

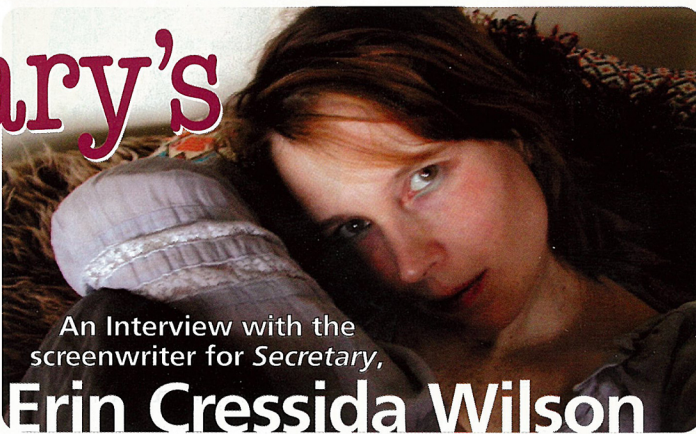
Secretary's Day

by David Salcido

Screenwriter and playwright Erin Cressida Wilson, wears many hats. In addition to having such critically acclaimed plays as *The Erotica Project*, *Hurricane*, *The Trail Of Her Inner Thigh* and *I Feel Love* produced in such varied locales as New York, London, San Francisco and Edinburgh, she is also an actress (*Above Suspicion*), a professor at Duke University and writes a monthly sex column in *Razor Magazine*. Her latest project is an adaptation of a darkly humorous short story by Mary Gaitskill entitled *Secretary*, starring James Spader and Maggie Gyllenhaal, about a woman who develops a sado-masochistic relationship with her boss. The film has gone on to win the *Special Jury Award for Originality* at the 2002 Sundance Film Festival and opens nationwide this fall. She took time out of her busy schedule recently to talk about *Secretary*, empowerment and what makes James Spader sexy...

IMP: How did you come to adapt the short story which eventually became the film *Secretary*?

ECW: Steven Shainberg, the director and one of the producers, asked me to adapt the short story into a screenplay. When I read Gaitskill's short story, I thought it was very funny when the lawyer spanked the secretary, and in light of what was going on with Bill Clinton at the time that Steven gave me this project, I thought it was even funnier. But what excited me most about the story was to make it not a



An Interview with the screenwriter for *Secretary*, Erin Cressida Wilson



Maggie Gyllenhaal takes a letter in *Secretary*

“I love that Mary Gaitskill wrote a story about a secretary who is spanked as a punishment for her typos. It is taking a cliché and turning it on its head—which is one of my favorite things.”

victim tale, but a love story—to not create yet another story of a woman "overcoming" her problems, but a woman embracing her masochism. Steven and I wondered, what would it be like if masochism was not a deviance, but was just a different type of sexuality. Then the thought became, what if this is a "coming out film" for a masochist. What if she stops fighting her masochism, embraces it, defines it and then is empowered?

IMP: That's an interesting approach. How true is your adaptation to the original story? Were there any ways in which you left your own mark on the project?

ECW: The initial problems that the lead character has in the first quarter of the film are new, but based on our interpretation of Mary's character in her story. Mary's story provides at least two vital turning point scenes that are in the film, but the outcome of the scenes is quite different in the film. In the story, she leaves the job; in the film, she struggles, but eventually falls in love with her boss. I love that Mary Gaitskill wrote a story about a secretary who is spanked as a punishment for her typos. It is taking a cliché and turning it on its head—which is one of my favorite things. She's walking straight into the fetish, the cliché, and then redefining it. And in the film version, claiming it as her own.

More Kinky Highlights From James Spader's Career



Speaking Of Sex (2001) - Skewering social conventions is just the beginning in this quirky comedy which casts Spader as a depression expert trying to solve Jay Mohr's marriage problems.

Crash (1996) - Deadly car crashes as sexual turn-on and Holly Hunter in the buff are just two of the "highlights" of this daring kinkfest from creepmeister David Cronenberg.

Storyville (1992) - As a senatorial hopeful caught on film with a prostitute, Spader is in deeply political territory, long before Bill let Monica smoke his cigar and sully her pretty blue dress.

White Palace (1990) - Though separated by a mere 16-year age difference, Spader as a high-flying account executive, throws it all away to wallow in Susan Sarandon's timewarp.

Sex, Lies & Videotape (1989) - As video fetishist Graham Dalton, Spader convinces Laura San Giacomo and Andie MacDowell to reveal their deepest darkest secrets for his camera.

IMP: How hard a sell do you think the subject matter of *Secretary* will be for the American movie-going public?

ECW: That's hard to say. I think that young women will love the film. I also think that men up to the age of fifty will love it. And I think that men over fifty might not like it because it is about a woman taking charge of a traditionally subservient and unempowering situation. The lead character turns towards her sadistic boss and says, "Yes, I like it, give me more." I think the result for many older men might be castrating. I think for young men and women, it will be immensely empowering and delightful.

IMP: That's not a bad demographic. I confess to being fascinated by the career of James Spader. Do you consider him a good choice for the role of E. Edward Gray?

ECW: James Spader is perfect. He is my dream of E. Edward Gray. I would have never imagined that my dream man would get the role. I've wanted to sleep with him ever since I saw *Sex, Lies and Videotape*, but having him star in a film I wrote is much better. He and Maggie own the film. It is as if they came up with the idea, wrote it, directed it and edited it. And I think that is a great testament to the casting and to Steven Shainberg's direction.

IMP: As a woman, what is it about James Spader that you find sexy? Most men I know don't really get his appeal.

ECW: James Spader is unbelievably hot. Aside from being very good looking, having very kissable lips and teeth, and great hair that you want to put your fingers through, he has hands that you want to grab you and hold you. He has that "ice stare" that is both sadistic and vulnerable; and about all else, he is a concentrated, obsessed, and incredible actor. He makes you feel like if he were looking at you, nothing else in the world would matter. He's perfect to play opposite the assertive submissive. I think the reason that men sometimes cannot figure out his appeal and that women find



him so incredible, is that he plays best as the object of a film—the object of desire - rather than the subject. He is not the typical male hero/protagonist. He is made for women.

IMP: If you say so... What are you doing right now? There was word of a novel a while back. Is that still in the works?

ECW: Yes, I'm working on a novel, which is about a unique coming of age in San Francisco in the 1970s. I was one of the writers for this incredible thing called *Brave New World: Theatre Artists Reacting To 9/11*, which was performed in New York City in September. I have a play called *I Feel Love* which features actor Sean San Jose with a live five piece band playing incredible new renditions of Soul and R&B from the 70s. This was extended in San Francisco and is going to tour. I've got a couple of other films I've just finished writing, one for Forensic Films, (Jesse Peretz directing) another for a company in New York City called *Girl From Queens*. And I have a musical coming up in June at Playwright Horizons called *Wilder*, with music and lyrics by Red Clay Rambler, Jack Herrick and Mike Craver. It's a sexy musical about longing. I'm also developing a new project with Steven Shainberg - a natural next step from *Secretary*.