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Gay City NEWS

IN THE NOH: Keith and Ken

By: DAVID NOH

Two seminal figures of the 1970s and '80s -- actor Keith Carradine and director Ken Russell -- are joining forces to bring Anthony Horowitz's suspenseful play "Mindgame" to the Soho Playhouse, opening November 9.

Cherubic and surprisingly gentle after the Sturm und Drang of his oeuvre, Russell said, "This script came to me a couple of years ago and I thought it was fantastic. When I got to the end of the first act, I needed a large Scotch; by the end of the second act, I'd pretty much finished the bottle! It was that scary, a constant puzzle that turns upside-down, a sort of black comedy with shudders instead of laughs."

I told Russell what an impression his "Women in Love" made on me when I saw it at age 15, with Oliver Reed an absolute icon of a certain type of masculine beauty I've never quite recovered from, and he laughed, "It introduced you to nude wrestling, and you never looked back? Someone told me about watching the film in an empty Dorset fleapit, sitting behind two ancient women. They were commenting on the movie throughout, but when the wrestling scene started they were silent as a tomb. Only at the end, when the actors are lying there, exhausted on the carpet, one turned to the other and said, 'Lovely carpet!'

"To get away with it in the first place, I had originally set it in a country setting at night, with most of it taking place by a river which they fall into. Oliver dropped in and said, 'They don't fight in a poofy meadow by poofy moonlight. They do it in a room like this.' 'Two men standing in a room taking off their clothes would be difficult,' I said. He began stripping off, so I said, 'Okay, I get the message. We'll try it.'

"Both he and Alan Bates were very keen to do it, but when that morning came, they got cold feet. One said he had a bad cough and the other said he'd hurt his ankle, and they both had



Iconic filmmaker Ken Russell now reveals the hand he had in Larry Kramer's screenplay for "Women in Love". AARON EPSTEIN

doctors' certificates. Luckily, I had arranged a scene for the two actresses, just in case, but, the next morning, they came in, threw off their dressing gowns and were as naked as the day they were born, no problem.

"After the shooting, Oliver's stand-in, Reg, came up to me and said, 'You got me to thank there, Ken! I could see they weren't going to do it and they're not the best of friends, so I got them to

gang up on you, Ken, so they were allies. 'Come on lads,' I said, 'Let's go to the pub and the more they drank the more they were running you down all the time, saying they weren't going to do it. There came a time, as I knew there would, when they had to go outside to the lav to relieve themselves. So on that lovely moonlit night, they stood side by side in the ur-eye-nals, and one looked to the left and one looked to the right and they saw there

wasn't much in it. So that was the only thing worrying them and they agreed to do it.' But, of course, in between takes, Oliver cheated by going behind a screen and giving nature a helping hand."

"Oliver and I knew that he wasn't a great actor, but the camera loved him and he knew how to use it. He had this smoldering look, so we devised a thing depending on the intensity of the scene. He'd say, 'What is it, Ken? Moody one, moody two, or moody three? He was as sober as a judge on the set, but afterwards he was known to fill a chamber pot with alcohol and drink, which I call really getting pissed.

"We did a film on Debussy, which has just come out in a boxed set, with five others. He'd just been in a pub fight where someone put a bottle in his face, which gave him that scar, but it didn't matter to me.

"Larry Kramer was our screenwriter and I never could have foreseen where he'd go. He was strange -- I think Oliver didn't take to him. 'Fuckin' poofier!' He first came into Oliver's hotel room and said, 'Hi, Oliver, how are you? I'm Larry.' Oliver just threw him up in the air and he landed on the floor. 'That's nice, Ollie, can you throw me back up again?'

"When I got the original he'd written, I turned it down. I think he had Oliver and Glenda Jackson riding off into the sunset at the end. The studio asked if I'd read the book. I hadn't, but did, and then I had to do the movie, but not with that script. They said, 'Why don't you work with Larry and get it to your satisfaction?'

"So mostly it was me dictating D.H. Lawrence's dialogue, but they wouldn't give me a co-writing credit. Larry said, 'If you ever say to anyone that you had a hand in the script, I'll sue you for every penny you've got.' So hi, Larry! How're you doing? I hear he's mellowed and he can have all the credit."

"Tommy" is another imperishable Russell work, with Ann-Margret at her most feral. I mentioned that strange dichotomy between her ladylike off-screen demeanor and sizzling porno persona on the screen. "I know what you mean," he agreed, "it's like that other actress who surprised me, watching 'The Fugitive Kind' the other

day -- Joanne Woodward. In it, she's dyynamite!

"Ann-Margret writhing in all those baked beans was sexy. She'd cut her hand dancing toward the telly and I had to rush her to the hospital, covered in beans and chocolate in a silver cat suit, bleeding profusely. The next afternoon, she was very white but she was a plucky girl and we still filmed.

"I don't know if you know her husband, Roger Smith, but he was a real control freak, and he walked into the studio when she was in the beans and nearly had a heart attack. It wasn't his image of her at all!

"Everyone warned me about working with impossible rock stars, but they were all as good as gold. Keith Moon was only late once, and it was the assistant's fault, but he pointed to his chin and said, 'Go on, Ken. That's the spot. Hit me -- give it all you got!' Lovely man -- I was in his hotel room once and he had the window open and the hotel porter was walking across the lawn. He looked up and saw Keith, who said, 'You still haven't taken the telly for repair yet!' 'I'm sorry, Mr. Moon, I'll be right up!' 'Don't worry - it's coming down,' and Keith threw it out the window."

Keith Carradine is thrilled to be working with Russell: "He's a legend -- another notch in the butt of my legends pistol. When I read the play and heard that Ken was involved, I thought his sensibility was a perfect match for this."

Since almost the beginning of his career, Carradine has been an indie king, working with the likes of Robert Altman, Alan Rudolph, and Louis Malle.

"Those big studio blockbusters -- they don't ask me," he said. "I would love to make some money once in a while, who wouldn't? It's not even a matter of me putting it out there. I go and meet these people -- the Michael Bays -- for their blockbusters but I never get chosen. I think I'm the cult guy, so I do TV and indie films, and try to get back to the theater, although you have to do a certain number of TV and films to be able to support that habit."

Alan Rudolph's "Choose Me" is a real unsung classic, which took its inspiration from a Teddy Pendergrass

song and was originally made to lift that singer's spirits after he'd been injured in a car accident. Carradine, Lesley Ann Warren, and Genevieve Bujold give perhaps their best screen performances, and Carradine said working with the two ladies was "like drifting back and forth between a black hole and the Bermuda triangle -- which one's gonna suck me in first? Lesley Ann was very present and applied. It was all very important to her to get it right, she demanded such perfection from herself that it would automatically flow and be placed on all of us, not in an unpleasant way.

"She was really dedicated to the craft and then you had Genevieve, who's like a will-o-the-wisp gamine you couldn't pin down, like gossamer in terms of the nature of her presence even when she was there, and that wasn't always guaranteed. Lesley Ann's avidness was equally matched by Genevieve's reluctance about even being an actor. She's a genius, but there's a part of her you feel like she doesn't even think it's something worth doing -- it's so frivolous. "There was one day when she didn't come to work and everybody was freaking out, and Alan had to go to her house and it was funny because it was kind of like she was scared to start. She's such an instinctive acting animal, like you're with a wild horse with an apple trying to entice it to come out to the meadow."

Carradine's daughter, Martha Plimpton, is New York's most exciting young actress, and I asked if it's all about the Carradine gene, from him, his father, John, and brother, David: "It's certainly half of it, but Martha's mother [Shelley Plimpton] is also an extremely talented woman who did fabulous work," he said. "Martha is a prodigy and has been from the get-go, performing from four years old. I can't wait to see her in "Pal Joey" -- people are going to be surprised by what a singer she is -- almost kind of a Peggy Lee. It could be a whole other career for her and she could play any room in this city."

Asked about the chance he might work with his daughter, Carradine said, "I've talked to her about it, but she's adamant that she's never gonna do that. She said, 'I'll be too intimidated.' I said, 'You! I'm the one! I know I'll get out there and she'll wipe the floor with me, which is why it would be really fun, to have my clock cleaned by my kid."

