the village VOICE
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features

Filming the life of erotic researcher Alfred Kinsey, director Bill Condon finds it's déjà vu all over again

Sex, Actually

by **Jessica Winter**
November 2nd, 2004 10:45 AM

Sex is comedy: Filmmaker Bill Condon (center) with actors Liam Neeson and Laura Linney (photo: Bill Condon)

"I don't know what attracts me to biopics because I don't like them that much," says Bill Condon, who has followed *Gods and Monsters*, his portrait of *Frankenstein* director James Whale, with *Kinsey*, a look at the eroto-taxonomist whose bestselling fire-starter *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) threw the first sparks of the sexual revolution. "In this case," says the director, "I had to avoid that deadly dreary biopic thing, but still show how an unlikely person in an unlikely place in an unlikely time took this project on." That is to say, how Alfred Kinsey—the son of a zealously Methodist family, a man more than halfway through his twenties before he lost his virginity—became the pansexual founder of the devoutly unorthodox Institute for Sex Research, located in buttoned-up mid-century Indiana.

In *Kinsey* (opening November 12), Condon, who won the adapted-screenplay Oscar for *Gods and Monsters*, sidesteps the "biopic thing" with a disciplined formal conceit: The film takes shape as Kinsey's sexual case history, as if the man of science (Liam Neeson) were one of his own research subjects. Amassing material for the script, Condon sought out Kinsey's surviving colleagues and posed his share of delicate queries about their mentor, who didn't blanch at turning himself and his co-workers into lab rats of human desire. "I spoke with Paul Gebhard, played by Tim Hutton in the movie, which was incredibly helpful," Condon recalls. "I could ask what felt like awkward questions—you know, 'What was sex night like at the Kinseys'?'—and he was so matter-of-fact about it all. There's such a great openness and nonjudgmental demeanor there, and I got a little glimpse into how they managed to make people feel comfortable when they were discussing these things."

A policy of nonjudgment perhaps also defined the fascinating open-door marriage of Alfred and Clara Kinsey (Laura Linney), in which both partners pursued other lovers—and sometimes shared them, in the case of Kinsey assistant Clyde Martin (Peter Sarsgaard). "That's the crisis moment in the film, when Kinsey admits to his wife that he's having an affair with a man," Condon says. "The bisexual aspect of it is almost beside the point. It's an archetypal situation—and Kinsey wrote about it—how

to navigate the pressures of monogamy on a long-standing relationship. There's a myth in American movies that's as strong today as ever, that there exists out there a soul mate for you who will also fulfill all your sexual needs over an entire lifetime. And if you don't find that person, then somehow you've failed in life. This is something that a lot of people in committed relationships have to face, and we just don't talk about it much."

Jonathan Gathorne-Hardy, the English author of *Sex, the Measure of All Things: A Life of Alfred C. Kinsey* (1998), says, "Nobody can know the true nature of any marriage, this one in particular. Kinsey was a secretive man, and he didn't show his emotions easily. The difficulty in portraying him accurately is that you somehow have to take into account the people who saw in him a clear vein of kindness and sympathy as well as the people who only found him irritating, abrasive."

"There are a lot of stories about Kinsey in a social situation, where he would just boom at people in a mini-lecture—he always wanted a teacher-student relationship," Condon says. "It worried me that we were putting somebody like that at the center of a movie, because you can really grow impatient with him." (It only helps, of course, to cast the strapping and charismatic Neeson in the role.) "I was also startled by what a peacock he became once he got famous, and how much he enjoyed the limelight," Condon adds. "When you read about Gore Vidal spotting him in gay bars—now, he was there working, but the idea that this guy could become so part of the homosexual elite culture of New York in the '50s, and just assume that no one would know about it, that surprised me. He took real risks."

A forthright depiction of a knotty and sometimes disquieting life and career, *Kinsey* aims for a popular audience, and is thereby bound to make some theatergoers uneasy—or even hostile, given that right-wing usual suspects like Judith Reisman and Concerned Women for America have already attacked the film for spotlighting a dangerous deviant. (Reisman insists that Kinsey solicited and encouraged, rather than simply tabulated, the pedophilic acts recorded in *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*.) "There's this crazy notion that if certain interests can destroy his reputation, then somehow the progress we've made since 1948 can be reversed," Condon says. "When I look at Kinsey's work I see all the ways we've advanced, most obviously through the women's movement and the gay movement. I'm an openly gay filmmaker and I don't exist in Kinsey's lifetime—that's just a fact. I'm always struck by how far we've come, but I'm also struck by how these controversies keep repeating themselves."

"This film is coming out at a very curious moment that echoes Kinsey's own time," Gathorne-Hardy says. "The religious right is very vocal, as they were in the '50s when they claimed that Kinsey was undermining the American family. And though bombs aren't going to fall on our cities or your cities, there's a frightening feeling of a warlike atmosphere that Bush has stirred up, and that harkens back to the Cold War."

Once more into the breach, then, for Alfred Kinsey—though the stakes may be even higher this time around, as Condon points out. "The fringe people who attack Kinsey always make the same leap, that talking about something is the same as endorsing it, but this is life-or-death stuff," says the director, who cites President Bush's unrealistic emphasis on abstinence education in allocating funds to fight AIDS in Africa. "The Kinsey Institute is now involved in research on condom use, and 40

percent of people they sampled don't know how to use them, including a surprising percentage who put them on after they have sex. All the attempts to impose morality on science, whether it's sex ed or stem cell research, are exactly what Kinsey faced in his day."