernando (left) and Alexis overlooking Medellín (legion) pack guns and every day is a *Series 7*-style survival game whose object is to make it past sunset with your blood supply intact.

Rather than get his death wish, Fernando (the dashing rumples Germán Jaramillo) hooks up with a beautiful young thug named Alexis (the fine Anderson Ballesteros, a nonactor discovered selling incense on the street), the sole surviving member of a street gang. Attracted by Fernando’s erudition, antigovernment cynicism, and endless cash flow (a Mafia legacy from his sister), Alexis falls hard for Fernando, becoming his lover and personal angel of death. If a taxi driver is insolent, out comes Alexis’s pistol. If a neighbor bothers Fernando with nocturnal drum playing, bang, gone.

Our Lady of the Assassins

■ Written by Fernando Vallejo ■ Directed by Barbet Schroeder ■ Starring Germán Jaramillo and Anderson Ballesteros ■ Paramount Classics

Fernando makes some effort to reform Alexis (“Let them live; it’s what they deserve”), but mostly he is content to roam the streets with his impulsive stud puppy, dispensing sardonic comments and learning to appreciate life through the eyes of a young man whose days are truly numbered. The tension of the inevitable pulls tautly at the lovers, like a mousetrap spring ready to snap at the slightest provocation.

Violence is abundant and disturbingly matter-of-fact in *Our Lady of the Assassins*. While we never become inured to Alexis’s homicidal fits, we shudder at the knowledge of how close Medellín is in spirit to the indifference that has sprung up in our own backyards. Death and homosexuality have long been intimate bedfellows in film and literature. For a change, sodomy has nothing to do with it. ■

Stuart is the author of The Nashville Chronicles: The Making of Robert Altman’s Masterpiece (Simon and Schuster).

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