



Cynthia Nixon PHOTO Loren King

created such a nice room for her, rather than a back bedroom for an unmarried daughter. That spoke volumes about the way he viewed his daughters, that no matter what the life choice was, she'd have a really nice room with enormous, beautiful windows."

Nixon, who recites many of Dickinson's poems in the film, said Davies offered the role to her and "reportedly wrote it with me in mind. I have identified with Emily Dickinson since I was a kid," she says. "She and I have a lot in common: we're both so much about connection; we're kind of anti-presentational, both of us. We have a love-hate relationship with attention. We can be emotionally volatile. She is so strong; I don't think I'm as disciplined to live the kind of life she lived.

"She's not graceful. I'm not graceful and I don't have much interest in being graceful. It just seems disingenuous to me. I am interested in conveying what I think, not looking lovely while I do it."

Nixon says she was influenced as a child by Julie Harris as Dickinson in a television version of "The Belle of Amherst."

"My mother was a big fan of both Emily Dickinson and Julie Harris," she says. "We had a record of Julie Harris reading some of the poems and most famous letters so it really got in my head very early. I inadvertently memorized

sections of it. That's the think about Emily Dickinson: when she reaches you, you really feel like she's speaking to you directly. Her vocabulary is large and her poems are dense and subjects very weighty but they're so spare that children can get the gist of many of them."

Similarly, Davies discovered Dickinson early on. "When I was 18 and a lowly bookkeeper, the local radio station did a 15-minute documentary on her and it was Claire Bloom reading her poetry. I ran out and bought [a book], never thinking I would go into the arts much less make a film about her."

Davies acknowledges that "A Quiet Passion" manages the daunting task of creating drama from a woman's interior life. "It doesn't matter in the slightest if you never go anywhere if you have that inner life. But there was also inner conflict," he says, noting that Dickinson wrestled with her religious beliefs until, finally, she concluded, rather painfully, that there was no afterlife.

"That was very hard," he says, "because then there was no comfort. I was brought up Catholic and I was devout but I [also] think there's nothing. In fact, my manager said, 'This is your most autobiographical film.' And he's right. A posthumous reputation—what good is that?" [x]

# Quest for Truth

Two new documentaries with LGBT subtexts are essential viewing

Flamboyant nobleman, poet and unabashed bisexual Edward de Vere, the 17th Earl of Oxford and among the first to compose love poetry at the Elizabethan court, is believed by some scholars and historians to be the "real" William Shakespeare.

Local filmmaker Cheryl Eagan-Donovan, founder and president of the aptly named Controversy Films, has herself entered the controversy with her second feature documentary "Nothing is Truer Than the Truth." It profiles De Vere and gives voice to those who champion him—a movement that's been around since the 1920s—as the true author of many of the plays and sonnets which he wrote under a pseudonym and which were subsequently attributed to Shakespeare.

"It's risky; only a few [experts] publicly support" the theory, says Eagan-Donovan. One of the subjects in her film who is on record as a De Vere proponent is out actor Sir Derek Jacobi, a member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, whom Eagan-Donovan met through his partner, Richard Clifford. She also interviewed Oscar- and Tony-winner Mark Rylance (who is on the fence about De Vere); artistic director of the American Repertory Theater Diane Paulus; and Tina Packer, the

founding artistic director of Shakespeare & Company in Lenox, Massachusetts, both of whom are also intrigued but not convinced.

Eagan-Donovan, who received a grant from the Shakespeare Fellowship Foundation, optioned the book "Shakespeare By Another Name: The Life of Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, The Man Who Was Shakespeare" by Mark Anderson who devoted more than a decade to researching the life of Edward de Vere.

Her film focuses on the 18-month period when De Vere escaped the confines of life at Elizabeth's Court and traveled throughout Italy and Europe from his home base in Venice. In London, De Vere associated with a circle of poets, many of them gay, notes Eagan-Donovan, adding that although married, De Vere had mistresses and when he returned from Italy, it was in the company of a young male singer. "I consider him a male version of Dorothy Parker," she says. "He had a wicked wit; he was known to exaggerate and spin tales. He was quite a character."

Those in the De Vere camp believe the plays could have been written only by someone with a high level of education, knowledge of the aristocracy and the arts, and who likely traveled extensively through Europe where many of the plays are set. All of this is true of De Vere but not the man assumed to be Shakespeare, who was born in



Edward De Vere



Bill Genovese in the documentary "The Witness"

Stratford-Upon-Avon to a family of unremarkable status.

"Nothing is Truer Than the Truth" screened at the Boston Public Library in November as part of ongoing exhibits and events to mark the 400th anniversary of William Shakespeare's death. Eagan-Donovan is now in the process of applying to film festivals and editing a broadcast cut for possible airing on the BBC. A screening of the film is set for Jan. 10 and 11 at Deerfield Academy in Deerfield, Mass. Eagan-Donovan, who also teaches screenwriting and film at Lesley University and Northeastern University and will screen the film at both sites this winter, sees her documentary as an education tool.

"It's controversial but to focus it on schools and to include discussion is a great way to talk about sexuality and bullying, since many kids are bullied because of anxiety over sex and gender roles," she says.

Eagan-Donovan was first introduced to De Vere in the late '90s by professor Don Ostrowski while taking a history course at Harvard (she'll

be screening her film for one of his classes). Production began in 2010 and the following year Egan-Donovan traveled to locations in Italy, including Verona, Padua and Venice. Last year, she shot in London including footage at Westminster Abbey.

### 'Witness' on PBS

If there's a sadder story than the infamous murder of Kitty Genovese in Queens, New York, in 1964, it might be that of Mary Ann Zielonko, Kitty's lover and the woman who identified Kitty's body that March night.

In the 2016 documentary "The Witness," which had a theatrical run and will air on PBS, Kitty Genovese's brother Bill, who was 16 at the time of her death, tries to make sense of his sister's murder by revisiting the crime and talking to people who knew her. In his off-camera interview with Zielonko, she describes how she and Kitty met in Greenwich Village; their life together in the Kew Gardens neighborhood of Queens; and the night the police awoke her



Kitty Genovese

with news that Kitty was dead and then proceeded to harshly question her. Zielonko reveals that her own life fell apart after Kitty was killed and how, at Kitty's funeral, the Genovese family shunned her, even later taking the dog that belonged to the couple. It's a heartbreaking, little-known sidebar to a story that's captured headlines for more than 50 years.

The story provoked international outrage after the New York Times claimed 38 witnesses did nothing as Kitty was being repeatedly stabbed on the deserted street as she returned home from her job as a bartender. The "38 witnesses" story has since been debunked (there were far less

and some did try to help). Bill Genovese himself talks with a now-elderly woman who was Kitty's friend in the building and who came to Kitty's aid as she lay bleeding to death in the hallway.

The compelling film is directed by James Soloman but this is Bill Genovese's story: he is the witness of the title, a man whose own life was forever changed and who, rather than being a passive bystander, remained a loving brother and a vigilant investigator determined to understand his sister and honor her memory. [x]

"The Witness" airs Monday, January 23, at 10 on WGBH Boston.