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3 November 2009 11:47

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Andrew Haigh

04 Sep 2009

Greek Pete sold out faster than any other film at this year's London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. No one was particularly interested in the film's director Andrew Haigh during the Q&A session afterwards, but that didn't surprise him.

Pete Pittaros, the star of the film, was also present and most of the questions were directed at him. That's understandable because how often do you get to ask a rent boy what it's really like to be a rent boy? I'd wager not very often, but Haigh is the reason Pete is able to enlighten us.

He shadowed Pete and his friends for a year, watching them interact and observing their everyday routines. He gained their trust and, in return, they allowed his camera into their lives. The result is a candid view of the life of a London rent boy.

36-year old Haigh was born in Yorkshire. After university, he landed a job at Merchant Ivory as a runner, graduated into the editing suite and made his first short in 2004. Three more shorts followed before he made *Greek Pete* for a paltry £5,000.

Haigh became a one-man production unit to make his debut. He's the writer, director, editor and cameraman more through desire and financial necessity than egomania. Despite interest from financiers, unsurprisingly no one was willing to part with cash for a film about a group of male escorts.

More fool them because it's not only Gaydar who considers Haigh to be a consummate new talent. In 2008, Screen International named him one of their UK Stars Of Tomorrow. Rachael Scott met Haigh in the Soho Hotel to discuss his film and his rising star status.

A myriad of questions spring to mind about your film, but let's start with the obvious. Why did you choose to make *Greek Pete*?

I knew nothing about the world of male escorting whatsoever, but it seemed like a really interesting world to live in. I was interested in what kind of people work in that industry, how they forge a life for themselves. Pete wants the same things in life as everybody. He's just chosen a difficult environment to achieve those things. I was more interested in the character side than a desire to make a film about rent boys.

"I could easily have made the film with no explicit sex, but they are escorts and they do have sex. If you go and see *Harry Potter* you want to see his magic tricks, do you know what I mean? I think it's important to their world."

How did you find Pete?

I put adverts on numerous websites. I probably contacted about 30 people and only four replied. I interviewed those four, Pete was the first person I met and he stood out from the rest of them. I think he was quite wary when he first met me because he didn't know who I was or seen any of my work. He was a little bit more sorted than the other guys I'd met and I didn't want to go down the route of, 'Oh look, here's a fucked up escort'. Pete seemed to have a sure reason for doing it.

Which was money?

Yes, but more than that. I think he saw it almost as a good career move because he could earn money, he could live somewhere nice, he could get what he wanted. That he would choose an industry so far away from the mainstream was really interesting to me.

The film is part documentary and part drama. Why did you decide to make it that way?

I don't think the guys were interested in doing a straight documentary and I wasn't really, either, because I've always done drama before and I wanted to stay within that realm. I thought blurring the two together was the best way to understand their lives and still have a narrative thread to the story.

Also, even from the very beginning, people look at the back of magazines and look at an escort's picture and the whole of their world is wrapped up with what is real and isn't real. They are a million different things to a million different people and I wanted to play around with that within the construction of the film. I didn't want to steer the film too much in any direction. I wanted to let them talk how they would talk and for it to be how I saw their lives.



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How much of the film is fact and how much is fiction?

A lot of people when they first see it think it's a straight documentary and then they get a little pissed off because they don't think some scenes are real. I've never said that it's a straight documentary and I don't want to promote it as that. There are elements of truth throughout and all their words are improvised. I created scenarios and they existed within those scenarios. So there's truth in everything even if it's set up. All the stories they tell are their stories, but elements have been constructed to reflect real situations, but I wasn't putting words in their mouths. Maybe you could call it a 'staged documentary'.

So could you say then that all of these things can and have happened at some point, but not necessarily when you were there holding a camera?

Exactly. I want to be really honest about the process and for me the process is very interesting to me as a filmmaker more than anything else because I was working with a group of real people with no money whatsoever, and together we came up with a version of their lives. A lot of filmmakers have successfully merged documentary and drama together. Harmony Korine's *Gummo* is one and there are plenty of Iranian directors who have done that.

The one thing that struck me about it overall was just how 'normal' their lives are.

To be honest, that's what I thought, too. I thought their life would be incredibly seedy, but after spending time with them, they spend most of their day on the computer looking for clients. They're in bands making music or DJing - and it's not just a case of them being fucked up escorts on drugs.

"They do want the same things as everybody else. To be respected, to earn some money, to be in love, have relationships, they want all of these things. I think people sometimes forget that."

The Christmas dinner scene was an eye-opener. There's no reason why a rent boy wouldn't sit down in a civilised fashion on Christmas Day and eat dinner with friends, but it's not the first thing that comes to mind...

Exactly.

I would like to think that a scene such as that or where they're sitting around chatting about their day or whether God really exists or swapping notes on punters is realistic and that there is a genuine friendship and camaraderie between them.

That particular scene isn't on Christmas Day, but they do do that. They are genuinely friends with each other and they spend a lot of time just hanging out and helping each other out. What was really fascinating for me was listening to them talk about their experiences, when outside you're thinking, 'Oh my God, that's really quite sad or shocking', but their way to deal with it is in a very matter of fact kind of manner.

What research did you do once you'd formulated the idea for the film and thought up the scenarios you'd like to see them in?

I just talked to them, really, finding out what that kind of life was like. It was very much a collaborative process between all of us. I wanted them to be part of developing the story as well. Because I know nothing about that world, there was no point in me telling them what should happen in their world.



What did you find you had to do to gain their trust?

I think they knew quite quickly that I wasn't there to judge or exploit them in any way. I never intended the film to be titillating and they knew that was the case. Also, they wanted people to understand their lives a bit better because they're not necessarily embarrassed by what they do. It was very important for me that people didn't see them as just clichés. It's so obvious, but they do want the same things as everybody else. To be respected, to earn some money, to be in love, have relationships, they want all of these things. I think people sometimes forget that.

They see what they do as just a job and although that might seem obvious, it's also surprising.

It is a job and a lot of people can't separate sex from having a relationship, but they seem to be able to do that. I went through all the questions that you would want to ask someone at research stage - 'How is it you can have sex with those kind of people? How can you get aroused?' and they were very pragmatic about it.

I love the fact that there's an awards ceremony for male escorts. How on earth do they judge it?

I think you get nominated and then clients vote. There's not a two-week session where you have to sleep with everyone or anything like that. People who have used those escorts have to vote.

Pete was so excited about it, wasn't he?

Yes, like a big kid.

He seems very intent on being the best at his job.

He takes pride in his job, which no one would expect, really.

"I don't necessarily think that this film is a gay film as such...No one mentions being gay in the film, no one's coming out and no one even has a problem with their sexuality."

I think coming from an ignorant perspective, which most people will be, you automatically assume that he must be ashamed of what he does.

Yes. I didn't push that aspect too much, pushing him to say that he was ashamed because that's what we want as an audience sometimes, to feel like we're morally superior. Deep down, we can make as many assumptions as we like, but he didn't want to be seen in that way and this is how they see their own lives.

Was there any hesitation between Pete and Kai about being filmed together in an intimate way?

It was something that we all discussed and I thought I could easily have made the film with no explicit sex, but they are escorts and they do have sex. If you go and see *Harry Potter* you want to see his magic tricks, do you know what I mean? I think it's important to their world. The sex scenes in the film are quite different. One is almost romantic, another is quite cold and business like and the one with the Americans is quite strange, but I think it's important that you see what they do.

The impression you always get about prostitutes in Hollywood movies is that it's just a job and when they're making love to their husband or boyfriend it's completely private and separate. So in my brain I'm thinking surely they wouldn't want the cameras on them now, but that's all coming from my experiences of watching prostitutes on film, not from real life.

The explicit sex scene between Pete and Kai was constructed. It wasn't a case of they're having sex and I'm sitting in the corner of the room filming it, but they are really together and do have sex.



Pete talks about a man he slept with who had gout and I wondered how he manages to get a hard on when confronted with someone he finds very unattractive.

He said something interesting to me, that if you knew that no one was ever going to know that you'd had sex with this person, they're never going to be your boyfriend, you're never going to introduce them to your friends or family you can pretty much find something sexy about anybody. There's always something about someone that is attractive and I think it's only when you start having relationships with somebody that you suddenly become very aware of what everyone else thinks. We all know that when you're drunk you can get off with pretty much anybody!

Ha ha. Speak for yourself!

And wake up the next morning and think, 'Oh no. This is never going to be a relationship'.

Yes, that's very true. What was it like for you when you came out?

I was 25, quite late. People accepted it and got used to it, but I still think it affects you throughout your life. Just to say that you've come out and everyone's fine about it doesn't mean that the baggage you had when you were feeling scared about coming out goes away. You still have to keep coming out every time you meet someone different. Everyone assumes that you're straight unless you're obviously, openly gay.

I don't necessarily think that this film is a gay film as such. A lot of my straight gay friends came to the premiere and they all really enjoyed it and found it fascinating. No one mentions being gay in the film, no one's coming out and no one even has a problem with their sexuality.

"I didn't push...him to say that he was ashamed because that's what we want as an audience sometimes, to feel like we're morally superior...he didn't want to be seen in that way and this is how they see their own lives."

I've got a quote from you saying, 'It is the slow struggle, the muddle to get places that interests me'. Can you elaborate on that?

I love films that are not about big dramatic events. It's the build up or aftermath of those events and how those affect you in slow, subtle ways. That's how I see life as a kind of slow meander and I try to make films that are in tune with that.

Your short films favour outsiders as the main character, don't they?

Yes. There's definitely a similarity within my work. They're usually very lonely characters struggling to make sense of what they want in their life.

Why is that?

I just think that life isn't easy for people and that doesn't have to be because of great trauma. Just deciding what you want and who you are is hard and all of my characters find it difficult to connect with people.

***Five Miles Out* was about a girl who had been sent away while her sister dies from anorexia. It's interesting that you focussed on the sister rather than the girl who was anorexic.**

Yes. It's more about the effects of trauma that interest me. How the girl deals with the things happening in her family.

Why did you make the transition from being an editor to a director?

I always wanted to direct. It was just a way to get into the industry. Also when you work in editing you have enormous contact with key people within film because there's a very small group involved at the editing stage.

Will it be full-time directing from now on?

I hope so. There're always problems with raising money and if my next film is gay-themed it will probably be hard to raise money for it. My work is never going to be particularly commercial, so - I think if you can't get money and your film can be made for virtually nothing, then it is possible just to go and do it.

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***Greek Pete* is released in select UK cinemas on 4 September 2009.**

Author: Rachael Scott

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