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BEGINNER'S LUCK

Director Mike Mills on
his own gay dad story
by David Lamble

Christopher Plummer in Mike Mills' *Beginners*.

Andrew Tepper

The new film *Beginners* (opening Friday) puts a vivid and very odd twist on the traditional parent-child coming out story. A couple of viewings and a chat with its creator Mike Mills caused me to reflect on the power movies have to reinforce lessons that real life can leave murky and unsatisfying.

My dad was dead before I came out even to myself, and as for my mom, I didn't so much come out to her as merely skip town. When she finally made it to Texas as a ward of my sister, I

took it upon myself to show her queer Dallas: a Meg Christian concert, movie nights at my duplex with my gay support group, and finally, a raucous kind of art happening that ended with great sex with my aspiring-painter, soon-to-be ex-boyfriend, while mom snoozed in the next room.

In *Beginners*, Mike Mills ups the stakes for an equally idiosyncratic intergenerational coming out party by flipping the premise — in this case, detailing the eruption of gay consciousness that

exploded from his retired museum director dad when his wife of 45 years died. In my grumpy family, coming out didn't produce some miracle of understanding, spiritual epiphany or emotional catharsis. They weren't homophobic as much as simply resentful that some grand new drama had been introduced into our ongoing domestic battlefield that wasn't about them.

With *Beginners*, Mills employs the wit, precision for telling complicated personal

stories with a great acting ensemble, and peculiar straight-boy sensitivity to queer issues he displayed with his 2005 debut feature, *Thumbsucker*. He puts us inside an arid marriage of convenience seen from the point of view of a scared little boy who grows up to be a relationship-phobic adult man.

In slapdash flashbacks, we see the boy becoming substitute partner for his mood-swinging mom who doesn't get enough from

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San Francisco Ballet School students
in Myles Thatcher's *Timepiece*.

Erik Tomasson

Divergent showcases

San Francisco Ballet School students & Royal Danish Ballet

~ by Paul Parish ~

The big dance event this past week, Cal Performances' presentation of the first visit of the Royal Danish Ballet to the Bay Area in 50 years, came and went so strangely that I am still wondering how so many things could have gone wrong. Many of us were hoping it would be "the dance event" of the year. What were we all expecting, anyway? Meanwhile, the students of the San Francisco Ballet School gave a recital that

looked better at their best than some of the Danish repertoire did at its worst.

It must be said, San Francisco Ballet, school and company, owe a great deal to the Royal Danish Ballet and its great school. Indeed, Balanchine brought a succession of great Danish dancers to New York (including Helgi Tomasson), where they ruled the roost as principal dancers. For three

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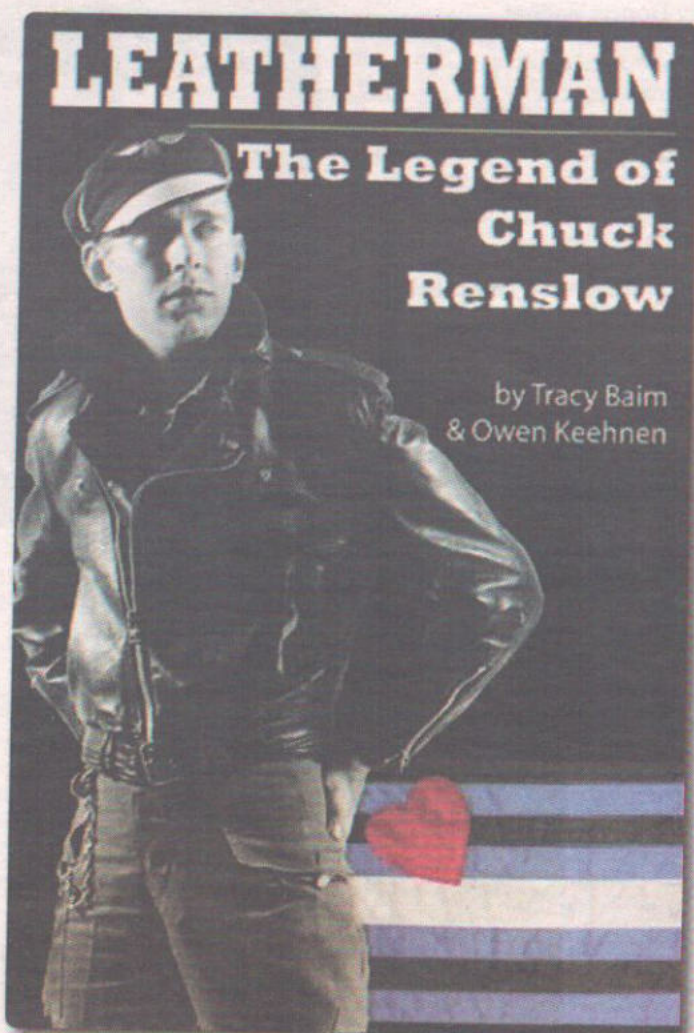
In *Casablanca*, "sooner or later everybody comes to Rick's." In Chicago, the world comes to Chuck's. Since 1950, Chuck Renslow, now 82 and one of the most famous gay men on the planet, has safely hosted thousands of GLBT visitors at his 30 venues, from his legendary Gold Coast bar (1960-88) to his International Mr. Leather Contest (1979) and his prestigious Leather Archives & Museum (1991). For 60 years, Renslow, a politically aggressive Democrat in the Chicago Machine, has been a person of interest to cops, politicians, fans, and frenemies.

Rather than review *Leatherman*, I can best, as a SoMa historian, serve as local tourguide to this bespoke book with its candid backstage drama of leathermen, lesbians, and Mafia wise-guys shaping homoculture two decades before Stonewall. I came out on Renslow's 1950s Kris Studio photography and his Gold Coast, where, beginning a 10-year union, I married his handsome bartender, photographer David Sparrow. As eyewitness, I appreciate the authenticity of *Leatherman*, into which my two-bits was invited by leather-village griots Owen Keehnen and Tracy Baim.

Renslow's strategic business mind led gays politically into a new age. He saw first what others only saw eventually. As an occult practitioner of magical thinking, he intuited the private necessity of coming out, and the public necessity of founding safe venues to do it. Starting Kris Studio (1953), he first courted homomale men by creating butch social destinations, which he eventually diversified to all genders: his 2010 IML winner was FTM wheel-charioteer Tyler McCormick. Pioneering locally, he built a nationally sustainable model proving gay-owned businesses key to building community, politics, and social networks. Born a year before Harvey Milk and politically active 20 years before Milk hit Castro, Chicago native Renslow evolved a transforming 1950s heartland identity that defied city, state, and federal laws.

In 1954, with lifelong muse Dom Orejudos, the artist "Etienne," he bought Triumph gym, photographed musclemen, created magazines, was busted by the Post Office for mailing obscene material, and helped push toward the Supreme Court decision that frontal nudity could be sent via US mail. Without that 1967 ruling, subscription mailing of 1970s sex-identity publications could not have reached readers, and *Drummer* would never have become SF's longest-running gay magazine.

Synergizing business with art, Renslow's pre-Stonewall Chicago



style, driven by his can-do "Renslow Family," helped stimulate SF's 1970s immigrant boom. For instance, Etienne, Renslow's esthetician, painted the Gold Coast walls re-conceptualizing bars as galleries, beginning the Muralist Movement whose "Rushmore Four" included Tom of Finland, *Drummer* art director A. Jay, and SoMa's Chuck Arnett, whom Robert Opel and I dubbed *Drummer's* "Lautrec in Leather." In 1962, Etienne tutored Arnett, who, speeding off to SF, painted his avatar mural at the Tool Box. When *Life* magazine pictured that mural, five years before Stonewall, it invited gays nationwide to bring all regional lifestyles to melt in San Francisco's pot.

Within the extended Renslow Family, B.A.R. columnist Mister Marcus regularly alerted Western readers to Renslow's Midwestern entertainments, from his annual White Party to Castro diva Sylvester singing on Renslow's "K-Y Circuit" stages. As an IML judge for 28 years, Marcus flew to O'Hare with SF entourages, often including Folsom's divine IML emcee Queen Cougar. Always, folks returned to SFO energized in local activism by the annual leather-family reunion that is IML. After winning "Mr. IML 1985," SF's Patrick Toner, using that celebrity, established the AIDS fundraiser, the Dore Alley Fair. In 1991, Renslow and Anthony DeBlase, the SF publisher of *Drummer* and creator of the Leather Pride Flag, founded the IML Trust-funded Leather Archives & Museum,

with Joseph Bean, editor of SF's *Bear* magazine, as executive director.

In 1978, creating SoMa's first gallery, Oscar streaker Robert Opel chose veterans Etienne and A. Jay to launch Fey-Way Studio's opening exhibit, featuring emerging talent like Robert Mapplethorpe, who told me, when assigning him his first magazine cover (*Drummer* 24), how his own 1970s photography was influenced by the 1950s beefcake of Renslow, who was "genius at lighting his models."

Becoming *Drummer* editor, I purposely injected Renslow's masculine, but not separatist, heartland values into the founding of that magazine, which helped create the very SF leather culture it reported on. *Drummer* 9 featured the "Gold Coast 15th Anniversary," and, imitating Renslow's first IML, *Drummer* kick-started the "Mr. *Drummer*" contest, which soon anchored the Folsom Fair. In 1980, Renslow's business manager Patrick Batt moved to SF, helped Bob Damron found the Eagle bar, and became manager of *Drummer* during our editorial shift to safe sex.

Forthrightly, *Leatherman* dares dish dirt, such as the rift between thwarted S&M lovers Renslow and Sam Steward, both filmed separately by Kinsey, caused Steward to move his Chicago tattoo parlor to Oakland (1964), establishing Steward as famous SF author "Phil Andros." And those are just some local GPS links to this entertaining documentary about 20th-century gay American history. ▼

"I have two sisters, who aren't in the story, which gives you an idea of how much it is fiction, and when I turned 18, my sister said, 'You know pop's gay,' or, key word: was gay. I did not know this! Because my dad, born in 1925, wore a suit, voted for Reagan, disciplinarian in the family, art historian, smart dude. Doesn't seem like he ever had sex, first of all, with anybody, and secondly, that he wasn't gay. He was an art historian, did buy my mom a lot of clothes, did wear a little cravat and all the little clichés you could associate with that. But he felt more like a Victorian, turn-of-the-century person than anything else.

"In the end, his coming out was

amazing for me. I loved my dad so much, he was so awesome and so much more engaged with me and taught me so much more about my 'straightness' than my 'straight' dad did. I mean we talked about sex, like details of sex, and what you can hope for in a relationship, in a way that we never did when he was straight. Just imagine: my mom has just died, and my second parent seems like he's about to die, and all of sudden he's like 40, he's got a trainer, he's wearing all-black, he's really alive. And there's this pool of guys who are so sweet to him, and then, when he did get sick, they were the first ones at the hospital. So everything about his gayness I really cherish." ▼

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Beginners

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"In many points of my life, it would have been advantageous to be gay, going to art school, being in the New York art scene. But I never really felt that was what I was. At the same time, I can often identify with gay guys more than straight guys as far as sensibility, interests and friendships with women."

During a recent joint news conference with his star Ewan McGregor, Mills expanded on the implications that his dad's coming out had on his family, including Mills' older sisters, whose stories are left out of the movie.