



## **Murder in Suburbia**

**A local director makes Dallas the location of his revenge thriller Hate Crime.**

By KRISTIAN LIN

To begin with, Tommy Stovall is not related to Dave Stovall, the Fort Worth filmmaker and former president of the Lone Star Film Society. The two men have both recently completed movies with gay themes that played at Fort Worth's Q Cinema, and Tommy occasionally found viewers confused as to who had done which film. His movie is entitled Hate Crime, and it recently enjoyed a one-week run at Dallas' Magnolia Theater. (Its scheduled DVD release is November 14.)

The Llano, Texas, native conceived the idea for the picture roughly a decade ago. "That's when the media started reporting on hate crimes," he said. "That phrase just stuck in my mind, and I thought it would make a great title for a movie." As many on the festival circuit have found, it's something of a misleading title as well. The film begins straightforwardly as the story of a gay-bashing murder in a Texas suburb but then veers into the odder direction of a revenge thriller. Stovall reported that while mainstream audiences are inclined to take the film on its own terms, gay audiences have found the plot twist more of a sticking point. He noted that most gay viewers he has spoken to have been positive about the film.

The same can't be said for the sporadic reviews that Hate Crime has drawn. While Roger Ebert gave the movie a positive notice, Jeannette Catsoulis in The New York Times was more representative in calling it "an outrageous exercise in wish fulfillment." Rising to his movie's defense, Stovall replied: "The critics think [the revenge plot] is an excuse for vigilantism. That's not it at all. Lots of other movies have a revenge element, like A History of Violence and Munich. Those movies don't get criticized the way ours has. Because it's a gay man getting revenge, some people have a problem with it."

The 35-year-old Stovall currently lives in Sedona, Ariz., but he was a longtime resident of Oak Cliff, and his life partner's accounting business is in Dallas. The former corporate and promotional video director chose to shoot his first feature film in Dallas. A local talent agent hooked him up with a casting director in L.A., who procured for him recognizable Hollywood actors such as Bruce Davison, Giancarlo Esposito, and Lin Shaye. The shooting took place in summer of 2004. "We shot in an abandoned hospital building that had no air conditioning," he remembered. "The makeup people were busy keeping the sweat off the actors."

His next planned project, which he hopes to be more of a family film, will be set in his current city. (Indeed, the working title is Sedona.) Still, Hate Crime deeply reflects its writer-director's Texas upbringing. The film explores differing religious attitudes toward homosexuality, and Stovall noted that while audiences in New York and Chicago found the movie's depictions of religious characters to be exaggerated, Dallas audiences didn't. "A lot of people here came up to me and said, 'I grew up with a preacher like that.' I wanted to show that ... this is Texas. We have lots of people with lots of different churches."