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Ferzan Özpetek

by [Rachael Scott](#)
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He's been dubbed "the Italian Almodóvar" and Madonna defined him as "quite simply a genius". Ferzan Özpetek has a new film out and it's called *Loose Cannons*.

It's a comedy about a son who gives up his gay life in Rome to live a straight one in the Italian provinces running the family pasta business after his father has a heart attack.

Loose Cannons explores familiar themes of individual expression and freedom, and finding the courage to do so despite adversity. Özpetek is well known for combining gay and straight storylines, and exploring the family we are born with and the family we choose in a state of crisis.

Set in the southern Italian town of Lecce where a homosexual family member, especially a son, can bring shame to his parents, the loose cannons of the film's title are the rule-breakers, the ones who refuse to abide by the stereotypically conservative behaviour and opinions of the traditional Italian family.

Born in Turkey, the 51-year old openly gay director moved to Italy when he was 17 to study Film History at Rome University and has lived there ever since.

His first film *Steam: The Turkish Bath* (1997) charted his experiences of moving from Turkey to Italy but in reverse. In the film, the lead character finds an acceptance and happiness that was missing from his empty existence in Rome and, despite its gay content, it was a surprising hit, especially with conservative Italian audiences.

One of the few European directors to have cross-gender and trans-Atlantic success, Özpetek was nominated for a Golden Berlin Bear for *The Ignorant Fairies* at the 2001 Berlin Film Festival.

Rachael Scott met with Özpetek do discuss *Loose Cannons*.

I see the film is dedicated to your father? How close do you feel to the material and the characters?

It was a very strange thing. Initially in the script the father didn't have that kind of attitude. Without realising it, towards the end of the movie, I had changed his hairdo, changed his clothes and I was shocked because all of a sudden I realised he was looking exactly like my father. His attitude, his body language, his way of walking, all the mimic of the actor was my dad. That touched me a lot.

We have stuff that we haven't dealt with with our parents. I didn't have a good relationship with my dad. He suffered from Alzheimer's Disease in the last five years of his life and he wanted to talk to me all the time. He was my inspiration for *Facing Windows*.

It's so strange the way that things happen and the way you achieve goals in life. My dad always wanted me to do well at university and to get a degree. I eventually ended up getting an honorary degree and that touched me a lot because my dad always wanted me to get this, but I got it in a different way – without taking courses or doing exams – I got it by making what I loved.

I had a back catalogue screening at the MOMA (Museum of Modern Art) in New York and I wished he were there to see what I was doing. Obviously he wasn't because he passed away. My attitude towards him when he was alive was completely different.

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"I don't want the film to be perceived as a discourse in homosexuality. It's a discourse about life, realisation in life and the pursuit of happiness regardless."

I was shocked and surprised at the family's reaction to Antonio's coming out. Was that heightened for comic effect or are people's attitudes really that bigoted in some areas of Italy?

It could be a realistic depiction of an everyday, bourgeois, Italian family but, on the other hand, this isn't the emphasis I meant. The emphasis in the scene when the father orders Antonio out isn't because he says he's gay but because he sees him as a limb of his body, as the guy who will embody the dynasty and this kind of refusal is what causes the father to banish the son – not his sexuality.

It's a scandal because the son says he'll tell everyone in the village that he's gay. The sexual identity element is there, but the way I meant it to be seen was a refusal of obedience from the son towards the father. When the father orders his son away from the table and then sends his wife to call him back and she doesn't tell him his father wants to speak to him, that for the father was the end of it.

Many of my friends have had problems. One of my friends told his family he was gay and the father is OK about it, but his mother doesn't want to see him. They are a very rich family and she cut him off and threw him out of the apartment she'd brought him. She thinks her child is hers, like a part of her body. I say it everytime - the parents never think to ask if their child is happy.

It's about what you do and how you do it and your choices, but the pivotal question for him is, "Am I able to ask myself if I'm really happy?" That is the ultimate question. I don't want the film to be perceived as a discourse in homosexuality. It's a discourse about life, realisation in life and the pursuit of happiness regardless.



I know you dislike being pigeon holed solely as a gay filmmaker, but how would you describe your body of work? What are the main themes running through *Loose Cannons*?

I don't like the term 'homosexual'. When you introduce someone to someone his sexuality shouldn't be the main thing. It's like from the belt under instead of from the belt up. You wouldn't introduce someone as being heterosexual, but that's immediately what happens. You're labelled and the 'sexual' part of the word is what I have a problem with.

Even when people are referred to homosexual in a very sweet way there's an underlining form of discrimination. Luckily life is so rich and diverse that to me it's a mistake to focus just on that all the time.

"I don't like the term 'homosexual'. When you introduce someone to someone his sexuality shouldn't be the main thing. It's like from the belt under instead of from the belt up."

Do you look forward to a time when there is no such thing as a 'gay' movie or a 'gay' film festival?

Absolutely. But without the loss of identity because it's very important. The majority of gay people think they are emancipated by going to gay clubs and gay festivals, but they've forgotten their own identity.

I gather that producers of your first film *Hamman* wanted to change the character from being gay and do the film in Italian. Considering that Italy can be very conservative, how has it got easier to make one of your films and how much of that is to do with social change?

The issue wasn't about cultural or political reasons, it was just that they didn't want a bi-lingual film. They absolutely didn't want two men kissing to be seen, either. What was considered particularly disturbing was that these two characters were absolutely ordinary people, which is even more dangerous.

I look forward to witnessing a gay pride cortege where people look normal, wearing normal clothes. Imagine a young boy of 10 or 12 seeing a pageant of ordinarily dressed gay people? That would cause massive chaos in his mind and would be perceived as probably even more dangerous than a full-blown gay pride in all its colour.

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But has it got easier to make your films? If so, is that because you have become more successful and can guarantee a profit or is it because of social change?

My films impact society as a whole and they have an emotional potential that is for everyone. I'm the only Italian to be given a retrospective at the MOMA in 10 years, which speaks for itself.

I know my films will never be submitted for an Academy Award by Italy because my previous film *Facing Windows* was an incredibly strong film that was bought by Sony and it was ticking all of the boxes, but I know I wasn't shortlisted because of the name and surname of the maker, and because of the content. It's a very subtle underlying thing.

I am one of the best-loved directors by the people. They go crazy for me, tell me I've changed their life and their ideas. For example, the Turkish Consul in Los Angeles gave a dinner for me and during his reception speech he said, "I was quite taken aback at first. Özpetek's cinema is very far away and removed from me. Every time I see one of his movies I can't help but think how far from my life they are, but by the end I realise it's got incredibly close. And when I leave the theatre I feel changed inside and my attitude towards the world has changed. It literally helped me to change my perspective."

***Loose Cannons* is out on DVD now.**

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DVD: Loose Cannons

A comedy from gay Turkish-Italian writer director Ferzan Özpetek about a young man too scared to come out to his father.



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