



## Broughton, James (1913-1999)

by Gary Morris

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Every movement has its muses. James Broughton probably would have copped to being a muse, or perhaps more accurately, a smiling spirit guide to pleasurable realms beyond the norm.

It is less likely he would have considered himself a leader of any movement, despite the fact that he more or less created the West Coast experimental film scene with two short films, *The Potted Psalm* (1946) and *Mother's Day* (1948), and has been identified with the San Francisco Renaissance, the literary movement that included Kenneth Rexroth and Robert Duncan.

Broughton is simply too individual for categorization, even when the evidence for labeling him this or that is overwhelming. But the lure of labels is strong, so for the sake of shorthand, and with apologies to Broughton, let us call him poet, avant-garde film artist, and Dionysian gay sage.

Broughton was born in Modesto, California on November 10, 1913 into a wealthy family. His father died when he was a child and he was sent to a military academy, from which he was later expelled for having an affair with another boy. He was educated at Stanford and the New School for Social Research.

In his memoir *Coming Unbuttoned* (1993), Broughton recounts his childhood, reflects on his work, and remarks on his love affairs with both men and women. Among his male lovers were gay activist Harry Hay and publisher Kermit Sheets.

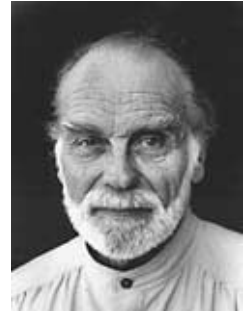
In 1962, Broughton married Suzanna Hart. The couple was divorced in 1978. On Christmas Eve 1976, Broughton celebrated his relationship with artist Joel Singer in a marriage ceremony. Eschewing the labels homosexual, heterosexual, and bisexual, the poet and filmmaker describes himself as a "pansexual androgyne."

Broughton's poems reflect the influence of Blake, Whitman, Duncan, and Ginsberg. Collected principally in two volumes, *A Long Undressing: Collected Poems: 1949-1969* (1971) and *Special Deliveries: New and Selected Poems* (1990), his poems are ecstatic and visionary celebrations of life's pleasures, characterized by simple diction and experimental form.

He also wrote a number of plays and memoirs, including *The Androgyne Journal* (1977), though he remains best known as a filmmaker.

*Mother's Day* is a comic anti-tribute to Mother that envisions Father as mostly a face in a frame, staring dourly, and the children as childlike adults, mindlessly engaging in such rituals as playing hopscotch and shooting squirt guns. Broughton's attack on the family is wrapped in Firbankian whimsy: "Mother was the loveliest woman in the world," reads a title in the film, "And Mother wanted everything to be lovely."

*Mother's Day's* more jarring images--ruined buildings, inscrutable characters--are less in evidence in his



A portrait of James Broughton by Stathis Orphanos.  
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later films, which take the motif of the child-man (and child-woman) and expand it to rhapsodic effect.

Broughton was busy in the 1950s and 1960s writing poetry, but he returned to filmmaking in 1968 with the fanciful *The Bed*. The film's central image is arresting and hilariously absurd--an empty bed is traveling leisurely down a hill as if it were a car. Eventually it settles in a meadow and becomes the locus of all manner of strange scenarios and woodland trysts.

Characters--mostly naked--appear suddenly on its sheets. Broughton pops in as a kind of laughing Pan, sitting nude in a tree serenading a series of revelers. He ridicules conventional rituals when a woman arrives and officiously begins making up the bed. More typical, though, are the polymorphous pleasures of wriggling bodies apparently liberated by the bed.

Broughton brings nature in harmony with humanity in odd and intriguing ways, as when a woman in close-up encounters a spider and reaches out to kiss it. In another scene, a live lizard appears to slither out of a man's mouth.

Broughton's poetic skills are often highlighted in the films; such is the case in one of his boldest efforts, *Song of the Godbody* (1977). Here a male body--the filmmaker's own, as it is featured in so much of his work--is shown in close-up, a kind of landscape of flesh that the camera lovingly surveys.

Broughton's beatific words accompany this exploration: "This is my body, which speaks for itself. . . . This is my body, which sings of itself." The comparisons to Whitman are inevitable, and Broughton could certainly lay claim to being Whitman's heir, celebrating the male body and male bonding unabashedly, and going further than Whitman in ways made possible in part by Broughton's appearance in the world decades later. What Whitman said, Broughton can say and show.

*The Gardener of Eden* (1981) is a brief document of his honeymoon with lover and frequent collaborator Joel Singer. The film was shot in Sri Lanka, and is typical in its treatment of the transporting beauty of nature and its positioning of the person as a fundamental part of it.

Two years later, in 1983, he made the masterful *Devotions*, also with Singer. Set in San Francisco and featuring a shimmering gamelan orchestra background, the film imagines an ecstatic world in which men are freed from tired, joyless convention. Broughton again appears as the sweet seer, playing a pipe, seducing his players into scintillating tableaux of union. His mostly naked men spend their time in loving embrace, washing each other, caressing, kissing.

Broughton's wit is never far away from his erotic celebrations: in one scene two men kiss on a rooftop, then slowly don nuns' habits and saunter away in the fading day. Later, a pair of leather queens whip up a soufflé. Without being the least bit polemical, this graceful film, like all his work, shows the sweet rewards that come from living authentically and, above all, joyfully.

Broughton died of heart failure on May 17, 1999 in Port Townsend, Washington, in the arms of his lover Joel Singer and in the company of two close friends. He was 85.

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**Gary Morris** is the editor and publisher of *Bright Lights Film Journal*, now online as [brightlightsfilm.com](http://brightlightsfilm.com). Author of *Roger Corman*, he writes on film regularly for the *Bay Area Reporter* and the *San Francisco Weekly*. He serves on the editorial advisory board of [www.glbtq.com](http://www.glbtq.com).