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## Interview with Kate Davis

### Producer of Sundance Film Festival Award Winning Movie *Southern Comfort*

by Erin Torneo, [Indiewire](#) 

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... Kate Davis' touching documentary *Southern Comfort*, which won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance a few weeks ago and recently played in Berlin.

**R**obert Eads was many things to many people: a cowboy, a grandfather, a good ol' boy from the South who wanted to die on the land he owned and would pass on to his children. He was also a transsexual who died too young of ovarian cancer, a man born female, a mother and a daughter, a victim of discrimination - and the subject of Kate Davis' touching documentary *Southern Comfort*, which won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance a few weeks ago and recently played in Berlin. The film follows the last four seasons of Eads' extraordinary life, as he falls in love with Lola Cola, a lively male-to-female transsexual, and in the process, explores issues of family, identity and the complicated relationship between biology and choice that serves as the crux of the transgender debate.

*It really takes a lot of courage to have your life exposed in any documentary ... given the sort of deep-seated hatred that still exists for transgendered people*

At the party for *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* at Sundance 2001, "Inch" director and star John Cameron Mitchell, in drag, dedicated the band's final number to Lola Cola. The moment reaffirmed the sense that this once invisible community had finally emerged, in both stunning dramatic and documentary forms.

Filmmaker Kate Davis, softly spoken and modest in person, tackles the documentary side with profound sensitivity and emotional weight. Despite the complexities of the characters' struggles - from discrimination in the medical community to rejection in their own families to fears of violent intolerance, Davis stands back and lets the story tell itself. *indieWIRE* spoke

with Davis both before and after Sundance about her relationship with Eade, dramatic structure, intimacy, and the political struggles of the transgendered community.

The film, acquired by H.B.O. for broadcast later this year, opened to a sold-out screening at the Film Forum in New York on 21st February.

**indieWIRE:** How did you first meet Robert and learn of this incredible story?

**Kate Davis:** I was fortunate enough to be able to do a more directly political piece for A & E Television Networks on the transgendered community, and their struggle for civil rights. During that time I went to a lot of conferences held across the country every year. One of them was a F.T.M. in Maryland, where I met a lot of guys. Hung out for a few days and heard a lot of stories. But when I met Robert, he really grabbed me - I mean, on many different levels. He was dying at the time, having already been diagnosed with ovarian cancer. And over two dozen doctors turned him down for treatment, because he's transgendered. So here was this cowboy, smoking his tobacco pipe, telling me all about not only the heartbreaking injustice that he had faced, like being a man from the South, and having to go into an Ob/Gyn office. But also, he opened up on many other levels, like telling me about being a parent - to be a man and be pregnant - how that felt, and how his sons felt. And he emanated such warmth and charisma.

**indieWIRE:** When did you decide to make a film about him?

**Kate Davis:** All the way back on the plane I was thinking: I've gotta make a film. And when I called him, he said: "Yeah, I thought you'd call". He sort of had a sixth sense about our talking to each other. Then I didn't hear from him for months during the summer. I think he was going through a period of sickness again - his health was like a roller coaster. One day he'd be running around and, you know, cleaning his gun, or taking Jacuzzis and just traipsing through the woods, and the next day, he'd be completely laid out on his back, in pain. I assumed then, at a certain point during that summer, after the Easter test shoot, that maybe the film just wouldn't happen.

**indieWIRE:** The fragility of his health aside, did Robert express any hesitation about having such private struggles filmed?

**Kate Davis:** He's always been a very private person. And so he was a little bit - I wouldn't say hesitant, but he was taking a real leap of faith when he made this film. I mean, it was the first time he would ever be completely "out" in public. He knew that he would also be

dead after the film came out - and that provided him with a certain amount of safety, so he made the commitment. But I think it was not an entirely easy thing to do. And that's true for everybody else in the film, too. It really takes a lot of courage to have your life exposed in any documentary, but particularly if your mere existence is a life and death threatening issue, given the sort of deep-seated hatred that still exists for transgendered people. I think he felt either his life was just going to get swept under the rug, and somebody else would get sick and die, or not get treatment. And he didn't just want it to be about the prejudice, either, or his own death. He wanted it to be about his spirit of life.

**indieWIRE:** How did the other characters become involved? It seemed like several of them were not entirely "out", so it was surprising that they agreed to be filmed.

**Kate Davis:** When I met the cast of characters, I realised: This really is more than Robert. I wanted to include a whole community. Because part of all of their lives is that they often lose their biological families and create their own sense of family. And Robert speaks eloquently about his chosen family. So Cass and Max then became the other main characters, and he was just falling in love with Lola. Fortunately, I interviewed her that first meeting. At that point, she was star struck and thought that he would recover from his cancer. Max, Robert's best friend, encouraged me to continue pursuing Robert to make the film.

**indieWIRE:** Did you come to the project with a narrative structure in mind?

**Kate Davis:** Another facet of his life unfolded in front of the camera, each time I went down to Georgia - his romantic relationship developed, he prepared to go into the hospice, and so forth. And then I had a structure for the film, basically. But, originally, in fact, I didn't. I only filmed about six times during the course of one year. In the editing room, though, I approached the whole thing as just a love story, with the gender issues all a subtext.

**indieWIRE:** Even though several of the characters express their fear of being "out", they are strikingly frank, on-camera, with questions about their bodies, and operations. Why do you think this is?

**Kate Davis:** There's a million other factors, but I attribute their frankness to two things. One is that my approach to people when I'm making films, tend to be based on trust. I made a film called "Girl Talk", about three runaway girls. It's extremely close-up and sort of in their world. It's a tone that sometimes is set when I work with people.

**indieWIRE:** Is it a conscious process?

**Kate Davis:** It is, almost. It just seems to be my style. Not with every subject, by any means - but when I'm really doing my own work. Doing the camera work myself, with either me or my partner, Elizabeth, doing sound, we kept it a very intimate environment, which was partly conscious. But also I'd have to say we just really love these people. We were very, very close, very quickly, with all of them. The second factor is that many transgendered people I've met - to get where they are today, to still be alive, despite all the hardships - requires a certain deep level of self-awareness. And a lot of them have been through pain, and sort of come out the other side, through introspection. So they're often much more open, and immediately intimate, than many people. It's like there's no room in life for trivial bullshit, because their lives are so lived on the line. It's just who they are.

**indieWIRE:** The argument for obstetrics D.V. is largely a economic one, but I'm wondering in your case if D.V. was also a deliberate choice. The small D.V. cameras are less obtrusive, of course, and more intimate.

**Kate Davis:** Yes, the D.V. camera proved to be very important in many respects. It was portable, light and easy to shoot with for hours at a time, unlike 16mm cameras. And because it was small, it was less intimidating and so did contribute to the sense of intimacy. So many people comment that the camera in *Southern Comfort* seems to be 'transparent.' Additionally, the hour loads mean that the scenes could play out more naturally and fully.

**indieWIRE:** The intimacy in the film suggests your own complicity - that you, as the filmmaker, are just another one of the people who loved Robert. How did you preserve enough detachment, to do work as a filmmaker when that work involved documenting someone you cared about dying?

**Kate Davis:** Everybody has their hard parts when they make independent films. Often it's the fundraising, or it's some technical nightmare that happens. In my case, it was losing Robert, because I had grown attached to him. So yes, I had to have a sort of split consciousness, where sometimes I was just going after the shot. For example, when he's sitting there at the barber shop, you look at that face, and it's like a portrait of death, itself. And then, at other times, I just put down the camera and gave him a back rub, or gave him medicine, and just cried with him. There were dramatic moments that I couldn't, ethically, pick up the camera to capture. It would feel too cold-blooded. It wasn't easy.

**indieWIRE:** How did Robert handle being the subject of the film when his health was failing? Did it complicate the relationship you two developed?

**Kate Davis:** We were on the same team. Robert knew the film had to be made. He felt it was really important that his story got out there, and that people learn these kinds of social and systemic atrocities happen. Transgendered people can still be bludgeoned as a moral statement on the part of bigoted people. Robert lived in the land of the K.K.K., and he used to have dreams of crosses burning on his lawn all the time. So he and I had a mutual understanding. It wasn't just that I came in as an outsider, to capture images and run off with them. But he was working with me to make a larger statement, through his own personal story.

**indieWIRE:** Were you able to get early financing for the film?

**Kate Davis:** I didn't have much financing. It was a difficult story for people to get their minds around. People had such little experience

even imagining what a transgendered man is. It's been like an invisible community, until now, and the recent success of *Boys Don't Cry*. But that wasn't really about the community at large, but more a very isolated incident, Brandon Teena. I mean, you tell somebody there's this cowboy, and he's transgendered. He falls in love with a male-to-female. And then it's just like: "Huh? What?" It just flips reality, as we know it, upside down.

**indieWIRE:** Why are there so many films dealing with sexual identity right now?

**Kate Davis:** It's very hard to say. Sexuality is all over the place. Major novels and non-fiction books have come out that have stretched the envelope of what can be discussed publicly. We've broken through a lot of taboos. After heterosexuality, the next border to cross seemed to be homosexuality, and now gays are much more prevalent in the media. But a yet untapped realm, after that, is people who really transcend the norms of what we consider "male" and "female". This is new territory. And even then most of the stories have focused on women - transgendered women. For some of the reasons I mentioned. I think the men are really hidden. I think a lot of people don't even know they exist.

**indieWIRE:** How did Lola and the cast receive the film?

**Kate Davis:** It's a funny thing I never would have expected. I, of course, was hoping they would all say, "Yay!", and rally around it, because it's about all the issues that are near and dear to their heart, and they all adored Robert. They all watched it, and, although they liked the film, they had picky problems with their own appearance - whether it was their hair, their weight, their accent or whatever.

**indieWIRE:** Appearance because it is so central to their chosen identities, perhaps? There is almost a feeling that your own body betrays you.

**Kate Davis:** Of course. When you're a transgendered person, you have to spend double, if not triple, the time that most of us do, being conscious of how you present yourself: how you look, how you talk, how you walk, how you hold your cigarette. So seeing themselves blown up on a screen is a pretty intense experience. How most of us, or, let's say, non-transgendered people express our gender identity is a constant, unthinking process.

**indieWIRE:** Do you ever feel limited by truth, by the responsibility as a documentarian trying to express reality?

**Kate Davis:** I must confess that the infinite richness of reality has always challenged and fascinated me. I find a lot of fictional stuff falls flat, or is too uni-dimensional. So I can't say that when I make documentary films I feel frustrated by limitations. No. I think the limitations of the filmmaking process in documentary - which are real, and they're often a pain in the neck - they are well outweighed by sort of the complex landscape of real living beings in front of the camera.

**indieWIRE:** Does the privilege of seeing things, encountering marginalized communities what attracts you to work?

**Kate Davis:** It's a combination of things. I think that there are political underpinnings to why I do what I do, and why I choose these subjects. But, on the other hand, I could never be a politician - that's not me, you know. I love working with film. On a purely artistic level, I love the narrative, the music, the sound, the rhythm of editing - all this stuff that isn't directly related to the film's message, but to filmmaking, itself. So I really think it's a mix. I'm unable to do films that have no social relevance. On the other hand, I'm probably equally unable to do propaganda.

**indieWIRE:** When we first spoke, you had just gotten accepted into Sundance. Now you've won the Grand Jury Prize. What's that like?

**Kate Davis:** Winning Sundance was more than anyone could count on in life. I was thrilled, but mostly for Robert. I really felt like his dreams were being realised. That by being willing to open up on film, his story could reach many well outside the transgendered community, and perhaps change hearts and minds. Standing at the podium, I missed him, but had a sense that if he's up there watching, he's grinning his cowboy grin in between puffs from his pipe.

## Southern Comfort

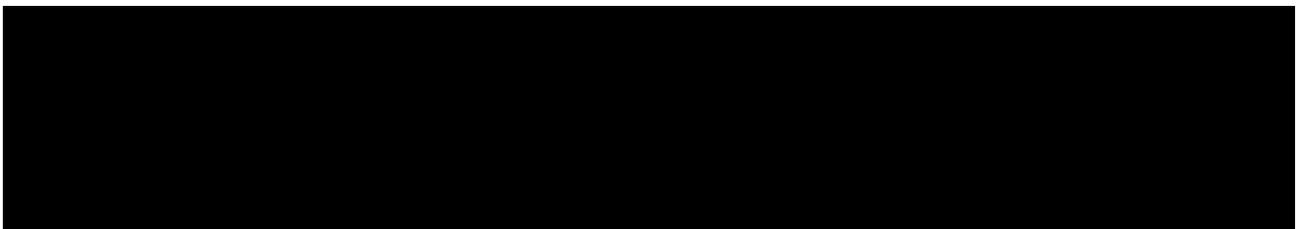
Directed by: Kate Davis

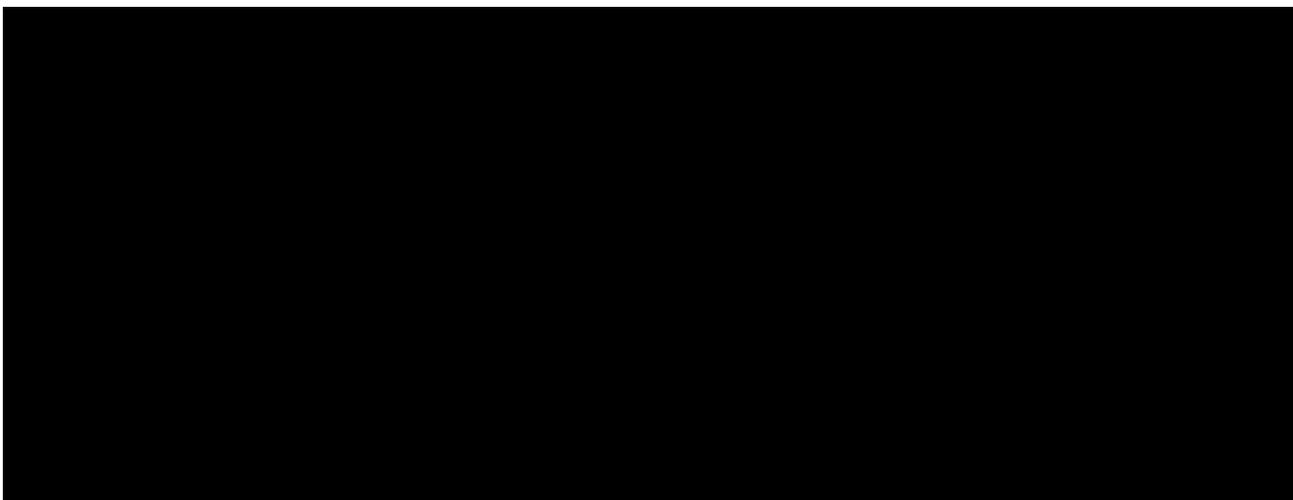
Starring: Robert Eads, Lola Cola, Maxwell Scott Anderson, Cas Piotrowski, Corissa Anderson

Producer(s): Kate Davis, Elizabeth Adams, Nancy Abraham, Sheila Nevins

Released: 2001

[From Amazon Movies](#)  Stunningly poignant documentary tells the remarkable story of Robert Eads, a female-to-male transsexual coping with cervical and ovarian cancer. Unable to find a doctor who feels comfortable treating him, Eads faces his illness with the help of a local support group for transgender individuals and the love of his girlfriend Lola, a woman who was born a man.





## From Kate Davis ...

**From Amazon Movies** 📺 This June (2009) marks the 40th Anniversary of the Stonewall riots. In June of 1969, for the first time, transgendered and gay youth fought back against the police because they were fed up with oppression, and many felt they had nothing to lose by risking their lives and throwing bricks at the establishment. To the amazement of many during those violent nights, they found they had a collective voice. This grew into the annual Gay Pride parades which continue across the world, all testaments to the power of speaking out.

These themes of courage and stepping out of the closet were also the backbone of *Southern Comfort*. When I met Robert Eads at a conference for transgendered men, I found myself living with a very hidden minority, hidden because they pass so well as men, and hidden to protect themselves against the daily perils of living as a transperson in a world which still persecutes them and makes every day a dangerous prospect.

The men in *Southern Comfort* were fine living their regular lives, and hardly jumped at the chance to be part of a documentary. In fact, Robert himself resisted for months, and one day called to tell me that he was up for it. That he would be dead by the time the film would be finished. And so we all started to help tell Robert's extraordinary tale of being a transman, a parent, a shotgun-toting guy who can pass for a classic redneck from rural Georgia, and as someone who was falling in love during the final year of his life. During the filming, I began to hear one recurring idea: the importance of accepting oneself. From that comes the strength to live a more honest life, and from that comes the chance to open up the hearts and minds of others.

And so the six main people in *Southern Comfort*, most of whom had survived rejection from their families, friends, employers, and the medical world, decided it was time to speak out and let others know how that feels. That they are human too. Many times at the end of a shoot, I would fly back from Atlanta feeling inspired by their strength - wouldn't it be great if we all could simply accept ourselves? - but also I felt outraged that such prejudice still exists and continues to kill.

*Southern Comfort* has, since then, reached millions of people around the world. There was even a town in rural Japan which celebrated "Robert Eads Day". Those in the film now know they did a lot to help break down stereotypes about those society condemns for being different. In a quieter way, the film reflects the spirit which was needed to ignite the Stonewall riots. Enough hiding. Time to be on an equal footing with everyone else. In the end, this isn't a story of L.G.B.T. rights or transgendered rights, but of human rights.

- Kate Davis, Director, *Southern Comfort*

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