



Condon, William "Bill" (b. 1955)

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Bill Condon.
Courtesy Office of Bill
Condon.

Bill Condon has earned critical acclaim for directing and writing the films *Gods and Monsters*, about openly gay director James Whale, and *Kinsey*, on the life of the famed sex researcher. Among Condon's other writing credits is the Academy Award-nominated script for the movie musical *Chicago*.

William Condon was born October 22, 1955 into an Irish Catholic family in Queens, New York. He attended Regis High School, an all-male Jesuit institution in Manhattan. He found high school "liberating" since "the priests were much more radical than you could ever hope to be," especially in actively opposing the war in Vietnam.

In his sophomore year of high school Condon began his first serious romance, a two-year relationship with a young man in the class ahead of his. Condon's parents eventually learned of the love affair and spoke about it at first, but subsequently "it was never talked about," Condon recalled.

Condon earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Columbia University. Following his graduation in 1976 he moved to Los Angeles, planning to establish residency and then pursue film studies at UCLA.

In the interim Condon began freelancing as a writer. One of his articles in the movie periodical *Millimeter* caught the eye of British producer Michael Laughlin, who hired him to write scripts for two horror films, *Strange Behavior* (1981) and *Strange Invaders* (1983), both of which Laughlin directed. Although *Strange Behavior* was set in Illinois, it was filmed in New Zealand, so all the Americans on hand were pressed into service for bit parts. Thus, Condon made his screen debut as the first victim of a mad doctor. He has since appeared occasionally in other movies.

Condon continued in the horror genre, revising the script of a screenplay originally titled *The Louisiana Swamp Murders* into a movie called *Sister, Sister* that he directed in 1987. The film flopped, putting Condon into what he described as "film director's jail"--making movies, including crime thrillers such as *Murder 101* (1991), for cable television, some of which he produced as well as wrote and directed.

After several such efforts he returned to the big screen with the 1994 film *Candyman: Farewell to the Flesh*, which was based on a short story by Clive Barker, whom he met during the shooting of the movie in New Orleans.

Making *Candyman* was a turning point in Condon's career. He learned about financing independent films, and the contacts that he made helped him secure the movie rights to Christopher Bram's novel *Father of Frankenstein* about director James Whale. Barker agreed to serve as executive producer of the film, which was realized as *Gods and Monsters* in 1998.

Bringing the project to fruition was a considerable challenge. Condon was disappointed that although the distinguished actor Sir Ian McKellen was slated to play Whale, even production companies that had

previously backed films with gay themes showed little interest in funding *Gods and Monsters*. Eventually a small company, Lion's Gate, provided a three-million-dollar budget--modest by Hollywood standards--and the film was shot in a mere four weeks. The demanding schedule was necessary because of McKellen's pending commitment to appear at the National Theatre in London.

McKellen, then 59, was at first reluctant to play the septuagenarian Whale since he had recently accepted another role as an older man and was afraid of becoming typecast. Condon allayed his fears by pointing out that he would also be playing Whale in his forties in flashback scenes. Upon seeing a picture of the 40-something Whale, McKellen declared him "rather dishy," and the die was cast.

Other actors in the film included sweet-natured hunk Brendan Fraser, somewhat miscast as the young gardener whom Whale hopes will assist him in committing suicide, Lolita Davidovich as the gardener's girlfriend, and Lynn Redgrave as Whale's devoted Hungarian housekeeper, who fears that "Mister Jimmy" will go to hell because he is gay.

Gods and Monsters opened to enthusiastic critical response, winning numerous awards at film festivals. When the Academy Awards for the year were given out, McKellen's extraordinary performance was overlooked, but Condon's script earned him an Oscar for best adapted screenplay.

Condon received a second Academy Award nomination for the superb script that translated the cynical Kander and Ebb musical hit *Chicago* from the stage to the screen. Rob Marshall directed the movie version in 2002.

Acclaimed as the best movie musical in years, *Chicago* is actually the product of the collaboration of several out gay men, including--in addition to Condon and Marshall--executive producers Neil Meron and Craig Zadan. Winner of an Academy Award as Best Motion Picture of the year, it may have done more than any other recent film to resurrect the musical as a viable film genre.

Condon's most recent project is *Kinsey* (2004), a film biography of the legendary sex researcher Alfred Kinsey, which he both wrote and directed. Featuring brilliant performances by Liam Neeson as Kinsey and Laura Linney as Kinsey's wife Clara Bracken MacMillen, the film explores the contradictions of the scientist's complex personality and recreates the conditions under which he conducted his pioneering research.

A crucial element of *Kinsey* is its depiction of the sexual relationship between Kinsey and his younger associate Clyde Martin (Peter Sarsgaard), who also had an affair with Kinsey's wife. As he began his film, Condon said, he was skeptical about the concept of bisexuality and "less comfortable with the idea than [he] knew [he] was." In the course of making the film, however, he came to understand Kinsey as "really someone who moved on that scale"--a reference to the measuring device that Kinsey devised to describe human sexual behavior, with 0 denoting exclusively heterosexual activity and 6 exclusively homosexual.

Condon said in a 2004 interview in *The Advocate* that "it was very important for [him] as a gay filmmaker that *Kinsey* not be a movie that could be typed exclusively as a gay film." He stated that he sees Kinsey as "truly one of the fathers of the gay movement," but added that "because [Kinsey] didn't believe in labels and because he spoke to everybody, [he, Condon] didn't want it to dominate."

What does dominate in *Kinsey* are the ideas that every individual's sexuality is different, that diversity is valuable, and that tolerance in sexual matters is an enormous virtue. Thus, it is entirely appropriate that a movie telling the story of the man who pioneered in collecting other people's sexual histories be structured as Kinsey's own sexual history and that that history be presented in as non-judgmental a way as Kinsey presented the histories of his subjects.

Condon saw a parallel between Kinsey and Whale, in that for each man there was a "deep connection between his personal life and the work for which he's famous." Moreover, he felt "a certain personal

connection" with Kinsey, "having grown up in an Irish Catholic household with a father who was very kind but also very skittish about any mention of sex."

Indeed, one of the real virtues of *Kinsey* is that it recognizes the enormous contribution the sex researcher made by helping dispel some of America's widespread ignorance and skittishness about sex, including male homosexuality and female sexuality in general. Among the consequences of his work was to question the notion of "normality" in sexual behavior and to reassure sexual minorities that they were not alone.

Precisely because he told the truth about the disparity between Americans' actual sexual behavior and the rigid social and legal codes intended to regulate it, Kinsey exposed the national hypocrisy in regard to sex and helped liberate individuals from the tyranny of convention. His role as liberator is touchingly dramatized in the movie by a scene between the ill scientist and a lesbian (portrayed by Lynn Redgrave) who thanks him for having made her life altogether better. For being a liberator, however, Kinsey paid a heavy price.

As the film documents, after the publication of Kinsey's landmark books on male and female sexual behavior, he was vilified by political and religious leaders, who in effect hounded him to his death. Even today religious and social conservatives continue to defame the man and his research, accusing him of everything from condoning pedophilia to practicing "junk science" (an epithet far more applicable to their own pseudoscientific approaches than to Kinsey). Luckily, their homophobic campaign to boycott Condon's film is likely to garner greater publicity for it and increase attendance, which may in turn lead to greater appreciation for Kinsey and his remarkable achievement.

Condon lives in Los Angeles with his life partner, who is a screenwriter and director. The couple has been together since the mid-1990s.

In addition to writing and directing, Condon is on the board of IFP/Los Angeles, an association for independent filmmakers, and is also a founding member of the Independent Writers Steering Committee of the Writers Guild of America.

Since he has made films about Whale and Kinsey, Condon has found himself described as a "homosexual activist," a designation with which he is not entirely comfortable. "I'm proud to wear those stripes," he says, adding, "I just haven't done enough to earn them."

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About the Author

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