

Things You Should Know about Douglas Thompson

Douglas Thompson grew up in a mental institution near Ukiah, California where his father was a psychiatrist. His parents moved away from the big city to raise their family in this picture-perfect little town in the Northern California wine country. During his early years he often accompanied his father to work, where he became the darling of the schizophrenics. That was only the beginning.

His childhood was filled with music. His father was an accomplished musician (saxophone and clarinet), his mother a soprano. Douglas often went to work with her as well, and spent part of his childhood backstage, where he became the darling of the chorus, and learned to speak Italian quite well, in addition to moderately bad French and German. He saw quite a few of the world's great tenors naked, and this may have made a lasting impression on him, too.



Douglas could not stand living in Ukiah and did everything he could to escape the monotony and small-mindedness of a little town. He also knew he was gay by the time he was ten, and Ukiah was not the place to be. He worked several part time jobs to afford flying lessons and made his first solo flight at sixteen. He got his private pilot's license at eighteen. He painted enough to have a successful one-boy show at seventeen. He was also an accomplished falconer while in high school and was often seen around Ukiah with his Harris' Hawk named Heroine in the back of his bright green 1959 Opel station wagon. There were fewer than 500 licensed falconers in America in those days, and Douglas was their darling.

Predictably, Douglas fled Ukiah almost immediately after his high school graduation and headed to San Francisco. This was the age of flower power and free love, and Douglas took ample advantage of both while in college. In addition to music he studied fashion design, and theatre. He thought he might become a great operatic tenor himself until he discovered that he didn't really have a voice. He turned instead to business.

Douglas took a break from his MBA program at a Stanford to enjoy himself in Europe. In Paris he fell in love with Kerre Mezzi, a gorgeous half-Tunisian Frenchman, who he still adores today. They conspired to get Douglas a job with the company Kerre worked for and they lived blissfully in a tour bus carrying adventurous tourists back and forth between London and Kathmadu--a ten week trip in each direction. (Perhaps it was these long trips that caused Douglas to eventually specialize in run-on sentences.) Douglas recently re-found Kerre on Facebook. Together they visited places most people can dream of but can longer visit, like Iran and Afghanistan.

The trip ended a year and a half after it began and Douglas was hooked on travel. He took a job in a small travel agency in Menlo Park California. In these days travel agents were respected professionals. It was during his two difficult years at Astra Travel that a piece of fried chicken brought Douglas and Joan Baez together (it's a long story), and he eventually became a member of her inner circle. He planned her personal travel and her tours and occasionally traveled with her. He became the darling of the Rolling Thunder tour.

Eventually, Douglas could no longer endure the suburbs and moved back to San Francisco, where he lived two blocks from Castro Street. These were the heady, golden days of Harvey Milk, of candle-light marches from “The Castro” to Civic Center, and the exciting birth of what has become a global community. In 1978 he served on the transportation committee for the first Gay March on Washington. During the “White Night Riots” following the acquittal of Milk’s assassin, Douglas turned his back on his Baez-inspired Ghandian nonviolence and burned a police car. He’s especially proud of that and had a toy police car on his mantle for years until it was set ablaze on top of the bar at The Stud in San Francisco.

Douglas’ involvement with travel continued into the 1980s. He owned several travel agencies, including a corporate travel company in the Transamerica Pyramid building. They had corporate clients like BP and TransAmerica, but also the major cults like EST, LifeSpring and The Peoples’ Temple. This chapter of his life ended with a near-fatal motorcycle accident that permanently injured his left leg. He spent two years at home in an impressive cast that reached from his toes to his groin. These two years were spent without sex which, oddly, would become an important factor in his destiny.

During his long holiday from work, a wealthy house-husband friend asked Douglas to join him to study at California Culinary Academy (“just for fun”), one of the world’s finest chef schools. They learned to cook together and had quite a bit of fun. He adored the tall white hats, but did not open a restaurant for more than twenty years. He cooks almost daily while wearing pearls and a frilly apron with a large “D” in red sequins.

When he finally began to walk again he had lost interest in being a travel agent, even though there was a great public interest in owning and working in travel agencies. Recognizing this demand, he developed a half-day seminar program called *So You Want To Be a Travel Agent*. During the first year he did two seminars a week in cities as far east as Dallas and Minneapolis. After the first year this became a full-day program called *How To Open Your Own Travel Agency*. For two more years he did seventy-five presentations a year from Honolulu to Atlanta and Miami.

After Douglas got sick and tired of the food on domestic airline flights he turned the seminar into a book, and Dendrobium Publishing was born. He eventually wrote six more books on tourism management and marketing topics, including one with travel law authority Alexander Anolik, one with CPA Mary Miller-Marshall and one with travel documentary producer Jon Schulberg. Dendrobium also developed customer-management database software and the first stand-alone travel agency bookkeeping software for travel agencies. He spent most of his time consulting and helped to open more new travel agencies in the United States than anyone, including the big franchises of the time.

Orchids had already played an important part in Douglas’ life for twenty years. It is a madness, he admits, that is shared by many. These odd and sometimes bizarrely ugly flowers have somehow been imprinted on humans since the beginning of time, and those who are bitten by the orchid bug surrender a large part of their lives to it. A small indoor collection grew to two greenhouses housing nearly 2,000 plants in the rear garden of his lovely San Francisco Victorian house

During these days Douglas’ friends began to die. More than seventy-five friends were lost during the early days of the HIV pandemic. Douglas believes he was spared because he was “closed for business” for two years. These were profound losses for him. As a director-elect of San Francisco’s AIDS Emergency Fund, he was required to come up with a new fundraising idea. His was an “orchid garage sale.”

He had too many plants and wanted to get rid of some. "I had plenty of plants for such an event," he said, "but I asked a few friends if they had plants to get rid of. It did not take long for word to spread among our community of addicts about what I planned to do and the most amazing things began to happen. People I had never met came to my office with boxes of plants. 'We heard what you are doing,' they would say. 'I lost my brother to AIDS. I think you have a wonderful idea.' Then the boxes started to arrive from Taiwan, Thailand, Ecuador and even France. Trucks bulging with goodies from places like The Conservatory of Flowers in Golden Gate Park and Streibing Arboretum at UC Berkeley arrived at my back gate. Suddenly I had thousands of plants to sell."

The late, great newspaper columnist Herb Caen mentioned the sale before it happened. Then came the TV cameras. More than one hundred people waited patiently for the sale to open. The two day event raised \$9,000.

"*OrchidMania*" became a California nonprofit corporation and an organization with as many as 50 volunteers for several annual sales and maintenance of a huge collection of plants in a large commercial greenhouse. OrchidMania raised as much as \$100,000 a year for HIV organizations that did not qualify for mainstream funding, including needle exchange programs, an orphanage for children with HIV in Chiang Mai, and a condom give-away and street-side counseling program for MSM Douglas eventually started in Saigon. Douglas ran OrchidMania for ten years. The unusual group was featured on NBC's *Today Show*, and inspired a sister organization in South Florida. The group officially gave up in 2010 after twenty-two years when the land on which their greenhouse stood was sold.

Many large plant donations came from commercial orchid growers in Thailand and Douglas decided to travel to Asia for the first time in nearly fifteen years to meet donors and find grant recipients. And that is how he ended up in Asia. Douglas decided to lend his experience as a business consultant to some of the small programs he found and one trip became four or five a year. One night while watching a song and dance performance about using condoms in a farm village near Chiang Mai, God spoke to Douglas, telling him that the time had come to make Thailand a permanent home. His underwear and KitchenAid mixer soon moved to Bangkok.

Towards the end of those "commutes" Asia's economies collapsed and Douglas saw an opportunity to earn dollars and live on Thai baht. In partnership with a friend who had founded the utopia-asia.com website, Utopia Tours was born online. They sold tour packages especially designed for gay visitors in Thailand, Vietnam and Cambodia. His original business partners were later implicated in a fabricated "crime" and were deported. The company has since been re-branded as Purple Dragon Ltd. Purple Dragon now has operations in nine countries (soon ten), and employs more than 60 local guides and managers. The company has developed the first gay Asia iPhone app.

In 2006 Purple Dragon opened "Figo," a gay bar and restaurant in Siem Reap (Angkor Wat), Cambodia. Douglas was in heaven, but it turned out to be the fastest possible way to get rid of a lot of money. Saddened customers still Google "Figo Menu" a couple of times a month.

Douglas still lives in Bangkok, where he works 14/7, bakes biscotti and what have been called "the best chocolate chip cookies on the planet," and is happily/unhappily single. He makes his own Italian sausage, dill pickles, pasta, bread, and lots of Mexican food because Thailand is a gastronomic wasteland. He brought heirloom tomatoes to Asia, first on Figo's own organic farm, which was stolen by Prime Minister Hun Sen. Now they grow in Northeastern Thailand.

Of his many painful experiences in Thailand, one of the biggest was as founding co-Chairman of Bangkok Pride, which he ran along with Anan Anpruang for two years. They produced a week-long

event that brought global media coverage and included a parade that drew a quarter of a million people the second year. This was an exhausting, thankless job and the organization went into a downward spiral after the end of their tenure.

Douglas does not allow orchids in his home. He writes a cult-status blog when he has time, one of the best travel newsletters you can find, and occasional travel and food stories for several magazines, newspapers and websites. He vows he will never write an autobiography since nobody would believe it.

He also writes "[Ask Darika](#)," an advice column for a gay magazine in Thailand. Darika has a huge fan following of her own. Darika would like to have a television cooking show and she is developing her own iPhone app. She is also considering some cooking clips on YouTube, and a fantasy experience for visitors called "Queen for a Day." (She is still looking for bottles of Jungle Gardenia perfume).

Douglas has done plenty of TV and radio. He got an FCC license in high school and had his own classical music show on a Ukiah FM station. He also appeared frequently as an orchid expert on KRON TV in San Francisco and on The Garden Channel, a syndicated cable channel in North America. For reasons nobody knows, he always works barefoot on television.

Douglas wishes he had room for the many other experiences he left out of this bio, including a couple of dozen boyfriends, being the darling of the Republican Party in Northern California, getting arrested a lot during the Vietnam war, making a couple of porno movies, growing up in the same town as Jim Jones and the Peoples' Temple (and later sending them all to Jonestown via one of his travel agencies), writing the first gay guide book to Vietnam, being in business with a psychotic alcoholic Italian film producer, a convicted bank robber, and former diplomat gone bad. For those stories you will have to wait for his book, which he vows he will never write.