

PREMIERE



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D I R E C T O R

TODD HAYNES

FOR A DIRECTOR OF films about social alienation and human deviance, Todd Haynes, 30, comes across as surprisingly well adjusted and accessible—in fact, a heluva nice guy. No Jarmusch-style mystique or Lynchian eccentricity here. On the contrary, his sunny, all-American affability could once have easily won him a spot next to Annette Funicello on the Mickey Mouse Club.

And no doubt he would have put the experience to good use, since he has shown a proclivity for utilizing iconographic childhood images in his investigations of life's dark side. In his now-legendary 1987 short feature, *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story*, he used dolls bearing a distinct likeness to Barbie and Ken to tell the story of the singer's struggle with anorexia. His first feature, *Poison*, which won the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival, interweaves three stories of social transgression: one of them resembles a television news documentary and another an episode of *The Twilight Zone*, while the third is based on a story by Jean Genet.

Yet Haynes's childhood in suburban Encino, California, presents a picture of cozy, Cleaver-like normality. He describes his mother and father as "the young and cute parents that everybody wishes they had." Films like *Mary Poppins* and *Oliver!* were early influences, and Franco Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* inspired his first Super-8 production. Young Todd played all the roles except Juliet, who was portrayed by a neighborhood friend, while Dad was his off-camera sword-sparring partner.

Haynes attended an alternative high school and then Brown University, where he studied art, film, and semiotics. Upon moving to New York City, he decided to make a movie starring dolls to

see whether an audience could become as engaged by them as they would be by actors. He spent months making miniature dishes, chairs, costumes, Kleenex and Ex-Lax boxes, and Carpenters records to create the film's intricate, doll-size mise-en-scène. "I would take a really thin dowel," says Haynes, "cut it short, paint it yellow, make a little pink band at the end and a teeny gold slash, sharpen the other end and make a little black dot at the point, and—voilà!—a pencil."

His obsession with small things made a huge impact on the museum and art-house circuit. Because of all the press coverage and word of mouth, Haynes didn't have to do much to distribute the film; exhibitors were calling him. This success was cut short, though, when a legal threat from the Carpenter family over unlicensed music rights forced Haynes to pull it from exhibition. But among his many new fans was director John Waters (*Hairspray*, *Cry-Baby*). "When I first saw it," says Waters, "I thought, 'Finally, the little movie from hell that I've been waiting for.' This new generation of filmmakers doesn't know how to get on my generation's nerves enough. But here was one that really surprised me. He's got the originality that you just can't fake."

While making *Superstar*, Haynes found that despite all the creative activity in New York, most filmmakers worked in relative isolation. So in 1987 he, Christine Vachon, and Barry Ellsworth formed Apparatus Productions, a nonprofit organization that has funded and produced short films. "It was great," says Haynes, "because I got experience in making films and utilizing resources while helping other people. The crew of *Poison* was largely made up of people I had been working with for two years at Apparatus."

Like *Superstar*, *Poison* was also an experiment, this time with different genres. Says Haynes, "The three separate styles force the question of who is speaking, something you're never asked to consider in a typical movie."

While dolls can be quite cooperative and won't fault a director for lack of experience, it's not always easy to win the devotion of real actors. Yet Haynes receives high praise. "I'd bring up suggestions and he'd try them out, which makes you want to work that much harder for him," says Susan Gayle Norman, who appears in the *Twilight Zone* segment as a research scientist. Adds Scott Renderer, who plays a homosexual prison inmate, "He is probably the best director I've worked with for knowing exactly what he wants." **JENNINE LANOUILLE**