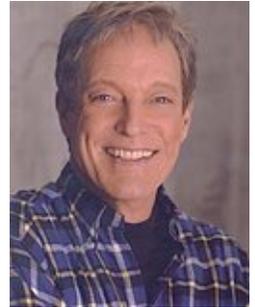




Chamberlain, Richard (b. 1934)

by Linda Rapp

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A portrait of Richard Chamberlain by Greg Gorman.
Courtesy Panacea Entertainment.

American actor Richard Chamberlain built a career in television, film, and theater playing romantic heterosexual roles. Deeply closeted for most of his life, he at last publicly acknowledged his homosexuality in his 2003 memoir *Shattered Love*.

Chamberlain, born in Los Angeles on March 31, 1934, grew up in Beverly Hills, but, he says, on "the wrong side of the now-vanished streetcar tracks" in a city whose name is synonymous with affluence. Although the Chamberlains were not rich, they were reasonably comfortable financially.

Emotional comfort was a far rarer commodity in the household. Chamberlain's father was an alcoholic who terrorized his wife and two sons with psychological rather than physical violence. In his memoir Chamberlain describes consistent feelings of inadequacy and failure to live up to his father's expectations.

Chamberlain entered Pomona College in 1952, intending to major in art, but he soon began appearing in the drama program's plays, enjoying enough success that he decided to pursue an acting career after graduating.

His plans were briefly interrupted when he was drafted and served two years in the army. Upon his return to civilian life he enrolled in acting classes, in one of which he met a young man who became his first love. Because of the homophobia prevalent in the late 1950s, the pair were careful to keep the year-long affair "as secret as possible."

Chamberlain made his movie debut in the forgettable *The Secret of the Purple Reef* (1960, directed by William Witney) and filmed a pilot for a proposed television series that never materialized. Shortly thereafter, however, he won the title role in the NBC drama *Dr. Kildare*, which began its immensely successful five-year run in 1961 and established the handsome Chamberlain as a romantic leading man, the object of desire of both men and women.

When *Dr. Kildare* ended, Chamberlain declined offers of other television series to work in theater and film. This led him to England, where he lived for four and a half years. A highlight of his British sojourn was the opportunity to play Hamlet at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in 1968.

Chamberlain's movie career has included an eclectic mix of projects. His roles in Bryan Forbes's *The Madwoman of Chailot* (1969) and Ken Russell's *The Music Lovers* (1971), in which he played Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky, are generally considered among his best, earning critical accolades. He also appeared in Irwin Allen's disaster films *The Towering Inferno* (1974) and *The Swarm* (1978) and Richard Lester's *The Three Musketeers* (1974), among others.

In the late 1970s and 1980s Chamberlain reigned on television as "the king of the mini-series," starring in *Centennial* (1978, based on the novel by James Michener and directed by Harry Falk, Paul Krasny, Bernard McEveety, and Virgil Vogel), *Shogun* (1980, based on James Clavell's novel and directed by Jerry London),

and the phenomenally successful adaptation of Colleen McCullough's *The Thorn Birds* (1983, directed by Stan Margulies).

Around 110 million television viewers watched the tale of Father Ralph de Bricassart's doomed love for Meggie, an Australian sheep rancher, putting *The Thorn Birds* among the highest-rated mini-series in the history of television. The mini-series also solidified Chamberlain's status as a mysterious heart-throb for legions of female fans.

When cable television began drawing an ever increasing share of the audience, the major networks moved away from producing costly mini-series. Chamberlain returned to the theater, where he undertook such mature roles as Henry Higgins in a 1994 Broadway revival of Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe's *My Fair Lady* and Baron von Trapp in a national tour of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's *The Sound of Music* in 1999.

When Chamberlain publicly acknowledged that he is gay in his 2003 memoir *Shattered Love*, the news came as a shock to virtually no one. That he chose at the age of 68 finally to speak of his sexuality was considerably more surprising.

Although the tabloids had outed him in the early 1990s, and his homosexuality was an open secret in much of the theatrical and television community, as well as the subject of gossip in the gay male community, throughout his career he had refused to comment on the topic because, he stated later, of his "own self-rejection" as a gay man. He also feared that coming out might jeopardize his job prospects, which was certainly a valid concern when he was starting out in the early 1960s. Even today many gay male actors wonder if they can be accepted in romantic heterosexual roles if they are openly gay.

When Chamberlain finally revealed "the worst kept secret in Hollywood," however, he found his fans "supportive, . . . positive, [and] friendly."

In his memoir Chamberlain writes of his search for inner peace and of his relationship with producer-director Martin Rabbett, his partner since the mid-1970s. For the past decade the couple has made their home in Hawaii, where Rabbett grew up.

The two have worked together on various professional projects over the years. One of the most recent was a July 2003 production of Timothy Findley's *The Stillborn Lover* at the Berkshire Repertory Theater in Stockbridge, Massachusetts. Rabbett directed the play, in which Chamberlain starred as an ambassador who reveals to his family that he is gay. Critic Malcolm Johnson observed that Chamberlain brought "a deep reserve and quiet dignity" to the role, perhaps reflecting both his many years of reticence and his newfound self-acceptance.

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