Todd Haynes

by Alison MacLean

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I've been a huge fan of Todd Haynes ever since my first trip to New York in 1989 when I saw his film, *Superstar*, featuring Karen Carpenter as a Barbie Doll. *Superstar* was subsequently and tragically banished to pirate video limbo by the Carpenter estate. I'd never seen anything like it—the sheer audaciousness of it took my breath away.

As did his next film, *Poison*, which intercut three very different stories: a 50's B-horror spoof about self-inflicted disease; a Genet-inspired love story set in a prison; and a mock TV "documentary" about a deviant boy who literally flies out a window.

Then there was *Dotti Gets Spanked* about a young boy's obsession with a Lucille Ball character on TV, which explores, among other things, the erotic fascination of spanking.

Todd's films always open new doors for me, show me rooms I never knew existed before. They're beautiful, puzzling and very passionate, and always informed by a radical, unshowy intelligence.

Safe, his new film, is no exception. It's a horror film unlike any other horror film—cool, mysterious and emotionally devastating. Like his other films, it creates its own unique, coherent world—a very rare thing these days. Which is to say, in seeing it, I felt I'd dreamed it. Stated simply, *Safe* is a film about a woman who develops an allergy to the 20th century. It's terrifying, yet at the same time, unusually—wonderfully—restrained, building a sense of dread from the smallest details: a black couch in a suburban living room; a man spraying deodorant under his arms. There is never a false moment. Todd is one of the most exciting directors I know. As a filmmaker myself, he gives me courage.

Alison Maclean When you wrote the script for *Safe* did you see it as a horror film?

Todd Haynes Definitely. But a completely latent horror film where every day life is the most frightening of all.

AM What's so unusual about *Safe* is the way in which it refuses to tell you what to think, whereas most films we watch take us by the scruff of the neck and tell us what to think and how to feel. *Safe* is ambivalent, almost as if you're undecided yourself. It's similar to the experience it's investigating, of being hurt and going to one of those New Age retreats with

equal feelings of hope—that there is some answer in their cure—and also skepticism and fear that their philosophy is completely hollow.

TH I wanted to interrogate my own knee-jerk reactions against these kinds of places. I researched New Age philosophy with an open mind to see what it was doing that I didn't like. And to see what it was doing that people were so in need of right now. Why is it taking on such a huge predominance in people's lives? Why are they choosing it as a way to comprehend their illness, unhappiness, or their emotional uncertainty? The book that really got me revved up was Louise Hay's book on AIDS.

AM I don't know her.

TH She's a California-based, middle-aged woman whose life changed from her illness and her subsequent recovery. With the best intentions, she wrote a series of books with little daily meditations. This was in the mid-'80s, when AIDS was taking off, and she developed a strong following among gay men. Her book literally states that if we loved ourselves more we wouldn't get sick with this illness. And that once you get it, if you learn how to love yourself in a proper way, you can overcome it. That's scary. I kept thinking of the people who have no answers to their situation and who turn to this. And my motivation wasn't to demonize the instigators or to victimize and reveal the blind ignorance of the followers, but just to understand this phenomenon for myself. *Safe* is a guarded interrogation of the whole thing with a careful sympathy for its central character, Carol White. I didn't want to overpower her with my own opinions or allow the film to overpower her with its narrative instructions. This character has her own uncertainty about who she is, and the vastly changing face of her world becomes our guide to her.

AM She's a very unusual character. I was intrigued by your comment about deliberately choosing an ordinary woman, someone you'd meet at a party and not necessarily remember the next day.

TH There are many more people like her in the world than the ones with strong personalities we're used to seeing on film. People aren't taught to project themselves in dynamic, articulate ways. And most people aren't gorgeous or absolutely sure of who they are. I know that I make films, I'm an artist. But there are times when I don't really know who I am. The unconscious assumption of who we are and what we're here for, those questions are fragile in most people's minds. There are times when that unconscious sense of ourselves slips through our fingers.

AM Carol's character seems so lost at the beginning and perhaps even more so at the end. There's that moment halfway through the film when she starts to question everything and comprehend the emptiness in her life, but it's a terrible knowledge. It's a powerful scene: Carol's sitting on her bed and her husband comes to the door and she says, "Where am I?" And she looks at the photograph of the two of them beside the bed and it no longer reassures her.

TH When she writes a letter to an environmental illness group, to say, "My name is Carol White and this is my history," at that moment her husband and normal life rushes through the door and she completely forgets everything. It's all taken away. But I agree, she's lost at the beginning and at the end of the film. The film is a very sad circle that returns her to a perfectly sealed-off version of where she started. There's some hope in the middle of the film, when she goes to this group and begins to take steps out of her protected, isolated world. Her body tells her that something's terribly wrong with her life and her world. Whether it's a material problem or a larger symbolic problem, it's something that everything in her life has been encouraging her not to look at. The chaos of that middle section is the most hopeful moment in the film, because suddenly she is forced to re-examine her life and see it as troubled and needing a change.

AM You don't make it easy for us, it can be seen equally as a physical or a psychological manifestation. And of course that's such a false distinction we make. It's such a horrifying scene, Carol's at a baby shower, sitting in her party dress with that little girl on her knee and—what's interesting is the way the girl reacts first, as if she senses Carol's distress before we do; then Carol completely falls apart. It looks like an anxiety attack.

TH A journalist said the other day, "I still didn't know whether her illness was psychosomatic or not." I discovered for myself at least, that whether the problem is the chemicals in our society or the conditions in which this woman is living, in both cases the problem is cultural. And most of the time it's a combination of both: emotional and physiological, concrete. Carol goes to Wrenwood, a New Age health center, to try and find all the answers and is told to find them within herself. Wrenwood's project is to internalize everything as psychological: an issue of self-love or self-hate. My tendency is to look at the world we live in, and the conditions we all share—ultimately, society is what determines either the material or the psychological manifestation of the illness.

AM It's a very complex way of looking at illness. There's a point where Carol embraces it.

TH It gives her a new identity.

AM Yes, you can see that—I've seen it myself in certain people I know. The film is a metaphor for something else. But the metaphor keeps changing. Sometimes it seems to be about a spiritual vacuum or emotional alienation . . .

TH Void.

AM And then of course AIDS. What's so uncanny is that the people are so real. Did you do a lot of research?

TH I talked to a lot of people who are chemically sensitive or environmentally ill, however you choose to define it. I also wanted to get elements of the vernacular and the vocal qualities of contemporary suburban America, particularly Los Angeles, in the film.

AM How did you do that?

TH I hung out in the San Fernando Valley and haunted those clubs and malls and department stores. My parents live in a world not unlike that, so I'm familiar with it. Some of the visual information and the locations are places that I know myself. There is a manifestation of Valley dialect in *Safe*, a tinny, depthless vocal quality that you're hearing more and more among younger generations, particularly women. It's a vocal laxity you don't hear often in films, certainly not Hollywood films, or when you do it's accidental, it's a bit part. You hear it on *90210*. I didn't want to make a big camp parody of it or criticize it, but I did want it to be part of the film.

AM It seems to me, perhaps because I'm a foreigner, but there's something quite girlish about it.

TH I know. (*laughter*) And then there's a whole other vernacular for the way the New Age people speak. I'd visit those places and feel like the evil spy with my notepad.

AM Did you make some real contacts?

TH My closest personal contacts were with people who are sufferers of environmental illness, and they really aren't the target of any specific critique in the film. They range in class, and place and sex. There's no definable voice or singular quality about them. Their sole concern is that people are alerted to this illness, that it's real, that it exists. Lynne Montandon of the Response Team for the Chemically Injured, which is a group in Atascadero, California, was wonderful, really supportive and helpful. As was Susan Pitman of The Chemical Connection in Wimberly, Texas, another little community of people with environmental difficulties. But I did visit some New Age places and steal from them, and didn't develop any personal contacts there.

AM Did you visit a place like Wrenwood?

TH Yeah. I stole some aspects of Wrenwood from a place called Kripalu, a yoga center.

AM Oh.

TH Do you know Kripalu? In Lenox, Massachusetts.

AM Yes, I've been there for a yoga class.

TH You went there! (*laughter*)

AM For a yoga class.

TH Did you stay over?

AM No, I didn't stay over. I've thought about it, though.

TH There's something completely restful and recuperative about it. But it also has an element to it—you can't call it a cult particularly, but there's certainly a following.

AM There's something that makes my flesh crawl.

TH It's that institutionalization of the spiritual.

AM Exactly. It's very political in a way. You touch on that in one scene at Wrenwood: a group therapy session and where that older woman is grieving and very angry and the therapist tells her to let it go, and she refuses. She's the odd one out.

TH She's resistant. And there's no room for that in New Age language.

AM He just cuts her off.

TH That was from Kripalu. I have to admit, the rules at Wrenwood, the asexuality, the silent meals for breakfast and lunch, men on one side of the room, women on the other, no sexual interaction or affection displayed . . .

AM Not wearing provocative clothes, or anything that might draw attention to itself.

TH Exactly. The assumption of men on one side of the room and women on the other is a perfect example of how New Age thought often reiterates power structures that exist in the world without examining them. It's reiterating this heterosexual idea of safety. By separating men and women there'll be no sexual distractions from the higher goal.

AM Carol's a wealthy suburban woman.

TH Suburban ideal.

AM And then she goes to what you would think to be the opposite end of the spectrum—in terms of an alternative lifestyle—and yet they seem to be equally life-denying. It's fascinating.

TH When I first heard about environmental illness it was in some tabloid T.V. piece about women. They called it a 20th-century illness. The very name was so fascinating my mind started to go. But what cinched it for me was that the solution to this problem was not some return to nature. Instead, women went to these trailer homes where everything was covered in plastic, and their lives became hyper-insulated and hyper-sealed off. That's really what convinced me that this was something I wanted to pursue. It was not taking you toward an essentialist position, but into this excessive control over your life and every substance and every piece of information that could disrupt your system. That's scary.

AM It's very sad. Were they all actors in the film? It was so realistic, those people at Wrenwood, I wondered whether some of them were non-actors.

TH All the speaking parts were actors, unlike *Poison* where I used a combination of actors and non-actors. I think I'm spoiled for life by the quality of the actors I worked with—they brought that sense of reality to everything they did. Even the extras, who my brother Shawn cast, were excellent. Because extras have to act too. Directors forget. There's always that species of extra in movies who are so wooden . . .

AM They can ruin a scene. I've had that experience where I cast an extra to be a nurse and they can't be believable doing a simple task.

TH Did you have a bad nurse experience? I had a really bad extra nurse experience too. (*laughter*)

AM I had to fire her on the spot and cast a real nurse.

TH I didn't have that much gumption. I wish I did. My nurse couldn't spray the spray can.

AM So what did you do?

TH I just kept shooting her over and over again.

AM Right, right. Everyone's waiting. You get more and more distressed. What I find so exciting about your films is the way they all seem to expand the experience of what it is to view a film. In *Poison*, you did that audacious thing of intercutting three distinct genres throughout the film. When I saw it at Sundance it made me think about how film—unlike music or the visual arts or fiction—has this unwritten rule that it must be completely homogeneous in style, not including flashbacks or fantasy sequences, of course. And then, in *Superstar*, casting Karen Carpenter as a Barbie doll. What's interesting about that film is how emotionally involved you become, how you start to forget they're dolls.

TH Thank you. I mean it was an experiment, like most of my films. Each one takes various risks, but their experiments seem to locate around identification—that's the place where we all participate in making real or making alive this two dimensional, technological gimmick projected on the wall. When we fill it in with our emotions as spectators it becomes powerful and alive, that's the place where I feel the most curiosity as a director.

AM Many films don't allow much room for the viewer to enter into them.

TH They don't want that narrative process interrupted. It's a perfect system, let's not mess with it. But it's exactly at that place where we unfortunately find ourselves identifying in stories and messages that re-affirm the world exactly as it is, in its worst aspects. And that's where I find narrative film to be the most frightening, because it's so powerful. It's hard to

find an equivalent in other art mediums, for me at least, that has such a symbolic impact on the way we think about the world and about ourselves. Films reflect and instruct us at the same time, and that's strong stuff. So I do delight in the idea that by playing around, tinkering or upsetting that process of identification a little bit, people have to think more about what they're seeing, who's telling them what and why. A viewer has to ask the question: where's this idea coming from? Without losing all the pleasure that's part of that process.

AM There's pleasure in your films, but there's a different kind of engagement. *Safe* has a detachment, a restraint that oddly enough draws you into the film all the more strongly. It takes some getting used to. It's a different rhythm, a different pace, but once you adjust—because it's more open-ended—you fill it up with your own thoughts and experiences. Like those shots you have where Carol's walking through the house and garden, and it's quite wide and we only see her back. What is it about backs? They're often so much more mysterious and eloquent to me than faces. You're dying to see her face and that desire makes you fill in her face for yourself.

TH *Safe* won't have that effect on everyone, but I did feel my own frustration with the volume and aggressivity of current Hollywood film practice, where each film has to out-shriek, out-pace the next. And the amount of histrionics and technological gimmickry and assault that each film displays, one-uping the next, again and again. I walk out of those films absolutely numb, feeling nothing, because they assume everything. Whereas a Chantal Ackerman film is a real inspiration because it's so restrained and resistant. What you see in it in real time is what every other movie would cut out. But it creates a suspense and curiosity, and a huge role for the viewer in the telling.

AM I worry that that kind of filmmaking and experimentation ended with the ’70s. People are much less patient because of this MTV sensibility. All the experimentation goes into creating the spectacle, but is not focused on the level of storytelling or the way a film engages with an audience.

TH The formula for successful filmmaking has been so reduced to a single set of prototypical characters, enormous events and perfect resolutions that it's almost inconceivable for films that are produced by the studios and larger independents to escape that formula. The ’70s were the last time that there were a range of possibilities, even in mainstream films.

AM It seems like you draw from television, or from the television you saw when you were growing up. As a filmmaker, has television been important to you?

TH Yeah. It is, but tell me more. I'm curious. I mean, sometimes I'm scared by how much television I watch. I don't know if I want it to be as much of an influence as maybe it is.

AM You re-invent it. It's seems to be part of the genre vocabulary that you draw on. *Safe* is nothing like television, but on one level there's all that banality of suburban life—it deals with the ordinary. It's kind of an anti-TV Movie-of-the-Week.

TH *Poison* was influenced by the TV disease movie genre, totally, but to a very different end. Disease movies have this guise of teaching the viewer, informing them about breast cancer, about AIDS . . .

AM Towards the cathartic death or towards hope.

TH In all of these TV films there is a burden on the part of the central character to have a transcendent realization as a result of their illness. In *Safe*, Wrenwood becomes the institutionalization of that transcendence. Basically, *Safe* is on the side of the disease and not the cure. It's the disease that completely opens Carol's eyes and makes her rethink her life, and the cure that returns her to this sealed-off existence. The values in *Safe* completely reinvent the disease movie, but the structure is very much the same.

AM Do you think about what would be required of you to reach a wider audience, to have a bigger budget in relation to the kind of films you want to make?

TH I'm always surprised when films of mine which I think are intellectual experiments are received by a wider audience. Whether it happened by fluke or because of the NEA scandal surrounding *Poison*.

AM But it won the Sundance award too.

TH Yeah, that as well. But *Poison* was getting a lot of mainstream coverage because of the NEA censorship stuff. It was seen by far more people than I ever thought it would be, even after Sundance, because many films win at Sundance and don't really take off. And I thought, is this film up to that? Is this really what I want for this film, to be scrutinized by mainstream audiences? And not because of the homosexuality but because of the structure. And I found that people in little towns across the country where I accompanied the film and talked about it, were really eager for something more than what they were being given by Hollywood and were excited by the challenge of it. And were also very sophisticated narratively, could read and identify genres. I felt very pleased that the assumptions we all make about American filmgoers versus European filmgoers are not always the case. I do admire filmmakers like Hitchcock who could, through the formulas he created in narrative, reach such an enormous audience and be absolutely mainstream and popular, but at the same time be so completely subversive. It's always something to marvel at. And he wanted to be popular—I love that. But that's not my main goal. Is it yours?

AM No, but it's a factor if you want to make films that cost more than a certain amount of money. It seems that you have to be enormously clever in the way that Hitchcock was or somehow . . . I guess I'd like to achieve that.

TH You're right there. There's the practicality of budgets, and trying to get your film made the way you think it needs to be made, and sometimes that requires considering name stars and structures that might differ from your first choice. But I've learned from making what I

make that I am an experimental filmmaker. I don't need to be a feature filmmaker as a personal reward. The limitations in that world alone are so profound in terms of what you can get made—it's always an internal debate in my head. I don't know.

AM The films that get me really excited, that give me huge pleasure, rarely achieve that popular success.

TH I know. I feel that way too. I certainly felt that way after this year's Oscar ceremony. Way out of touch. Is there this pulse, zeitgeist, this basic trend that we're all supposed to find and make our own? What becomes more and more apparent, particularly in America, is this multiplicity of ideas and points of view that have strange, unexpected crossovers from topic to topic but take place in heterogeneous worlds. Maybe that's the way it should be.

AM But you don't really see much of that diversity in films. You have the black film or the gay film, I hate to use those categories, but it's not really reflective of . . .

TH Money doesn't recognize them. But by the same logic, the attempt to pre-plan ahead by Hollywood standards, to use everything they know from previous hits, to prefabricate it using audience tests at every stage, to fashion films identically after other films, always fails. There's something accidental that occurs even in successful blockbusters. Film is a cultural habit. There's a ritual to going to films. What do you do on a date? You go see a movie. It's not necessarily because it's touching people or really moving them or rocking their world, it's just what's there. It's out of a lack of anything else to do that
we keep the film industry going, maybe.

AM This might be my skewed perspective, but it does seem that going to films is such a significant. part of people's lives. It scares me how much it dominates our lives.

TH And more and more so in the era of fiber optics. You don't need to go out anymore, but people do. At least they do. There's something about the big screen that's still an allure.

AM I was going to ask if you had a good Los Angeles earthquake story.

TH The earthquake coincided with a break in our schedule, so it didn't brutally affect the shoot, but we continued through numerous after shocks, which as I'm sure you've heard, are sometimes really sizable and frightening.

AM Just that anxiety . . .

TH Exactly. So we were shooting the final scene in the film where Carol gives her awkward speech to the group, saying, "You have to be so much more aware, reading labels, going into buildings . . . " all of a sudden it started to shake and the windows started to vibrate. It was a reaction shot and the actors kept their fake grins on, but the pain in their faces was really kind of brilliant.

AM Could you see it in the image?

TH Yeah, we used that take. What you see on the film is the actors actually reacting to the after-shock. (*laughter*)