

Hollywood's New Gene Pool: Television

# Interview

July 1998

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Counterattacking with compassion: *Dear Jesse* director Tim Kirkman. Cotton shirt by Joop!

# Jousting with Jesse

Are you ready for your hissy fit, Mr. Helms?

Tim Kirkman wants you to know he shares more with Jesse Helms than just a passion for homosexual men. A gay filmmaker living in New York City, Kirkman also shares a birthplace (Monroe, N.C.), a religious upbringing (South-

ern Baptist), and a past career (journalism) with the grand wizard of American political homophobia. In his celluloid letter to Helms, *Dear Jesse*, which opens nationally this month, Kirkman explores the myth around the man with whom he

has this unwanted kinship. But rather than attack the powerful "Senator No," Kirkman takes the high road. He interviews the kinds of North Carolinians who've suffered Helms's wrath—married lesbians, a white woman who adopted a biracial child with HIV—and surprisingly, they show respect for the senator even as they oppose his views. But this documentary is not a propaganda piece. Nor is it Kirkman's ego trip down memory lane. *Dear Jesse* is a rare cinematic diary—a gentle, personal film that is more about self-preservation and self-reliance than self-obsession.

**OREN MOVERMAN:** How did you come up with the idea for *Dear Jesse*?

**TIM KIRKMAN:** Several years ago, I read a biography of Jesse Helms and was struck by the similarities in our lives. This was terrifying to me—I left North Carolina because of the intolerant face Helms put on it, thinking he and I had nothing in common. But every time I tell someone I'm from there, they immediately mention Jesse Helms. His name is synonymous with North Carolina; I can never escape him. So I decided to go back home and find out why people keep reelecting this man, who is part of my life whether I like it or not. Then I realized in order to tell the story of what Helms means to North Carolina, I had to explain why I left. It ended up being a much more personal project than I had intended.

**OM:** He's been very successful in dehumanizing people like you, and yet you confront him with compassion. Why did you decide to take that approach?

**TK:** I didn't want to do to Jesse what he often does to gay people or anyone else he attacks. I wanted to be more understanding. If you can see a person as a human being, you can communicate. Otherwise they become a one-dimensional target.

**OM:** Do you know if Helms has seen *Dear Jesse*?

**TK:** He hasn't. A reporter asked him what he thought of the idea of a gay filmmaker making a film about him, and he said something like "I don't want to comment on it. These are people who will do anything to get some attention, including abusing the truth." Obviously, that makes no sense if you see the film—it's just people talking about their lives, thoughts, and feelings. He's not interested in

what *Dear Jesse* is about; his office wouldn't return our calls, and the Jesse Helms Center shut us out.

**OM:** Why do you think that, since 1972, voters have kept Helms in Congress, given that he's alienated practically everyone, from African-Americans and gays to the disabled?

**TK:** Helms is consistent, and one thing that's lacking in American politics is consistency. On a basic human level, that familiarity is comforting, and it's passed on to other generations, so it becomes a myth, a folklore that surrounds the man. JESSE!—the word is sacred to many. But remember: He has never won by more than 54 percent of the popular vote. The state is truly split down the middle. That's encouraging to me.

**OM:** How does *Dear Jesse* help in the political struggle against Helms?

**TK:** I don't know what political change it will make, if any. Obviously, I'm not interested in changing his mind, because I don't think that's possible. The film is a letter to Jesse Helms, but it's not about him. It's about the faces of those who are the target of Helms's message of hate. I know that in my personal life the film has meant a lot. It took years of communicating with my parents to work out their feelings about my homosexuality, and the film brought us a lot closer. My mom and dad are totally supportive of me, but my brother and sister, who are Christian fundamentalists, haven't seen it and don't want to. That kind of hurts, but we're trying to work through it.

**OM:** Many of the people in the film seem to be defined by Helms. If Helms didn't exist, would he have to be invented?

**TK:** Helms definitely galvanizes the people who oppose him. He made me feel that if I'm to know anything about myself and what I believe in, I damned well better know about Jesse Helms and the people who are attacking me. But there have always been people like him, and I imagine there always will be. I don't think there would ever be a need to invent a Helms.

**OM:** What would you like to see happen to Helms?

**TK:** I hope he gets defeated by the dream anti-Helmsian candidate: an African-American, colorblind, lesbian, communist, left-handed, wheelchair immigrant. [laughs] I really hope that doesn't offend anyone.

OREN MOVERMAN