



Film Actors: Gay Male

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From the silent era forward, gay film actors have made significant contributions to cinematic art and Western culture. While very few gay and lesbian actors have been permitted the luxury of openness, many of them have nevertheless challenged and helped reconfigure notions of masculinity and femininity and, to a lesser extent, of homosexuality.

Because of the peculiar hold that film celebrity has had on Western popular culture, film actors--particularly film stars--have always been the subject of rumor and gossip, which in turn has affected the way they are perceived by others. Literally scores of actors, ranging from silent stars such as Rudolph Valentino and later screen idols such as Cary Grant and James Dean to contemporary stars such as Tom Cruise, John Travolta, Keanu Reeves, and Tom Selleck, have been rumored to be gay. Sometimes the rumors are true, but often they are not.

Although the most successful gay film actors have achieved success by fulfilling the fantasies of the predominantly heterosexual mainstream audience, some of them have also simultaneously fulfilled the fantasies of gay men.

Any list of gay male film actors is bound to be selective and arbitrary and should include accomplished character actors such as Charles Laughton, Clifton Webb, Michael Jeter, Dan Butler, and Simon Callow, as well as handsome hunks such as Rock Hudson and Tab Hunter. The actors mentioned in the following paragraphs are representative and are included because they exemplify in various ways the peculiar difficulties faced by creative artists who were or are homosexual.

For the public, film actors are often expected to be not merely talented performers but also the embodiment of the characters they portray, and for many people an essential characteristic of film stars is heterosexuality. For most of film history, open homosexuality, or even rumors of homosexuality, could end the careers of actors; hence, it is not surprising that most gay actors have had to expend enormous energy disguising their sexuality.

Today, the question of an actor's homosexuality tends to center on whether the public will accept an openly gay actor in a heterosexual role. Many gay actors refuse to come out because they believe it may limit the kind of roles they are offered.

The Silent Era and the Coming of Sound

When Rudolph Valentino died on August 23, 1926, he was mourned wildly. Over 100,000 women swarmed his funeral. One month before his death, however, *The Chicago Tribune* called Valentino a "pink powder puff" and announced that if effeminate men like Valentino really existed, it was time for a matriarchy, even if led by "masculine women."

Male audiences were offended by Valentino's extravagant dress, colorful spats, make-up, and willingness to



Raymond Burr (left) with Barbara Hale and Robert Benevides, his life-partner. Hale played Burr's indispensable assistant in the Perry Mason films and television series in which he starred. Courtesy Robert Benevides.

display his body on screen in such films as *The Sheik* (1921) and *Blood and Sand* (1922). Hollywood's first queer film star, Valentino disrupted his era's rigid codes of sex and gender. Valentino's sexuality remains ambiguous, but rumors of his homosexuality were rife among Hollywood gay circles, despite (or because of) his marriages to and divorces from Jean Acker and Natacha Rambova, both lesbian.

Ramon Novarro, who starred in *Mata Hari* (1931) and *Ben Hur* (1926), was an outsider, a Mexican immigrant in a town known for its negative representations of Mexicans. But he brought to the screen a delicate masculine body and boyish eroticism that unsettled male viewers.

Novarro defied Louis B. Mayer, head of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studio, who demanded that the actor marry to deflect rumors of his homosexuality. Defiance of Mayer, as well as internal conflicts over his sexuality, which led to alcoholism, prematurely ended Novarro's career. Many years after he had faded into obscurity, Novarro, at age 70, was killed by two male hustlers--his death confirming the rumors that had hounded him during his days in the limelight.

By all accounts, William Haines, an MGM star in the 1920s, was the first openly gay actor in Hollywood. Although Haines met his life companion, Jimmy Shields, in 1923, he remained boldly flirtatious on movie sets. Louis B. Mayer, again, sought to control a star's image by issuing a press release announcing Haines' deep love for actress Pola Negri.

Haines rose to stardom with *Tell It to the Marines* (1927), but, ironically, six years later plummeted from stardom when he was reportedly arrested with a sailor in a room at the YMCA. Mayer allegedly canceled his contract and prohibited him from ever working in Hollywood, at least as an actor. Haines went on to a successful career as an interior designer.

In 1922 Hollywood established the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, a self-regulating body led by former Congressman Will Hays that functioned as the public relations and lobbying arm of Hollywood. The MPPDA squelched actors, homosexual and heterosexual, who generated bad publicity, and in 1929 passed the Production Code, a complex set of moral standards for film content. The banishment of Haines and the establishment of the MPPDA forced actors of ambiguous sexuality, such as Tyrone Power, deeply into the closet.

With masculinity defined in terms of the machismo of Clark Gable and the outdoor ruggedness of John Gilbert, there was little room for film stars who deviated very far from the increasingly rigid American gender and sex roles. The press became bolder, looking with skepticism at any publicity release announcing the imminent marriage of (gay) actors. During the 1930s and 1940s, gay actors were "The Twilight Men."

The Legacy of Stardom in the 1950s

James Dean, Montgomery Clift, and Rock Hudson achieved stardom in the 1950s, each leaving a lasting mark on film history and the public.

When Dean died on September 30, 1955, only one of his films, *East of Eden* (1955), had been released. After his death and the release of *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) and *Giant* (1956), Dean became an icon of the sensitive and moody young man.

In the years and decades since Dean's death, newspapers, magazines, and books have repeated rumors of his bisexuality. Allegedly, Dean had affairs with prominent men and women in Hollywood and frequented leather and S&M bars. Dean's screen persona, that of a troubled, uncertain, and reckless late adolescent, in conflict with 1950s conformist values, fused with the rumors of his personal life and resonated deeply with gay audiences.

"No other star captured the hearts and minds of gay men like Montgomery Clift," proclaims John Stubbard.

Clift's persona was sensitive, introspective, fragile, and intense. "Clift was like a wound," Jane Fonda noted, constantly suffering and in psychological turmoil. But with his physically slight body, pretty face, hesitance to take action, and troubled stare, Clift helped reconfigure notions of masculinity in Hollywood.

Gay men of the 1950s may have responded so fully to the suffering of Dean and Clift because they connected it with the degradation they faced every day in a homophobic society.

Almost every year during the 1950s, *Look*, *Photoplay*, *Modern Screen*, and other movie magazines proclaimed Rock Hudson "most popular star" or "top male star." He was six feet four inches tall, virile, steadfast, with a smooth muscular body and heroic square jaw. The strength of his masculine persona permitted Hudson to feign effeminacy in comedies with Doris Day and Tony Randall and appear vulnerable and indecisive with women in Douglas Sirk's melodramas.

Fearing imminent outing of his client by *Confidential* magazine, Henry Willson, Hudson's agent, arranged the star's marriage with Phyllis Gates, his executive secretary. It lasted three years.

Obsessed with his image, Hudson supposedly declared he would rather die before fans discovered he was gay. In the 1950s, Hollywood publicists filled magazines with pictures of Hudson in his shorts, frolicking with Elizabeth Taylor and other glamorous female stars. Gay males of the era saw through this facade, however, and, most of them also necessarily closeted, could even identify with it.

In the 1980s, many gay males could also identify with Hudson in another way. Shortly after the news in July 1985 that Hudson had AIDS, the writer Armistead Maupin, a friend and brief lover of Hudson's, publicly outed him by speaking to *The San Francisco Chronicle*. Waking up an apathetic President (and wider public) may well be the most significant legacy of Hudson's stardom. A *New York Times* headline of September 2, 1989 declared, "Actor's Illness Helped Reagan to Grasp AIDS, Doctor Says."

Troublesome Rumbblings from the Closet

Many gay actors invested an enormous amount of energy to remain closeted, but such efforts took their toll physically and psychologically. Raymond Burr, for example, believed he could ensure privacy by creating an imaginary world to hide his homosexuality and his forty-year relationship with Robert Benevides. Burr claimed he was married three times and had a son who died of leukemia at age ten. Only in the late 1990s did his sister admit that Burr was married only once, for a short time, and had no son.

No one can explain with certainty why Burr created such an elaborate facade to keep his life secret, but the actor clearly believed extreme actions needed to be taken. Possibly Burr had found out that in 1961, at the height of his popularity in television and film, a member of the American Bar Association, where Burr frequently spoke by virtue of his famous portrayal of Perry Mason, gave the FBI documents indicating that Burr was "a noted sex deviate."

Anthony Perkins' masculine persona was delicate, timid, and agitated. He suffered psychologically over his homosexuality, and, reportedly, had severe panic attacks in the presence of beautiful actresses when no sexual feelings were generated. Alarmed over possible exposure by *Confidential* magazine, Perkins married Berry Berenson, who had an adolescent crush on him and was sixteen years his junior.

Some friends believe that Perkins' desperate attempts to develop a heterosexual response were only partially successful. Another casualty of AIDS, Perkins was also a casualty of his internalized homophobia.

If Burr and Perkins are examples of the extremes actors have gone to in an effort to conceal their homosexuality, Tommy Kirk is an object lesson in the dangers of not concealing one's gayness in the early 1960s.

Kirk was a child star in such blockbuster Disney films as *The Absent Minded Professor* (1961) and *The Shaggy Dog* (1959). But in his late teens, despondent over the exploitation of his cute all-American adolescent image, Kirk took a step that most of his gay predecessors in Hollywood never dared. He came out to Disney.

Immediately fired, Kirk briefly received national press coverage but soon passed into obscurity. He joined church organizations working with gay and lesbian youth. He remained furious, and, at times, vocal, about Disney's propaganda mill and discriminatory practices. Unfortunately, Kirk's heroic act has all but disappeared from gay history.

The British Take the Closet in Stride

In 1988, Ian McKellen outed himself as he spoke on BBC Radio against pending anti-gay government regulations. Still closeted at that time were many other highly respected actors, some of whom, such as Nigel Hawthorne, would later be outed by others.

Three years later when McKellen was knighted, gay British filmmaker Derek Jarman attacked him for accepting the honor and for his congenial ties with a homophobic government. Openly gay British actors Stephen Fry, Alex McCowen, and Simon Callow came to McKellen's defense. A comparable scenario to this one in Hollywood at the time is impossible to conceive.

Interestingly, Sir John Gielgud, Dirk Bogarde, and Nigel Hawthorne remained silent during the McKellen controversy, yet they were among the best known gay actors in England.

Gielgud, one of the greatest stage actors of the century, and the winner of an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actor in *Arthur* (1981), had been outed years ago by his arrest in a public restroom. But he had led a circumspect life for many years, his homosexuality widely known and accepted, but not discussed. His silence at the time of the McKellen controversy must have been both considered and painful.

Living in rural France, Bogarde remained aloof and distant, offending British actors who wanted his distinguished reputation behind their lobbying efforts. After becoming England's Rock Hudson in the 1950s, starring in comedies and romances, Bogarde had taken a daring step by appearing in the 1961 film *Victim*, in which he played a lawyer who was blackmailed for his homosexuality. Two years later, in *The Servant* (1963), Bogarde portrayed a predatory homosexual who destroys a home's quiet domesticity.

Despite his daring in accepting these parts at a time when they may have damaged his career, Bogarde was notoriously reticent about his private life. He never discussed his homosexuality or his relationship with his manager Tony Forwood, claiming that who he was could be seen in his movies and discovered in his autobiographies.

Similarly, Hawthorne, who was to receive an Oscar nomination for Best Actor in *The Madness of King George* (1994), professed not to understand why one should be an activist. Even after he was outed by the gay press in 1994, and called "The Madness of Queen Nigel," and "Yes Minister, I'm Gay," by British tabloids, he merely brushed off the insults as trashy. Hawthorne seems to have felt that carrying on with life in an unassuming manner was a better path for him to take.

Contemporary Debate: To Come Out or Not to Come Out

The British actor Rupert Everett came out publicly in 1989. Rather than ruining his career, however, the revelation seems only to have made him more interesting to audiences. After his success in *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997), in which, however, he played a gay character, critics predicted that he would become the first openly gay romantic leading man in Hollywood. Everett received such ecstatic audience responses at test screening of the film that the director shot additional scenes that beefed up his role.

Everett's success rekindled discussion about whether audiences would accept an openly gay actor in heterosexual roles. Ian McKellen's response was blunt: "Bullshit, I think that anyone who believes [that audiences would not accept gay actors] is just battling homophobia within themselves." He has pointed out that one of the first roles offered to him after the public revelation of his homosexuality was that of a notorious womanizer, former British cabinet minister John Profumo.

Similarly, the coming out of Hong Kong actor Leslie Cheung, the acclaimed star of Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), did not damage his career. Admittedly, however, Cheung specialized in playing sexually ambiguous roles.

Still, the perception remains that being identified as homosexual can severely limit an actor's career. When Richard Chamberlain belatedly came out in a memoir published in 2003, he cited as one reason for his decision to remain closeted for so long the fear that being honest and open would damage his career.

A lawsuit filed by Tom Cruise, in which he charges a tabloid with falsely alleging that he is a homosexual, contends that such allegations could result in audiences' inability to identify with him as an action hero.

An openly gay casting director seems to confirm the possibility, when he recently said that he refuses to date gay actors because an actor seen in public with him risked confinement to gay or sexually ambiguous roles.

Indeed, even the initial assumption that Rupert Everett's openness about his homosexuality would not harm his career has recently been challenged. Everett has complained that studio executives have denied him roles because they believe that an audience will not accept an openly gay man in a romantic leading role.

Moreover, director Irwin Winkler, who recently made *De-Lovely* (2004), about Cole Porter's life as a gay composer, acknowledged that the fear of being "outed" as a gay actor still permeates Hollywood. "Most of the actors that are gay," he said, "are not openly gay at all and there are some that we know that if we talked about them . . . would be pretty upset."

In his 2002 autobiography, *Why the Long Face? The Adventures of a Truly Independent Actor*, Craig Chester chronicles the lost battles of being an openly gay actor, concluding that "being in the closet is good for business." He cites the example of Sean Hayes, who plays an outrageously stereotypical character in *Will and Grace*, noting that if Hayes "can't come out because of the ramifications . . . then who can?"

Actor Robert Gant stayed in the closet for over a decade while securing roles in such television shows as *Caroline in the City*. After coming out he landed an important role in *Queer as Folk*. Even so, he believes that openly gay actors will be limited in their choices until one achieves the stature of a romantic lead.

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