

Choosing Fatherhood

Johnny Symons' "Daddy & Papa" looks at gay men becoming dads

by Kathleen Wilkinson, special to SF Gate

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"What are we going to do? Are we going to be 60- or 70-year-old gay men going to that art opening again, or that cocktail party? I mean, what is life about?" asks William Rogers in the new documentary "Daddy & Papa," an exploration of the issues confronting gay men who choose to raise children.

One viewer at January's Sundance Film Festival, where the film premiered just days after its final cut, reacted violently to the comment, insisting that director Johnny Symons, who is also Rogers' partner, take the line out. According to Symons, the questioner felt the line was too judgmental of those who didn't have children, calling it "all wrong" and asking Symons, "How can you say that?"

Symons, whose partner and two sons were on hand in Park City, gave the floor to Rogers, who explained that his comment was merely an expression of his own strongly felt point of view and that he was not saying that parenting was for everyone.

"As a filmmaker, I thought [that the line in the film] was a great comment," notes Symons, a Stanford film-school grad who has worked in documentary film for more than a decade. "I really wanted it to be in there, because it does challenge people to think about their future, and I think a lot of gay men don't. There's an assumption that we're going to drift along and keep participating in the gay party scene in one capacity or another."

The Right to Choose

With "Daddy & Papa," the Bay Area filmmaker takes a new tack on the long-debated question of choice: Women have struggled to gain control over their own bodies and lead fulfilling lives without children; now the filmmaker asks -- and perhaps no film has asked this question before -- what about the right of gay men to choose to have a family?

In his first full-length documentary, Symons -- who has made three shorts, including "Beauty Before Age," which examines gay men's fear of growing old, and co-produced Frances Reid and Deborah Hoffman's Oscar-nominated "Long Night's Journey Into Day" -- looks at four gay families, two headed by a couple and two with a single man as the sole parent.

Through interviews, on-location shoots, archival footage and photos, he examines what compelled each party to raise children and how they came to have the children (two adoptions, one surrogate mother and a father who became a child's legal guardian), as well as issues these dads have faced since they made the decision to become parents.

Symons says, "I really want all the people in the country who don't know gay men and don't know anything about our families and who we are to see what we're like."

A Culture Without Kids

While the Sundance response to the film was far and away positive, another audience member noted that gay men who choose not to have kids would certainly not feel validated by the film. "I'm really not worrying about it," Symons says, "because every other message that we get as a gay man is, 'Of course you're not going to have kids.' First of all, it's not even an option, or people don't even realize that you can, and then there's very, very little in the culture itself that reinforces that.

"A lot about the gay male community pushes us in directions that are counter to parenting," he continues, "in the sense that the values are around freedom and spontaneity and sexuality and independence, and all those are really core, mainstream gay values."

Over the years, Symons says he's heard gay men say very negative things about children. "People saying things like, 'Thank God we don't have to deal with them.' I want to be able to help gay men look at the fact that there are more options than that. And I think the film succeeds at that. Maybe it goes too far, but I don't think the film sugarcoats it. There is complexity. There's a lot of anguish and drudgery and all that that goes with parenting."

Symons acknowledges that having kids changes your life. He feels strongly, though, that "to have a film that really presents the other side, in the face of the bus-shelter ads and the street fairs and everything else, I think it's OK. What I like my films to do is challenge people to think in a new way."

Mr. Mom

One of the strongest prejudices the film works against is the idea that men can't parent as well as women. "The whole issue of not having a mom is really loaded for people," he says. "It's very ingrained: 'Kids need moms. There's something essential that moms give kids that they can't get from dads.'"

This bias rears its head time after time for Symons, who, when he's in public with Zachary, is repeatedly asked, "Giving Mom a day off?"

"Nope, I'm the mom, and there are no days off," he's taken to responding.

In one of the film's more poignant moments, we see one boy, Oscar, talking about not having a mother. His dad, Doug Houghton, took him to see a "Rugrats" movie, without knowing the plot. The theme, which focused on one of the character's efforts to find his mom, clearly resonated painfully for the child, but what's also clear from "Daddy & Papa" is that Oscar would have likely died were it not for Houghton. As the film reveals, Oscar's biological father, a drug addict, could not care for the boy, who had significant health problems. Five years ago, the man asked Houghton, a nurse at a medical facility in Florida, if he would take in Oscar. Intuitively, Houghton thought it was the right decision, and the next day, he said yes. He has been Oscar's legal guardian ever since.

Inspiration for "Daddy"

Symons began the project in 1999 after his friend Kelly Wallace decided to adopt two brothers of mixed African-American and Latino heritage who would otherwise have been separated. "Kelly said to me one night, 'I'm adopting two kids,' and William and I were really intrigued by that," the filmmaker remembers. "And I kept thinking, 'This is a film.' I'm always looking for a good film, something to make a documentary about."

At the time, Symons had no idea that the piece would ultimately become a personal work as well. As he continued to film his subjects, he and Rogers were also exploring their own feelings about adopting. When the couple decided to become parents, he realized "I can't just invade everyone else's family; I've got to turn the camera on myself. That's the ethically right thing to do."

As it turned out, three of the four families in the film had at least one white, gay dad and African-American or mixed-race children. "White people are adopting transracially," he says, "and that in itself is controversial, but then, when those white people are gay men, it really ups the ante."

A Question of Race

Just as Symons had not planned for the film to evolve into a personal documentary, he had also not intended to focus on transracial adoption. "It just ended up happening," Symons says. "Suddenly, it was part of the film."

Once it became clear that race would figure in the piece, Symons adds, he wanted to focus on two questions: "How is that working in these families, and what does that mean to viewers?" The director notes that this additional issue made editing difficult. That process was a huge task, in any case, for him and his editor, Kim Roberts, who had to reduce nearly 100 hours of footage to a 54-minute film. "One of the tricky things was, how do we touch on these issues without letting them overwhelm the film or [without] sending it too far in one direction?" Symons says.

But if there's one thing Symons is good at, it's balance. Even in his own life, when confronted with the fact that this new wave of families has yet to appear on most people's radar, he can find an upside. "I'll be walking down the sidewalk with Zachary, and he'll be 20 or 30 feet ahead of me -- I've had this happen twice -- and people have stopped their cars, jumped out and raced over and said, 'Do you know where this child's parent is?' in alarm. They're just like, 'Oh, my God, this poor child is out here by himself.'

"I appreciate that there are people out there who are looking out for kids," he notes. "They're just driving down the road -- they care enough about this little kid who they don't know to stop and make sure that the kid is OK. That's a really good thing. But it's also about people being really blind to the idea -- just not even registering in their heads -- that this black child could have a white dad. It's experiences like that that make me realize that we have a ways to go before families like ours are really understood."

Changing Hearts and Minds

If the existence of these new families challenges most people who come in contact with them, such relationships are also profoundly changing the beliefs of those who are more intimately involved. Oscar's grandparents, an elderly African-American couple, have come to see Doug as Oscar's true father, the one who makes sure that he is provided for -- even if Florida, where they live, like Mississippi and Utah, continues to ban gay adoptions.

The unlikely combination of Oscar's grandparents and Doug is echoed in Symons and Rogers' connection with Dora Dean Bradley, their son Zachary's foster mother, who is a fundamentalist Pentecostal. "We started out with a lot of suspicion about each other, she being a Pentecostal and we being activist gay men," Symons recalls. "We wouldn't normally have had anything to do with each other. The reality is, we really like each other and we have a lot in common, and we found that out [because] we both adore this little child that we have both helped to raise."

Symons sees the growth of these kinds of bonds between divergent people as one of the most miraculous outcomes of gay adoptions. "[Dora] gave us a Father's Day card last year that said, 'To the two best dads in the world.' I was so moved by that. I never would have anticipated that that would happen. These are the kind of stories that are happening."

"Daddy & Papa" will air on PBS later this year.