

Howard (left) with his boyhood idol, Elizabeth Taylor.



The Producer

Madonna calls him “the smartest man in Hollywood”. From Rock Hudson to Kim Kardashian, he either knew them or knows them. And no idle name-dropper, he’s produced some big movies, some important documentaries and has an Oscar. So who is Howard Rosenman and how did his impressive career in showbiz start in the Arab-Israeli Six Day War? Feature interview by Matthew Myers.

DNA: Do you think the film-making industry has lost a certain magic, or has it advanced in a good way?

Howard Rosenman: Both. For me it’s lost a lot of magic in that I was originally a fan but, now, having made over 30 movies and seeing the reality of it all and how tough it is – that glamour no longer exists. But glamour in general doesn’t exist anymore. Maybe Angelina Jolie is glamorous or Cate Blanchett, but the glamour of Elizabeth Taylor, Myrna Loy, Rosalind Russell or Katharine Hepburn has gone. I don’t know who has that anymore. And the movie business has become very different. Big corporations own all the movie studios and it’s all about the bottom line. The studios have to make big branded movies now and it’s an industry.

One of your most acclaimed documentaries is *Common Threads: Stories From The Quilt*. Can you explain a bit about it?

Common Threads is a movie about the The NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt. Quilting

is a big American pastime and the AIDS Quilt is a series of panels that are six-foot by three-foot, the size of a coffin, and have the name of the deceased person with his personality all over it. If he was into motorcycles, they’d have motorcycles. If it was teddy bears, they’d have teddy bears. In fact, there’s a lot of koalas on the quilt. It’s now the biggest piece of artwork in the world, and the last time it was unfurled, it went from the White House to the Washington Monument and back. That’s acres of land.

Have you made a quilt for anyone?

Four. [A boyfriend and three friends.] After I laid down the four panels I fell on the quilt and cried. I was about to make a film with Hugh Hudson [director, *Chariots Of Fire*] and while I was crying he held me in his arms and said, “You’ve got to put your grief and anger into a creative process.” *Common Threads* follows the real stories of six people from the time of their infection to the time they end up on the quilt. Vito Russo, who directed *The Celluloid Closet*,

was one of them.

Your documentary, *Paragraph 175*, reveals the Nazi persecution of gay people. It’s very confronting. What was the response to this, particularly from straight audiences?

They were stunned. They had no idea that the Nazi’s persecuted gay people. The Nazi’s weren’t just persecuting gay Jewish people, they were persecuting gay people in general, for being gay. They killed some and put others in concentration camps. [Between 5,000 and 15,000 homosexuals were sent to Nazi death camps during WWII. Exactly how many died is unknown.]

Another of your classic documentaries is *The Celluloid Closet*, which is much-loved. You must be very proud of it.

The Celluloid Closet is very entertaining. We follow 100 years of cinema with all of the gay subtext. Straight people had no clue about it, and even gay people had no clue, but when it’s uncovered it’s very funny. I was able to wrangle a lot of talent like Tom Hanks, Susan Sarandon,

Shirley MacLaine and Whoopi Goldberg for the interviews and I was able to get all of those clips for nothing! It was three million dollars worth of clips. That was my big contribution. I'm proud of it, and of *Common Threads* and *Paragraph 175*.

Before becoming a producer, you were a medic in the Arab-Israeli Six Day War. What was the turning point toward a Hollywood career?

When I met Leonard Bernstein. He was the head of the New York Philharmonic and the Israeli Philharmonic. He came to Israel to conduct Mahler's *Resurrection* symphony at Mount Scopus. He was seen as a hero because he'd advocated for the state of Israel in 1947, when he was just 26. After the war he came to visit the volunteers and saw me and said, "You look just like a guy who was my waiter at a discotheque in New York!" I told him that I was, indeed, his waiter. He gave me tickets to the victory concert he was conducting and at the after-party he asked me to be a gofer on a documentary they were making about him. I figured that a great way to see the territories. He listened to my stories and said, "You're never going to make it in the world of medicine. You have to follow your blessing and become a storyteller." So it was Leonard who convinced me to leave medical school.

One of your first jobs was as Katharine Hepburn's assistant!

Yes, when I came to New York I called up Lenny and he introduced me to Stephen Sondheim and then through Michael Benthall, whose partner, by the way, was the very famous Australian ballet dancer Sir Robert Helpmann. They introduced me to Katharine Hepburn who was doing the musical *Coco* about Coco Chanel. And I became her assistant.

Did you have a good relationship with her?

Yes. One day I was very sick and I didn't show

up for work. It was in the middle of winter with five feet of snow on the ground. I was up in my little apartment on 63rd Street in a creaky little building and at 6.45pm I suddenly heard somebody banging at the door. "Open up! Open up!" And it was Miss Hepburn. "I was so worried about you, what happened?" I explained that I was sick and couldn't get in touch. "Well, I've got to make you some chicken soup." So she went into my kitchen, opening up all the cupboards yelling, "Where's the terrine? The terrine?" I didn't even know what a terrine was! Then she schlepped down to the delicatessen and bought me chicken soup.

You experienced the Hollywood of old. Did you ever attend the famous gay parties at George Cukor's house?

Oh, yes! On a Saturday afternoon he would invite the entire underground gay world, and I

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was a 22-year-old kid and I found out that all my heroes were gay. Richard Chamberlain, Tony Perkins, Tab Hunter, Truman Capote, Tennessee Williams and Gore Vidal. It was wild.

And Rock Hudson?

And Rock Hudson, most importantly!

Did you rub more than shoulders with these people?

There was a lot of frottage! I met them all, and some I slept with. It was great and an education. Suddenly the people who I saw on the screen – I was waking up with them in the morning!

What did you think of the recent biopic *Behind The Candelabra*?

I was very uncomfortable with it. I thought it was genius and Michael Douglas' performance was brave and brilliant, but I knew Liberace. I met him at a George Cukor party and he was the first guy to put his hand on my ass, and that was the first time I understood what it was like to be treated like a piece of meat. So I often empathise with these beautiful women who come to Hollywood and, just because they have big tits, they are ogled. Liberace was lascivious and lewd with me. I was also uncomfortable with people who were that flamboyant. When we made *The Celluloid Closet* it was about the images of gay people on the screen and I always felt that gay people should be treated like... the way we are. Not as women, but as normal, regular men. I knew Liberace's thing was theatrical but there was a certain cheapness around him and his boyfriend. I was invited a lot but I made the decision not to hang with them. So when I watched *Behind The Candelabra* I was uncomfortable with the way gay people were being portrayed, even though it was a theatrical trip. I saw it at Darren Star's house. He had a screening with the whole Hollywood elite and everybody loved it.

You became good friends with Anthony Perkins and his partner.

Yes, I met Anthony in 1967 and his lover at the time, Grover Dale. I became very close to Tony and Grover. Tony and Stephen Sondheim were very close and wrote *The Last Of Sheila* screenplay together. In fact, Stephen wrote the role of Bobby in the musical *Company* for Tony. Tony was very much a part of my life, too, and I was there when Joel Schumacher introduced him to Berry Berenson, and they got married. Sadly, Berry was later killed in 9/11, but I lived with Tony and Berry whenever they came to New York. I was a part of their family.

There's an amusing story about you and Armistead Maupin, right?

Yes! One night I went to what you'd call a cruising club, and met a guy and had an incredible time. Armistead Maupin had just achieved a lot of fame because of *Tales Of The City* and I, as a producer, called his agent and made a meeting with him. We were going to meet at Ma Maison, the hot >>



At a dinner party with Hollywood chums – who also happen to be big hitters like Bette Midler and Jane Fonda.



Left: With contemporary celebrity royalty, Kim Kardashian.

Right: Howard (left) with Debi Mazar, Ingrid Casares, Madonna, and Howard's then-boyfriend Jim Welch on a New Year's Eve in the '90s.



>> Hollywood restaurant at the time on Melrose. So I'm sitting there waiting to meet Armistead, and who should walk in but the same guy I had been with the night before!

What about other writers, like Gore Vidal?

I met Gore in 1967 and we were both in Hollywood around the same time. I went to Gore's place in Ravello on Italy's Amalfi Coast several times and went with him onto the set of *Caligula*, which was incredible. We were all very close and when Gore moved to LA and ran for the senate, he asked me to be his press secretary. Then he wrote a series of articles for *The Nation* that I felt were anti-semitic so we had a big falling out. But then I made up with him again.

You made your acting debut late, playing *The Advocate* magazine founder David Goodstein, opposite Sean Penn in *Milk*. What was that like?

Well, I knew David Goodstein, who was a king maker in San Francisco. He was a wealthy Jew from the east, very influential and he asked me to join a gay EST thing, which was a kind of communications workshop that was popular in the mid-'70s. In the movie, Harvey Milk and his boyfriend come to Goodstein to ask for an endorsement [but he doesn't give it] because they're "too gay". When they were casting they wanted someone who looked, talked and acted like Howard Rosenman – so they asked me if I wanted to act and I said "I'd rather poke needles in my eyes!" I didn't think I had the chops to act with Sean Penn or Josh Brolin but I auditioned and a week later I got the job!

Did you ever meet Harvey Milk?

Yes, Harvey and I came from the same area. We knew each other from the Jewish world. Then I met him in New York in the late-'60s,

and then again quite a lot in San Francisco in the '70s.

One of the first movies you produced was in 1974 – *Killer Bees* with Gloria Swanson. What was she like?

Very interesting. We shot that up at the Chateau Souverain Winery in California, which

Having come from silent movies, did that style come out in her acting?

Yes, her gesturing was larger than life. She played the queen bee in this broad brimmed hat and she had that expansive gestural approach to the whole thing.

Mr Rosenman I'm ready for my close-up?

Exactly!

One of your biggest films was *The Main Event* starring Barbra Streisand and Ryan O'Neal.

Did you deliberately team them up again after *What's Up Doc*?

Oh, big time. I liked *What's Up Doc* and I was obsessed with Streisand. I saw *Funny Girl* about 20 times on Broadway. She's the most talented singer in the world. Sue Mengers, the great talent agent who Bette Midler just portrayed on Broadway in *I'll Eat You Last*, put together the *What's Up Doc* package. I gave her the script because she was newly representing Diana Ross. Sue read it, she rang me, and said, "Hon-nee, how would you like to see your name Howard Rosenman presents Ms Barbra Streisand in *The Main Event*?" I said, "Fantastic!" But I actually knew it was going to happen because Barbra had a company called First Artists with Dustin Hoffman, Sidney Poitier, Paul Newman and Steve McQueen and they all had to do five pictures each for Warner Bros. Barbra had to be in a production by September 30, 1979 or else Warner Bros could hand her any script and she'd have to do it!

You were also very close to Elizabeth Taylor?

When I was a kid I was obsessed with her. She was the biggest thing that ever happened in the world. I followed her career, all her ups and all her downs. Over a period of time I went to the New York Public Library and cut out every picture of her – from the New York Public

“Madonna took me to the famous Paradise Garage, an after-hours club mainly full of the coolest of cool drag queens.”

is now the home of Francis Ford Coppola. Gloria played the matriarch of this family, the essential queen bee. She developed this middle European accent, which to Joel [Schumacher] and me sounded very much like Yiddish! Joel and I would look at each other, roll our eyes and say, "Tanta Rochel [Aunt Rochel] is emoting!" But she was very nice and she was always trying to convince us to stop eating sugar.

Library! I pasted them all over my walls. I snuck into the premiere of *Cleopatra* by hiding in an air-conditioning unit at 9am in the morning and then coming out later and pretending that I was Spyros Skouras' (head of 20th Century Fox) grandson. I sat next to the whole entourage at the opening.

Were she and Richard Burton the Brad and Angelina of their day?

There was nothing like these people. When Richard Burton did *Hamlet* on Broadway there were thousands and thousands of people trying to get to them. What I did was somehow convince Richard that I was the producer's assistant and I told the producers that I was Richard's assistant and eventually I got a job, which was to bring Elizabeth Taylor from the limo while the crowds were surging. So I spent every intermission with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton and when they found out that I was a con artist they loved it even more. So I stayed for the entire run of the show and Elizabeth and I developed a special relationship over the years and became very close.

From a gay icon of one era to another – Madonna. You befriended her before she was famous, is that right?

At the end of 1983 I went to a dance palace called The Funhouse. I wanted to check out this new "hip-hop". The DJ was this 21-year-old Puerto Rican kid named Jellybean. The music stopped and all of a sudden a spotlight in the middle of the dance floor lit up this white, white, white girl with blonde hair, wearing very short shorts and what I thought was just a bra but turned out to be a piece of lingerie. She had many crosses dangling from her neck, black boots, ivory-pink colored shorts resembling a girdle, and black leather gloves. Her name was Madonna. She started to sing *Holiday*. I was mesmerised and I introduced myself to her later.

So you became friends?

Yes. After that, Madonna, Jellybean and I would hang out together. She took me to the famous Paradise Garage, an after-hours club mainly full of the coolest of cool drag queens. It was probably the hippest place in all of Manhattan. It was where Madonna learned about Voguing. When no one knew who she was, I took Madonna to a Diane von Furstenberg party on Fifth Avenue. She was captivating that night and had Diane, Barry Diller, Henry Kissinger, Princess Caroline of Monaco and Calvin Klein wrapped around her little finger. They were entranced by her larger-than-life persona and beauty. We all felt she was going to be a giant star, without even hearing her music. That's how powerful her personal charisma was.

Was this a very creative time for all of you?

Well, around that same time I also met Whoopi Goldberg, in a black lesbian bar. Even though I knew Whoopi wasn't gay, I knew she was extremely hip by virtue of the venue. So we also hung out and my wild imagination came

up with a story using the talents of these extraordinary performers. The idea was a contemporary musical. I was meeting a lot of runaways, former pimps, prostitutes and male hookers at an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in the East Village. They all had stories straight out of *Oliver Twist*. I thought, why not develop a contemporary musical movie version of the Dickens classic about runaways in New York? Madonna would play the Artful Dodger, Whoopi as Fagin and Jellybean would do the music. Madonna, Jellybean and Whoopi were all on board and we developed the idea. Madonna wrote a great song for it, so did Jane Wiedlin from the Go-Go's, and Jellybean produced the demo. But we never got a good script out of it.

What happened to it in the end?

Most people thought I was pitching a ridiculous idea, dropping the names of one-hit wonders.

“When Anita Bryant opened that mouth and started spewing all this anti-gay stuff, it awoke a lot of political consciousness in people.”

Six months later, Madonna released her first album, Whoopi appeared on Broadway and both appeared on the cover of Time magazine! Jellybean also exploded as one of the hippest record producers in the world. My ability to pick winners before anyone else certainly changed my profile in Hollywood, and I made a producers deal at Disney resulting in five movies. Thank you, Madonna!

Tell us about Project Angel Food, which you co-founded in Los Angeles.

One day I was at the baths in New York and I saw a little charity box that said "With God's love we deliver", which was a meals-on-wheels service for HIV people in New York. Dr Ganger Stone started it, so I called her up and she invited me down to the village and I saw the whole operation. When I got back to California, I did some research and found that there was nothing like that in LA, so we

started Project Angel Food. It delivers meals to HIV and AIDS compromised patients in Los Angeles and it's now one of the biggest charities in Southern California. Joan Rivers, Lily Tomlin and Bette Midler helped a lot, and I mean a lot! Elizabeth Taylor and Barry Diller, who created the Fox Broadcast Network, gave me the money to help start it. **You're currently producing a movie about Anita Bryant. Many DNA readers won't know who she is or why she's important.**

Anita Bryant was very beautiful and in 1972 she was Miss Oklahoma. She also had a gorgeous voice and middle-America loved her. In 1977, The Briggs Initiative was proposed [which would've made it illegal for gays, lesbians or anyone supporting gay rights to be employed as a teacher] in the Miami-Dade county. Anita's Christian fundamentalist husband pushed her into representing that issue and she became the face of anti-gay hate. Now, from Stonewall in 1969 to 1977, gay people were at the forefront of culture in terms of architecture, music, fashion, literature and film. Gay people were burgeoning and expressing their freedom and most, like me, were interested in partying and having a good time. But when Anita Bryant started spewing all this anti-gay stuff, it awoke a lot of political consciousness in people. At the time Anita was also Miss Florida Oranges so a national boycott of the product was organised and it was very successful. Now I'm producing with Darren Starr and Jeffrey Schwarz, who directed the Divine documentary. The screenplay is great and Uma Thurman has committed to it and we're hoping that Zach Quinto will be attached to it, too. But would you believe that Anita's Christian fundamentalist husband turned out to be gay, as well as her son?

You were in Australia recently and gave a lecture at Monash University on how to get a movie made. What advice would you give to aspiring filmmakers?

Love your material, and have passion and tenacity. Learn the elements of the structure of a movie by reading Aristotle's *Poetics* and Joseph Campbell's *The Power Of Myth*. There's also a great book called *Story* by Robert McKee. The hardest art form to conquer is the screenplay because it needs concision and it has so many lines – narrative, plot, character, sub-text and logistics – and you have to get all of that together in a cohesive form in a structure of 110 pages.

What memory of Australia stays with you?

The generosity and openness of spirit. It's such a gorgeous place. I never realised how beautiful the cities are. Melbourne is such an alive, cosmopolitan city. I had no clue. ★

more: Common Threads: Stories From The Quilt, The Celluloid Closet and Paragraph 175 are available on DVD and iTunes.