

Interview with *Pop Theology*'s co-editors, Ryan Parker and Richard Lindsay, and Stephen Cone, director of *The Wise Kids* (2011, Cone Arts) and *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party* (2015, Cone Arts).

Editor's Note: Both the recording of the interview and the transcript have been edited for clarity and length.

Ryan Parker: So Stephen, it's great to talk to you. I think a place that I always like to start, is to maybe tell us about how you got to this point of making films. And then how you got to create *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party*.

Stephen Cone: I grew up in the Carolinas. I'm a cinephile from early childhood. I was obsessed with film scores even as early as seven, eight, nine years old, and had a whole teenage life of coming to different categories of film. I went through the AFI/Oscar phase; I went through the art phase; I went through the American independent film phase; and the action movie phase.

So I always loved movies, but back in the 90s, filmmaking as a sort of self-empowerment tool didn't seem possible. So I was drawn to performance. I was an actor in high school and college and I was a theater major, but knowing somehow I would eventually end up making movies.

So I came out of the University of South Carolina, spent a year in New York and I didn't love it there. Eventually I started writing plays, and the first play I wrote was a one act play that was produced in Chicago. I came to see it and felt more at home here. My stress level went down. It felt like a cultural center that was more conducive to the atmosphere that I grew up in. So I came here and dabbled in theater for a couple years.

Then in 2005 I had a really crappy day job and I called my dad during one lunch— I think it was either March or May— and I said, "I think I'm going to start making movies this summer. I don't know how I'm going to do it or what I'm going to do but I'm going to start." And so the last 12 years have basically been my self- education. I've made more or less one movie per year of various shapes and sizes and budgets. And so that's been my life.

I have a weird story in that it's taken me almost a whole decade to achieve any kind of first-time filmmaker buzz and that's seven features later. So it's been a really strange journey. The first five years was just me making a bunch of really over-ambitious stuff that didn't really come off and that didn't play anywhere. So in 2010 I was like, "Get off your high horse, your artsy over-ambitious high horse, and just make something small and personal." It took me five years of making stuff that wasn't very successful on the festival circuit to be like, "What if I just tackle something that was true to me and semi-autobiographical?" So that's when

I made *The Wise Kids*. That's when I started gaining legitimacy as a filmmaker. And so the latter five years of that ten-year journey has been a little bit easier and my movies have actually gotten seen.

So, with *Henry Gamble* I didn't really expect to come back to this world of evangelical America so soon. But I had written another script called *Porn Ministry*, about two evangelical ministers.

Ryan Parker: Yaasss.

Stephen Cone: I think they were in Charlotte and one of them catches porn on their 15-year-old son's computer and rather than lambast him they experience a really emotional pull toward the West Coast to share the Gospel with the adult entertainment industry. It wasn't that good, I mean it *sounds* great.

Ryan Parker: There's something there, man, there's something there.

Richard Lindsay: I would be very surprised if it's not already being done in real life.

Stephen Cone: Well, I looked up organizations.

Ryan Parker: There's a porn church out here.

Stephen Cone: But that movie culminated in a pool party [when the ministers came back to Charlotte], so the whole crux of that movie is that we spend about ninety minutes out with this adult entertainment industry and then the teenage son has a birthday party in the final ten pages. So this movie about porn culminated in this smaller sequence of all these Christians gathering to take off their clothes, which is the paradox at the heart of *Henry Gamble*, and any Christian pool party.

I was excited by that sequence and ultimately that's what became *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party*.

Ryan Parker: Fascinating.

Stephen Cone: And inevitably I was like I had already tackled these things a little bit [evangelical culture]. So it was like, "Why do this?" But you know then I started thinking about it as an emotional prequel to *The Wise Kids*. *The Wise Kids* didn't directly confront sexuality and those early mysterious inklings of desire. So that's ultimately what gave me the justification to do a kind of flip side to the coin. So ultimately I see these movies siblings: one just happens to emotionally and psychologically take place before the first one.

Ryan Parker: Yeah, so you bring up the pool party, and I hadn't really thought about that setting as carrying as much weight as it does. Growing up in the South and growing up Southern Baptist, that's something we always did every summer. We had a pool and we would have a bunch of people over and have pool parties with the youth group, and it's such a sexually charged thing. So what I appreciated about *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party* is the authenticity of it. You're not attempting to parody this community. I think that's what makes it stand out. I work in promoting faith films and they're not even close, not even in the ballpark [in terms of honesty].

Richard Lindsay: I see both films as being apocalyptic, in that sense of *revealing* something. Each of these characters in turn, something gets revealed to them, or revealed to us about them, and then it's never the same for them. It's like the veil of reality is ripped and suddenly they have to go on with that information. It seems like the weight of the gravity of the film rests on each of these characters in turn, and in the process we reveal things about those characters. So I'm just wondering what your thought process is on that and why you like doing that kind of filmmaking?

Stephen Cone: I mean, the reason I make them is because I grew up with these people and I love these people dearly. Even though I'm not technically part of that community anymore, I've come to appreciate that community more and I'm very moved by this community of believers. And I don't see them represented properly in culture.

Ryan Parker: Even from their own filmmakers, even from their own community they can't get that right.

Stephen Cone: Yeah, you have to understand art and storytelling. Movies that are supposed to be sympathetic, like *Saved*, I guess *relatively speaking* it's more sympathetic?

Richard Lindsay: It kind of turned into a *Mean Girls* prom movie at the end.

Stephen Cone: Yeah, so the standard has not been set for compassionate three-dimensional portraits of Christians in films. Which is odd because there's so many of them.

Richard Lindsay: That was one of the things I thought about. In both of these films, people pray. And even after...you know, there's the opening scene in *Henry Gamble*. And I don't want to reveal any spoilers, but there's two teenage boys and they're at a sleepover.

Ryan Parker: Ha!

Richard Lindsay: And they have a little discussion about sex, and then the teenage boys do whatever it is that teenage boys do when they start talking about sex. But then, right after that moment, Henry says his prayers and goes to sleep. And I think that's so characteristic of his culture. And you *never* see that in Hollywood. You *never* see someone say a prayer as part of everyday life. And yet that's part of mainstream culture in America. That's what most Americans do.

Stephen Cone: Yeah, [that scene] sort of embodies the whole movie in a way. In that opening scene it's midnight and it's safe. I've compared the bedroom in that movie to underneath the pool. These safe places where what may be judged or forbidden or called out or criticized in public—there are actually these little safe spaces in adolescence where you can work your stuff out. But you have limited time there and they are small spaces. You're most exposed to the larger spaces which are more tinged with judgment and you're more worried about what people are thinking of you.

Richard Lindsay: Have there been any audiences that the film has resonated with that you were surprised the film resonated with?

Stephen Cone: No, I wish. The maddening thing about the last few years, making *Wise Kids* and *Henry Gamble*... you know there are beautiful organizations like Level Ground who do embrace it and do look out for these sorts of movies. But there's really no forum for me to show this to a large group of conservative to moderate Christians. There's no organization made up of those people that is going to invite this movie there. And it's the same reason that we had to shoot *The Wise Kids* in a Methodist church and not a Baptist church.

Richard Lindsay: I wondered where you shot that.

Stephen Cone: My dad's Baptist church was right down the street but that was just not something I wanted to deal with and Methodists are more open to LGBT people than other denominations. I think the people that might really secretly profoundly respond to this in the Christian world are going to see it in May onward [after the film's release on DVD] when they're alone at night and it's safe.

Richard Lindsay: Yeah, they're going to be in Henry's bedroom, so to speak.

Ryan Parker: I've been trying to think about some more conservative sort of folks that I could share this with but I do think there's a possibility that those communities would respond positively to it. And one of the things I like about the film is that although you're very respectful of these people and those communities you're not shying away from the deep trauma that they frequently

inflict on people. People that we know bear the weight of that hyper-conservative approach to sexuality and social issues. Not just the issue of sexuality, but propriety and how we behave and how we act. When you start to place restrictions on peoples' behavior, with these heightened theological threats, so to speak. I think there's a broader sex abuse going on in the Christian community than just the Catholic Church, and it's not always physical. I think people are wise to that the older they get, and they start asking questions, but their churches aren't a safe place to air those. But maybe watching films like this is a way in which they can engage those more traumatic components of their past—or present.

Stephen Cone: This conversation is interesting because there are people who think—not everybody, but big fans of *The Wise Kids*—they think I took a step backwards a little bit with this film. That I was actually more judgmental, a little less three-dimensional than I was with *The Wise Kids*. I would attribute that to a slight tonal shift, a slight shift in perspective, because the movies are doing two different things. But I guess what I'm saying is *The Wise Kids* had a pretty tough time reaching a conservative audience and so between the two films that would be easier one.

So I don't know maybe I'm too skeptical about how *Henry Gamble*, would do [with conservative religious communities]. There's a lot of people out there who preferred *Henry Gamble* for whatever reason. But there's some people who are like, "I like *Henry Gamble*, but can we talk about *The Wise Kids*? I looooved it."

And I have to remind people like that that the more caustic or sort of broadly painted characters in *Henry Gamble* are few and far between. There's like two or three of them that maybe border on that. I have to remind people that the entire Gamble family are Christians too, and they begin and end the film as born again believers.

Ryan Parker: That's right.

Stephen Cone: So it's easy to say, "Oh he's hitting people a little bit harder this time." But percentage-wise, we are talking about three or four characters out of twenty. I don't know. I realize I'm answering an accusation that hasn't been thrown at me. I just wanted to bring that up because I do feel slightly defensive about this film in terms of its tonal place in my work and in terms of how it addresses these issues.

Richard Lindsay: One of the things these films reminded me of—and this is not a negative criticism at all—these films reminded me a little bit of Edward Albee or Mart Crowley, like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* or *The Boys in the Band*, but the screaming is going on on the inside, rather than towards the other characters.

In a sense those films are also revelatory. They're also about revealing the truth about people and focusing on each character and revealing the truth. To see that in a Christian setting is actually pretty refreshing to me. Not having to watch alcoholic Liz Taylor scream out her problems, and having to have her get blinding drunk before she can say what's on her mind, but to see people I actually identify with struggling with these problems and with their relationships.

Stephen Cone: The irony is that I wouldn't actually say that the people I grew up with were inauthentic. Do you know what I'm saying?

Richard Lindsay: Oh, yeah.

Stephen Cone: On the one hand you're like, "Why isn't anyone talking about their feelings? What's actually going on here?" On the other hand they don't seem phony. So you can actually have the beautiful authentic personalities and still be like super repressed emotionally. But you don't realize that you're standing in a pool of emotional repression until later and you looked back and you're like, "Oh...we were standing in a...pool."

Richard Lindsay: I think both Ryan and I can look back on that and see the pool.

Ryan Parker: Holy smokes, yeah.

Richard Lindsay: I think based on our backgrounds, we know people like this and we come from people like this. This is definitely something we're familiar with.

Stephen Cone: Yeah, my dad's been digitizing our old home movies so I actually went home over Christmas and saw a couple of the videos of me at Henry Gamble's age and some of the people that had inspired the film, and we're having a great time. It's not like this stiff unpleasant atmosphere. I think that's a lot of what y'all appreciate about the film, where comes from. I feel like I really miss the cookouts and stuff I had with them.

Ryan Parker: Yeah, there's more than a nostalgia at work. I watched this and the further I'm removed over time from those communities the more fondly I look back on them. And I realize that, in terms of all the theological or cultural or political changes [I have undergone], I don't start that journey without that setting. I don't know where my life is if I don't grow up in that place. That's certainly not where I am now. But there's a certain value to that that I want to honor in the way that I interact with people who maybe think like I do for differently than I do.

Stephen Cone: Yeah.

Ryan Parker: And I think your film echoes that.

Stephen Cone: It's not unlike other people who come from slightly rigid traditional ceremonial—but beautiful—age-old communities. It endows you with something. And also you realize that this community, while at the same time filled with a certain amount of repression, is also giving these people life. It's actually getting them through the day. It's actually filling them as people. It's not like they were just spreading this disease. They were actually sharing in something very beautiful that is good for them.

Ryan Parker: Yeah.

Richard Lindsay: Just a background question: Your dad was a preacher?

Stephen Cone: Is.

Richard Lindsay: Is. And what denomination or faith background?

Stephen Cone: Southern Baptist.

Ryan Parker: What did they take away from the film? How did they respond?

Stephen Cone: I've always wished there was more of an interesting answer to this question than there is. I mean I have relatively moderate supportive parents. There's become this sort of tradition between *The Wise Kids* and *Henry Gamble* where I'm visiting home and I bring a rough cut with me and we all go out in downtown Charleston and have dinner and get drunk. And then we go home and I'm like, "Okay! Here it is!" And then I go into the dining room while they watch and then I just constantly refill the glass.

Ryan Parker: That's the best screening possible.

Stephen Cone: But the thing is I'm not able to adequately gauge how everyone feels because we've all been drinking. So usually, like everyone's tired, and it's 11 or 11:30 at this point and they're all just kind of staring at the credits on the screen and they're like, "That was really nice" or "That was beautiful." I've never sat down and had a conversation with them about *exactly* their critique of the film or what they feel. I just know they've been supportive every step of the way.

Ryan Parker: That's great.

Stephen Cone: I think even when they feel a little strange—because let's face it, in some sense, their way of life is being critiqued by their son in front of

thousands of thousands and thousands of people. So I do think there's kind of like a period at the beginning where they have to adjust and adapt and think about it. And then a year or two or three later, I think they start to see—whereas early in the process they may be like, “Oh this is weird. I hope he doesn't think this about us” – I think they come around too what I'm trying to do. The goodwill and the understanding [in how evangelicals are portrayed in the film]. I think they hear from their congregants and from people in the community who see *Wise Kids* on Netflix and have positive things to say about it. I forward them emails I get from like French kids and kids in Arkansas and stuff. So they eventually are able to see what the films do for people. I got two emails from French people this week about *Wise Kids*.

Ryan Parker: That's awesome.

Richard Lindsay: In terms of the screening with drunk Southern Baptists, is that where the box of wine came from in *Henry Gamble*?

Stephen Cone: Yeah that has changed. In the Florence [South Carolina] days, which was up to when I was 18, there was no alcohol ever in any way shape or form. And then coming home from college, Mom and Dad got a little bit looser about it. And now it's a thing where it's still like if Mom and Dad are hosting a thing and Christina and I are home, Christina is my sister, there's still a little bit of, “Are we allowed to drink tonight?” And then we may or may not just do it or we may just sneak up to her room and do it and take a bunch of selfies.

Not so much anymore but that was an intense thing in high school. It was unimaginable that there would be anything except for horrible sugar filled sodas at these places [events like Baptist birthday parties and pool parties].

Ryan Parker: So [I have] a similar background about no alcohol, but what I thought was really sweet about the movie is when the two gentlemen start drinking out of the box of wine and it's very clear that the elder member of the party is getting a little tight. But his line in the movie is the most heartbreaking truthful moment when he's just kind of standing in disbelief at all that's going around. And he's like, “We're all broken,” or whatever that line is. And [the wine] gives him permission or the ability or the courage, and he's expressing this truth about this community that they're never going to say on a Sunday during church.

Stephen Cone: Right.

Ryan Parker: So I thought that was nice touch.

Stephen Cone: Yeah thanks. So, what does he say? He says, “We're doing it all wrong people.”

Ryan Parker: “We’re doing it all wrong.” That’s it, yeah.

Stephen Cone: That’s an interesting point. I think there’s a lot of maybe old school Calvinist Christians who would be like, “Okay great, the Chicago filmmaker is espousing compassion.” But there are harsher old-school Christians who are like, “Yes there’s love, yes there’s compassion, but there’s so much more.”

Richard Lindsay: I wanted to ask a quick process question. The film is so intricate. It’s like tons of different puzzle pieces fit together. And one of the things I love about it is that whatever’s going on, on screen in the foreground, whoever’s having a conversation, that’s not necessarily all that’s happening at one time in the film. And I love the scene where the adults are talking and Henry comes up and get the bowl of chips. It’s pretty clear that he has a crush on his best friend Gabe, and there’s this other girl there that Gabe has been lusting after, who seems to like Henry, and she’s gorgeous and she has a bikini with a cross on it—she’s got this little metal cross which I guess is to protect her virtue or something.

Stephen Cone: I don’t know. And you know what that was supposed to be a Jesus fish sewn onto the thing.

Ryan Parker: Yasssss.

Stephen Cone: But that got neglected; we forgot about it so that was a quick fix just to hang a cross on there.

Richard Lindsay: So [Henry] goes to get his bowl of chips and the adults keep talking and you see in the background Henry is down by the pool and the first person he comes to with the bowl chips is Gabe. That’s the one who he’s really concerned about first. And then and only then does he go to the other people.

My guess is you didn’t have a lot of time to rehearse that. So how did you put all those puzzle pieces together?

Stephen Cone: Well probably some of it’s accidental; some of it’s the actors. Just because the thing is happening doesn’t mean I’ve made everyone do it. So a lot of times it’s trusting the actors. When you’ve got actors that good you can just sort of design the thing real quick. Something may not have happened in first take but right before action I may call out something else. So it’s just constant mindfulness about the possibilities within the frame. Because of sound design and stuff there’s probably a lot of scenes in the film where you as audience members think that there are a lot of other people there but they’re actually not. We couldn’t afford to have all those actors there all the time so the kind of shots

you're talking about were the rare instances where we were able to have background and I think we were all committed to making that work. Obviously, some of the intricacies are in the script too. A lot of that is just actors on top of their game; it's scheduled well see you have time to figure things out over the course of a few takes. It's just being open to what's happening.

Richard Lindsay: You do have some incredibly talented actors.

Ryan Parker: [Agreeing:] Holy smokes.

Richard Lindsay: I've been looking at some of the stuff that Tyler Ross has been doing and he's been on *The Killing* on Netflix, had a major role on that.

Ryan Parker: That's fantastic [*The Killing*].

Richard Lindsay: I mean you're saying your prayers or something because you gotten a really good cast for this one and *The Wise Kids*.

Stephen Cone: Well thank you. I'm very proud of them. I love actors and it love looking for the right one. We have amazing casting directors here in Chicago that for *Wise Kids* travelled down to Charleston with me and did some local casting. Just powerhouse. It's the same casting directors that do *Shameless* and *Sirens*—Chicago-based stuff. They're really, really the best.

Ryan Parker: One of the things when I talk to directors and actors, certainly when I talk to people who love movies...as much as we do, is I think really good movies have the ability to shake the way we view the world. With really good movies you should go in thinking one thing and you come out and maybe at least you're thinking about it in a different way. Maybe you're more empathetic; maybe you understand something better; maybe you question something that you always held dear. And I think viewers experience that a lot and celebrate that with great films. I wonder for you, I wonder if going through this process with *Henry Gamble's Birthday Party*, in what ways did you emerge, did you maybe view the world differently? Did you look at life slightly differently? Or just maybe how did it help you grow as a filmmaker as you look toward future projects? Like, "I might do this differently or I learned this I want to incorporate this moving forward."

Stephen Cone: You know I did an audio commentary for the DVD and they just sent me an early copy of the DVD. And I watched my own commentary, just because, Why not? (I'm not getting keep watching it over and over again. I just want to make that clear.) But towards the end I said some things that I forgot I had said and I kind of surprised myself. I said that I went through a staunchly

atheistic phase. And I think that in making movies about these communities—and also one of my heroes is Marilyn Robinson.

Ryan Parker: [Enthusiastically] Yeah.

Stephen Cone: Reading her work and going through these movies have made me understand religion better, and understand these communities of faith better. And I spent so much of my time on these films focusing on, on the one hand, humanizing these people—so a strictly secular humanist point of view of these people—but on the other hand critiquing the world [they live in]. So what's happened is after these movies because of Q&A sessions and stuff... it's been harder for me in the past to peg down exactly what I *love* about the community and what I *love* about making stories about these people—as opposed to the nuanced little tricky moral conundrums that might lie there. So I have to say that being asked to focus on the positive and what I've taken from growing up in this world has made me understand religion better and understand the community better. And it's made me in a weird way more interested in Christianity.

So what I'm excited to do moving forward—because it will be a while before I tackle evangelical America directly like this—so now I'm excited to integrate these multidimensional Christian characters into whatever tapestries I continue to weave. I guess I've opened my own eyes to a complexity there that maybe even as I was making these, I was ignoring.

Ryan Parker: That's great

Stephen Cone: Does that make sense?

Richard Lindsay: Yep.

Ryan Parker: That's great, yeah.

Richard Lindsay: Well I can tell you, / can't wait to see what you do next.

Stephen Cone: I'm figuring that out now.

Ryan Parker: All the best on that too. That's a great answer. Not that there's a bad answer. That's [just] really interesting.

Hey thanks for taking the time. You're such a good filmmaker a great storyteller. And like Richard said you're someone that I definitely want to watch and follow. Because these two films are really special and probably mean a lot to a lot of people just because of the honesty and the openness that you have there. So all

the best with this as it nears its release with *Henry Gamble*. We'll do our best to promote it.

Stephen Cone: I'm excited for the 2 AM teenagers to catch it unexpectedly, because that's the audience for it you know.

Richard Lindsay: Pretty much, yep.

Ryan Parker: Thank you so much, Stephen.

Stephen Cone: Thanks y'all, bye.