

TREASURES FROM THE YALE FILM ARCHIVE

AN ONGOING SERIES OF CLASSIC AND CONTEMPORARY FILMS PRESENTED IN 35MM BY THE YALE FILM STUDY CENTER

WEDNESDAY

MAY 15, 2019

7 PM • WHITNEY
HUMANITIES CENTER

WAITING FOR GUFFMAN

PRESENTED WITH SUPPORT FROM
PAUL L. JOSKOW '70 M.PHIL., '72 PH.D.



Christopher Guest (born Christopher Haden-Guest and holder of a British peerage as the 5th Baron Haden-Guest) was born in New York City in 1948. He studied at the High School of Music & Art and began performing in country, bluegrass, and rock bands in the 1970s, eventually contributing a number of musical parody songs to the "National Lampoon Radio Hour" in 1973. He studied acting at NYU, and began performing in theater productions and in small film roles in New York. By the 1980s, he had made inroads into film and television work, including a single-season role in "Saturday Night Live" and his role as Count Rugen in *THE PRINCESS BRIDE* (1986). But it is his role as Nigel Tufnel, the clueless, Gumby-loving guitarist in Rob Reiner's *SPINAL TAP* (1984), for which Guest became best known, and which cemented his lifelong connection with comedic documentaries and musical parody.

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SEASON 5

After directing *ATTACK OF THE 50 FT. WOMAN* with Daryl Hannah and Daniel Baldwin in 1993 for HBO, Guest, informed by his experience on *SPINAL TAP*, decided to return to that earlier film's style with a new project, *WAITING FOR GUFFMAN*. In contrast with director Rob Reiner's on-screen role as filmmaker Marty DiBergi in *SPINAL TAP*, "I decided to remove the interviewer from the film entirely, and so you never heard any questions, and it's more of a hybrid in a sense that it is a more conventional film in its style than *SPINAL TAP* was," Guest said in a 1996 interview with the Sundance Channel.

DIRECTED BY **CHRISTOPHER GUEST**
SCREENPLAY BY **CHRISTOPHER GUEST**
AND **EUGENE LEVY**
PRODUCED BY **WARNER BROS.**
(1996) 84 MINS.

Guest reached out to Canadian actor, writer, and director Eugene Levy, whose work he admired on SCTV, to collaborate on the screenplay. Levy had himself made a music parody film in the mid-'80s, a riff on Scorsese's *THE LAST WALTZ* called *THE LAST POLKA*, about Yosh and Stan Schmenge (John Candy and Levy), the biggest polka stars in the world. Guest and Levy created a 16-page screenplay that laid out the film's storyline, but left nearly all dialogue to be improvised on set. The film would tell the story of the community theater enthusiasts of small-town Blaine, Missouri, who, under the direction of Guest's Corky St. Clair, put on a musical revue to celebrate the town's sesquicentennial.

STARRING **BOB BALABAN, DAVID CROSS,**
CHRISTOPHER GUEST, EUGENE LEVY,
LARRY MILLER, CATHERINE O'HARA,
PARKER POSEY, AND FRED WILLARD

Guest assembled a cast of comic actors, indie stars, and character performers who would go on to form the stock company for his films over the next 20 years, including Levy, Bob Balaban, Catherine O'Hara, Parker Posey, and Fred Willard. Guest also enlisted the help of his fellow *Spinal Tap* bandmates Harry Shearer and Michael McKean, who co-wrote a number of the show tunes with Guest, including "Stool Boom," "Nothing Ever Happens on Mars," and "Covered Wagons, Open-Toed Shoes."

In his book *Best in Show: The Films of Christopher Guest and Company*, author John Kenneth Muir quotes Guest as describing his definition of comedy as "reality plus 'one step further.'" This deft combination of reality and absurdity makes Guest's films more than simply amusing riffs on outlandish characters. From posters for Corky St. Clair's previous "off-off-off-Broadway" production of *Cornelius McGillicutty and His Truly Amazing Flying Machine* and a still from his staged version of *BACKDRAFT*, to the histories of the Blaine community actors, including family photos of the cast's ancestors, Guest lovingly creates believable histories for his characters. Guest even filmed a real town fair in Lockhart, Texas, where the film was shot, putting it to use in the film to add an authentic touch of local color.

After shooting, the filmmakers were faced with the task of whittling down 58 hours of footage into a coherent film. Some of the more notable cuts made came at the expense of the final performance of *Red, White and Blaine*, which originally ran more than 30 minutes long in an early cut of the film. The editing process took nearly a year and a half, but by the fall of 1996, the film made its festival debut, and arrived in theaters in early 1997. As the first of what would become a string of documentary-comedies (Guest notably despises the term "mockumentary") including *BEST IN SHOW* and *A MIGHTY WIND*, *WAITING FOR GUFFMAN* set the template for Christopher Guest's work for years to come and inspired countless directors in film and TV who sought to capture their own take on the style pioneered in this film.

DID YOU KNOW: CHRISTOPHER GUEST REVISITED THE CHARACTER OF CORKY ST. CLAIR IN HIS 2016 FILM *MASCOTS*, IN WHICH ST. CLAIR APPEARS AS FRIEND AND MENTOR TO PARKER POSEY'S CINDI BABINEAUX, THE DANCER BEHIND ALVIN THE ARMADILLO, MASCOT OF AMELIA EARHART COLLEGE FOR WOMEN.

NEXT UP: JANE AUSTEN'S *EMMA WOODHOUSE* IS BROUGHT TO LIFE BY GWYNETH PALTROW IN WRITER AND FIRST-TIME DIRECTOR DOUGLAS MCGRATH'S 1996 *EMMA*. THE FILM, WHICH WON AN OSCAR FOR RACHEL PORTMAN'S SCORE AND WAS NOMINATED FOR RUTH MEYER'S COSTUMES, ALSO STARS TONI COLLETTE, ALAN CUMMING, EWAN MCGREGOR, AND JEREMY NORTHAM. JOIN US FOR A 35MM SCREENING ON **WEDNESDAY, JUNE 26 AT 7:00 PM.**