

Spectator



McGregor (left) and Carrey enjoy life outside the prison yard.

FILM

GAY AND GAYER

Ewan McGregor and Jim Carrey bring the true story of con man Steven Russell and his former cell mate and lover to the big screen in I Love You Phillip Morris

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

EWAN MCGREGOR looks pissed. He's playing the title character, a prisoner, in the new movie *I Love You Phillip Morris*, and his character has just discovered that a fellow inmate (someone he can't stand) has been beaten up.

He's upset because everyone is blaming his boyfriend, Steven Russell (Jim Carrey), for the brawl. But when Morris learns that the gossip is true, that Russell really did order the pummeling, he jumps into his boyfriend's cot and coos, "That's the most →

GLENN WATSON

romantic thing anyone's ever done for me." The actors kiss on the lips and roll around until Carrey (now out of character) says to McGregor, "You're getting a little too excited."

A beat-down as a romantic gesture? The film's directors—Glenn Ficarra and John Requa—love it. Sitting in the steamy warehouse set outside New Orleans, Requa leans back with pleasure after McGregor and Carrey finish the scene, and Ficarra shouts, "That was great!"

Still, the make-out session needs to be shot several more times. Sometimes the kiss is more tender, other times more passionate. The one thing that every take makes clear is that *I Love You Phillip Morris*, which the producers hope to see released this fall, isn't shying away from showing two men in love.

Romance behind bars may not be remarkable, but the true story the film is based on surely is: Russell was a con artist who posed as a chief financial officer, a Virginia millionaire, and other powerful figures in order to steal hundreds of thousands of dollars. Once a police officer, he was married with children before coming out of the closet. Furtive affairs finally led to a relationship with his first boyfriend (played by Rodrigo Santoro of *Che*), who later died of AIDS.

After a conviction for insurance fraud, Russell was placed in Houston's Harris County Jail, where he fell quickly and completely in love with the redheaded and boyish Morris, who was incarcerated for violating probation imposed for failing to return a rental car. Russell was so in love that after Morris was released, he repeatedly broke out of prison (one time literally walking out the front door, dressed as a doctor) to be with his man.

"What makes [this movie] different from *Catch Me If You Can* or any other con-man movie is that it's a love story," Requa says. "Some of the more shocking elements of the movie—the idea of these men trying to snatch love and bliss in the middle of the most awful environment imaginable—are actually very funny."

For Carrey, the story presented a break for him as an actor: to tackle one of his most romantic roles yet. "Russell was so misguidedly relentless about love that you've got to admire it," Carrey says.

"I always try to figure out what delusion the character is living under. We all kind of have them, whether it's a feeling of worthlessness or whatever it is," says Carrey, who shaved back an inch of his hairline to emphasize "the brain" of his character. Russell reportedly has an IQ of 169.

To understand the con man's motivations, Carrey had to explore the pain of



Directors John Requa (left) and Glenn Ficarra work with Carrey on a prison scene.

Russell's childhood. "When your mother gives you up for adoption and then doesn't want you back when you find her—that definitely leaves a hole in you," he says. "It's difficult to trust somebody after that."

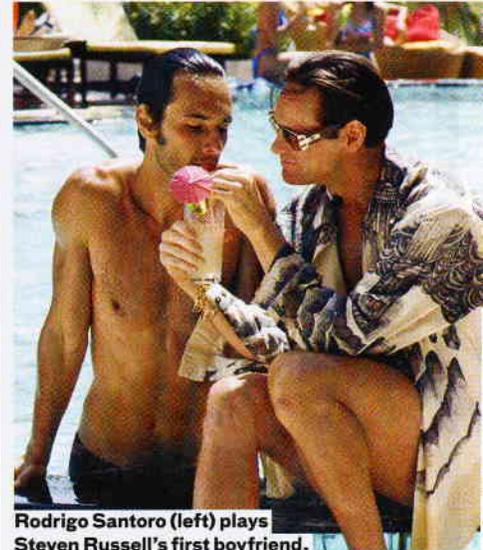
Trust—and a level of comfort—is something Carrey had to develop with his fellow actors right away. Because of a tight film schedule, the first scenes he shot were the love scenes with each of his romantic partners. He made out with Santoro in a gay bar in Miami on the first day of the shoot, followed quickly by sex scenes with Leslie Mann (who plays Russell's wife) and then with McGregor.

"It's a very, very amusing scene," McGregor says of his and Carrey's hookup. The two are out on a boat, "and I'm giving Steven a blow job. I look up and there's this big huge black storm cloud coming toward us. This is true—Steven turns the boat straight toward the storm because he knows that you can't outrun a storm. You have to go through the middle," McGregor says. "But Phillip doesn't know this, and it's maybe his queeniest moment, when he has this tiff and screams, 'What the fuck are you doing?'"

Carrey jumps in. "I tell him I read it in a magazine. And he asks, 'What magazine? If you tell me *The Advocate*, I'll fucking kill you.'"

The real Russell is still in a Texas prison (Carrey was not allowed to visit him). But Morris, who has a nonspeaking role in the film as Russell's lawyer, is a free man.

Friendly and charming, the slight 49-year-old Morris seems fit, though he's recovering from a stroke. These days he



Rodrigo Santoro (left) plays Steven Russell's first boyfriend.

lives in Hot Springs, Ark., in the home of a friend, a preacher, and says he's convinced people in his life today won't associate him with the Phillip Morris in the movie. (To be fair, he's not completely tight-lipped about the connection. Occasionally he delights in telling people—like the waitress at his favorite diner—to Google the movie title.)

Morris, who says it's "wonderful" to have McGregor portray him, isn't dating anyone at the moment. So the question naturally is, "Are you waiting for Russell?" "No," he says. "But when he gets out, as far as I'm concerned, we'll probably be together."

And by "gets out," does he mean parole or otherwise? Morris laughs. "Well, you never know." ♣