



Bogarde, Sir Dirk (1921-1999)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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In her eulogy for Sir Dirk Bogarde, Glenda Jackson called him Britain's "first home-grown film star." Often dubbed "the British Rock Hudson"--both for his matinee-idol good looks during the 1950s and his discreet homosexuality--his film career spanned five decades and seventy films.

He was born Derek Jules Gaspard Ulric Niven van den Bogaerde to a Dutch-born father (a London *Times* arts editor) and an English mother (a former actress) in Hampstead, London, on March 28, 1921. After an inauspicious film debut as an extra in the comedy *Come On George* (1939), his career was interrupted by military service in World War II, during which he was decorated for valor as a major in the Queen's Royal Regiment.

Bogarde resumed acting after the war. Noël Coward, an early admirer, encouraged him to pursue a stage career, but in 1947, when Stewart Granger dropped out of the romantic lead in *Esther Waters*, Bogarde assumed the role. As a result, he earned a long-term film contract with the Rank studios and subsequently ceased theatrical work.

During the 1950s, Bogarde starred in romantic comedies, war films, and crime thrillers. As he entered his forties, however, he assumed more serious dramatic roles, some of which touched upon homosexual themes, a particularly risky venture in the years before the decriminalization of male homosexuality with the 1967 Sexual Offences Act.

The first and most significant of these was in *Victim* (1961), in which he played a married lawyer who is blackmailed for a homosexual affair. Bogarde's moving portrayal of a sympathetic homosexual may have helped sway public opinion in the debate leading to decriminalization.

With this role also came the first of six nominations for the British Academy Award for Best Actor, an honor he won twice, for his performance as the sexually ambiguous valet in Joseph Losey's *The Servant* (1963) and for the romantic lead opposite Julie Christie in John Schlesinger's *Darling* (1965).

Bogarde's other significant films include *Song Without End* (1960); *Damn the Defiant!* (1962); *I Could Go On Singing* (1963), opposite Judy Garland; *Modesty Blaise* (1966); *Accident* (1967); and *Our Mother's House* (1967).

In the mid-1960s, Bogarde moved to Provence in the South of France, where he lived with his manager and long-time companion, Tony Forwood. Subsequently, Bogarde appeared mostly in European films, most notably as Aschenbach in Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* (1971), based on Thomas Mann's novella about a dying composer who becomes obsessed with a beautiful boy. Other late and daring films include Visconti's *The Damned* (1969), Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* (1974), and Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Despair* (1978).

When Forwood became terminally ill in 1983, Bogarde returned to England with him and saw to his care

until Forwood's death in 1988. During this time, Bogarde curtailed his acting and embarked on another career, that of a writer. During the 1980s and 1990s, he published sixteen books, including seven volumes of autobiography and numerous novels.

While in his autobiographical works Bogarde carefully avoids direct discussion of homosexuality, he does discuss his relationship with his partner, particularly his care of him during the latter's long terminal illness.

Bogarde was knighted in 1992, and died of a heart attack in Chelsea, London, on May 8, 1999, after being incapacitated by a stroke in 1996.

For most of his life, Bogarde acknowledged his homosexuality only tacitly, although, as his obituary in *The Independent* notes, "the public understood he was essentially gay." One result of his discretion is that he was ridiculed in the 1980s by some members of a younger generation of gay men who came of age after decriminalization. His reticence about his personal life should not, however, obscure the fact of his courage in being the first actor to create a sympathetic gay character in British film

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About the Author

Patricia Juliana Smith is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University. With Corinne Blackmer, she has edited a collection of essays, *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*. She is also author of *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction* and editor of *The Queer Sixties* and *The Gay and Lesbian Book of Quotations*. She serves on the editorial advisory board of www.glbtc.com.