



Playwright Douglas Carter Beane's 'The Little Dog Laughed' Barks Up the Right Tree

By [John Olson](#)

Interview with *The Little Dog Laughed* Playwright Douglas Carter Beane

The Little Dog Laughed, About Face Theatre's current production (through February 17th) is a cynical look at the Hollywood film industry's difficulties with homosexuality. Its author, Douglas Carter Beane, speaks from experience. Though his first major feature, *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*, featured three unabashedly gay characters (portrayed by uber-masculine actors Wesley Snipes, Patrick Swayze and John Leguizamo), the gay-themed off-Broadway hit *As Bees in Honey Drown* he sold to Universal went into turnaround after he refused to "butch up" the screenplay.

Beane used that experience as the basis for *The Little Dog Laughed*, a hit on Broadway last season that was nominated for a Tony Award as Best Play and won one for its leading performance by Julie White. Her role as a sharklike talent agent who could eat *Entourage's* Ari Gold for lunch was a good one, as evidenced by the fact that she won her Tony over two actresses playing roles written by Shaw and O'Neill (the other two nominees were Vanessa Redgrave and Angela Lansbury). Beane's success at the Tonys last June was followed by strong reviews for his Broadway adaptation of the movie *Xanadu*, which opened the next month.

He was in Chicago to attend the opening of About Face's production of *The Little Dog Laughed* and took some time to tell me about the play's origins, Hollywood's attitude toward gay male actors, and his passionate feelings about being gay in America. All those themes figure in *Little Dog*, but when he first began to work on it, the play was simply about Alex, a young gay man in New York. Alex was to be based on Beane's experiences at a younger age when, as Beane describes it, "I was just going around New York meeting a lot of guys and looking for love...just sort of showing up in their homes and hoping...well maybe they'll love me!" At first he thought it might be interesting to have one of the men the character meets be a closeted politician, but then he toyed with the idea of making that character a closeted movie actor instead. He bounced this idea off *Tales of the City* author Armistead Maupin over dinner one evening.

"I said I'm thinking of writing about a gay closeted movie star, but that seems so '50s, so dated. And then Maupin proceeded to list about 15 gay closeted movie stars who I'd all heard about but had sort of forgotten." Beane stuck with his idea of involving Alex with a movie actor, and he developed the agent character, Diane, to personify the Hollywood establishment that keeps gay actors in the closet. That opened up the old wound of his experience selling *As Bees in Honey Drown* to the movies.

"I wrote this play which I love very much and when I sold it to Universal, I said to the studio President, "before I sell this to you, this male lead is a gay man and he is Jewish and it's about him denying that in order to get ahead in the world; and she said 'absolutely.' I wrote a draft, they loved it and then the director came on board and said he wanted to not make him gay, but shy around girls. I was very nice about it and I said 'I'll give it a try' and I slept on it overnight and I realized it doesn't work, I don't want to do it and I can't do it. Who I am in my life, I don't to be doing this. I don't want to do a "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof -like-it-was-done-with-Paul Newman" version of life, I want to do *life*. I thought I was very nice and I stepped away from the project and said 'find another writer, do it, you bought it.' Then *The Advocate* and *Variety* did articles (on his decision). The Universal lawyers called and said they were going to sue me and stop payment on the project because I had damaged the property."

The Little Dog Laughed evolved into a scathing indictment of a Hollywood that prefers its actors and its screenplays straight. The Alex character became a hustler who gets involved in a relationship with Mitchell, a hot but closeted young movie actor on the brink of stardom who is cast in the film version of a gay-themed play. I ask Beane if he can tell me without naming names (while secretly hoping he will) if the Mitchell was based on anyone in particular. No such luck. He'll only say that "Mitchell is certain actors I've met in my life who have been sort of blank canvasses."

But, I ask, what about the gay actors who have recently come out? Don't T.R. Knight and Neil Patrick Harris seem to be doing okay? He tells me "there are so many rules and sub-rules (in the film industry). It's such a complicated and fascinating thing that a woman actor can be gay, because straight men think Lesbians are hot. Gay men now...well T.R. and Neil Patrick Harris came out....actually they didn't. What they did was even more interesting. They were in the process of being outed and in both

instances their press agents were in the process of "inning them," of saying "no they're not gay" and both of those guys who I know...TR I know pretty well, socially... kind of said like 'no, like now I'm never going to deny it.'" The passion in Beane's voice rises as he enacts Knight's and Harris' responses to the professional advice that they pretend to be straight. " 'I'm not gonna say it. It's one thing to say nothing, but to deny it. That's crazy, so I won't deny it.' So that was an interesting sort of sub rule...that maybe to work in TV you can be out, but it seems like you have to be closeted to be in the big studio feature films, which is so absurd."

He seems anxious to get beyond the tabloid-like appeal of his play, and smoothly but abruptly shifts the focus of our discussion. "The gay Hollywood theme is certainly a fun aspect of it, but for me the play is also about America, which claims to be about freedom and individuality, and how it requires neither. How it demands you to not be very free and not to be an individual. That was fascinating. Mitchell was someone who was really supposed to have it all in his life. He's attractive, comes from a fair amount of money, comes from the right background, is an in-demand movie star. And now he's got this thing that is going to stand between him and everything that he is entitled to. So is it worth the love of somebody who has got such a horrible damaged past to chuck it all for that? That's interesting."

I tell Beane about two other shows currently playing in Chicago that explore the issue of young, presumed-to-be straight men of privilege who struggle with the choice of either coming out or staying in and avoiding the risk of losing their status and becoming a member of a minority. Beane compares this aspect of the gay experience to that of light-skinned blacks. Like them, he says, "at any moment we can "pass for white." There are a couple of things that make the gay civil rights movement more fascinating and peculiar than any other civil rights (movement). You can be gay and no one else in your family is, so you can be rejected by your own family. Second, you can deny it and somehow still be accepted as this other thing.

Little Dog characters Mitchell, Alex and Alex's galpal Ellen make some tough choices by the end of the play. Beane explains that "All of them (the characters) are struggling with what they want out of life and what they'll settle for. As I was working on the rewrite for the Broadway version I was reading a William Saroyan play and there was a line in it...'they had the truth, but they were looking for something else.' And I think that's really what these characters are about. They know exactly who they are and what they need to be happy and they all are gonna take something a little different because it will make them more successful, make them more money. It's an interesting game of choices."

I suggest the theme he described transcends just gay issues. "One hopes," he answers, observing in an ironic tone, "The selling point is nude boys, then there's a great part for a woman, great jokes about Hollywood...and then maybe oh yeah, it's also about society." He won't see this production for another two hours, but I saw it the previous night and advise him that the About Face's actors only strip down to boxer briefs. A little later, when director Eric Rosen comes in to advise Beane he'll be needed somewhere else in five minutes, Beane, with just a slight tone of scolding in his voice says, "He just told me the boys aren't nude, so listen I need to talk to you about that..." "You didn't notice all the nudity?" Rosen jokes. "Five minutes," he reminds us and quickly ducks out of the sound booth in which we conducted the interview.

Despite Beane's ironic acknowledgement of the commercial potential of full-frontal male nudity in a gay-themed play, he's insistent that his stage direction calling for the nudity in *The Little Dog Laughed* be followed. In an e-mail to me after our interview he explained its dramatic importance. "At that point in the play, the two male leads have been dancing around the topic of being gay and both denying it. At that moment (when the agent walks in and sees Alex and Mitchell naked together) there has to be no doubt. And it also has to have the shock of something real occurring. In an evening of falsehood. And it gives something undeniable for Diane to walk in on and address."

Beane told me in another e-mail that he had formally requested to About Face that they perform the nudity as indicated in the script.. A statement from the company issued on February 2nd explained that the Actors' Equity regulations would make such a change impossible at that point, because their audition notice had not specified that nudity would be required of the actors playing Mitchell and Alex. The statement further acknowledges that Beane "graciously agreed" to allow the production to proceed without the nudity.

Beane's next project peripherally concerns Hollywood, but at a safe distance. It's a stage version of the 1953 Fred Astaire movie musical *The Band Wagon*, titled *Dancing in the Dark* and it opens at San Diego's Old Globe Playhouse in March under the direction of Chicago-based director Gary Griffin. A quick check of the old film in IMDB reveals its cast includes an uncredited Julie Newmar. She will, one presumes, see a performance of *Dancing in the Dark* and write Doug a note thanking him for everything.