

PHOENIX RISES

FILM DIRECTOR AND WRITER **STEPHAN ELLIOTT** HAS BEEN TO HELL AND BACK AGAIN; AND BECAME REACQUAINTED WITH HIS FUNNY BONE ALONG THE WAY. AHEAD OF THE CINEMA RELEASE OF **EASY VIRTUE**, HE CHATTED TO **KNIGHT HOOSON**.



Stephan Elliott



Priscilla musical stars Oliver Thornton, Tony Sheldon and Jason Donovan at the show's recent London press launch



Easy Virtue (L-R: Colin Firth, Katherine Parker and Ben Barnes)

I meet Stephan Elliott at a Soho private member's club. As we climb the stairs, I find myself watching for any evidence of his accident in his gait - he broke his back and legs a few years earlier and was bedridden for several years. He does shift his pelvis a little more than usual to initiate movement, but it's pretty subtle. He's wearing Blundstones - the Aussie bloke's boots.

"I swear a lot. I hope you don't mind," he warns me.

He is engaging, open and relaxed. He answers my questions and is eager to hear what I think of his new film, *Easy Virtue*, which premiered at the Toronto Film Festival in September to great reviews.

Easy Virtue, Noël Coward's 1924 play, has an adaptation by Elliott, and co writer Sheridan Jobbins. It is a classic fish-out-of-water tale of an American who marries into a traditional upper-middle class British family.

Elliott was resistant to the idea of directing the piece. "When I first read the play, I thought 'this is a melodrama, it's not a lot of fun and it didn't really work.' It wasn't a great play. Coward had verbal diarrhoea. He was the Stephen King of his day. He could write an entire play and only get one good quote."

However, Elliott was bed-ridden at the time, so he had plenty of time to think about the project. A decade earlier, he had been on top of the world. As the writer and director of the smash 1994 Australian hit, *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, he could do no wrong.

He was 30 years old and everyone wanted a piece of him. He was wined and dined by Hollywood and offered scripts on a platter - except they were only gay stories or drag queen stories. Everyone wanted another *Priscilla*. He was having none of it.

His next two films ended up being disasters.

Welcome to Woop Woop (1997) and *Eye of the Beholder* (2000) were both critical and box office failures. On top of that, Elliott lost all of his own money on the latter, which he self-financed when the backers withdrew from the project. By 2000, his film career was pretty much over. He threw in the towel and went off to the French Alps to ski for the rest of his days. Shortly thereafter, he skied off a cliff.

This horrific accident left him laid up for several years. Doctors were unsure he would live, let

alone walk.

Stephan began to rebuild his life.

While learning to walk, he also began to laugh; "It was time to get the giggles again," he says.

While stuck up in his bed, he started writing an adaptation of *Easy Virtue* and a stage version of *Priscilla*. For years he had blocked the idea of *Priscilla* on stage. "It took me a long time to stop hating it." In his mind, it was his sophomore creation and he wanted to move on from it.

Eventually, he found a way to translate the film to stage. It opened in Sydney in 2006. To date, it has been seen by over 1 million people and has grossed in excess of £41 million. A London production opens in March 2009 with Jason Donovan headlining.

Does he still hate it?

"Watching an audience laughing at it, I now realise it's a gift. It makes people incredibly happy. Now I love the old bird. I have forgiven her."

I AM TOTALLY FOR GAY MARRIAGE. BUT YOU GOTTA MEAN IT

Openly gay, Stephan and his Brazilian partner have just tied the knot after 14 years together. "I don't like marriage as an institution. That comes from having both parents having gone through several broken marriages. I don't see how you can stand up and say something

you don't mean. If you mean it, I am totally for gay marriage. But you gotta mean it. There are certain gay celebrities who get married and then 18 months later, they are getting divorced. Fuck off. Stand up and mean it."

As he found his sense of humour, he brought it to his revamp of *Easy Virtue*. He asked himself, "if I was to be given a period film, what would I do to stuff it up? We took the basis of the play and went North from there. I hope Coward approves. I think he would."

He has a lot riding on the project. "In this market, who knows if the world cares about period films? I am hanging a lot on the fact that people need to laugh right now."

I think he's probably right.

***Easy Virtue* goes on general release on 7 November 2008. The musical, *Priscilla, Queen Of The Desert*, is due to launch at the Palace Theatre in the West End in March 2009.**