



## Granger, Farley (1925-2011)

by Craig Kaczorowski

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Farley Granger in the trailer to *Strangers on a Train* (1951).

The American actor Farley Granger was perhaps best known for playing strikingly handsome yet emotionally vulnerable young men in such films as Nicholas Ray's classic noir romance *They Live By Night* and two Alfred Hitchcock-directed efforts with legendary homosexual subtexts, *Rope* and *Strangers on a Train*.

Although Granger was reticent about his private life, his homosexuality (or, more accurately, bisexuality) was widely known in the Hollywood and Broadway communities in which he worked. Moreover, the writer Arthur Laurents revealed in his 2000 autobiography the details of his four-year relationship with Granger during the late 1940s. Over the last several years of his life Granger himself appeared in several documentaries discussing the depiction of gay and lesbian characters in film.

The actor was born Farley Earle Granger II on July 1, 1925 in San Jose, California. A few years later the family moved to Los Angeles.

While still a student at North Hollywood High School, Granger began appearing in local theater productions. One night in 1943 he was performing several small roles in a play (Granger once jokingly explained that his job consisted of running onstage, shouting "Fire!," and then racing off to change into a new costume and coming back as another one-word character) and was spotted by a talent scout and a casting director. They both recommended the attractive 17-year-old actor to the producer and studio owner Samuel Goldwyn, who signed him to a long-term contract.

That same year Granger debuted on-screen as a Russian youth in Lewis Milestone's war drama *The North Star*. The next year he appeared in another Milestone war movie, *The Purple Heart* (1944), playing one of eight American airmen shot down and taken prisoner by the Japanese. Shortly after the release of the film, Granger himself joined the navy.

His first film after the war was Nicholas Ray's directorial debut *They Live by Night* (1948). Set during the Depression, the movie chronicles the romance of a young couple trying to escape the small-town life of crime in which they have become ensnared.

Granger's sensitive portrayal of the bank robber Bowie, his first starring role, is considered by many critics to be one of his finest film performances. As the *Los Angeles Times* noted, "Granger's quicksilver switches from tender lover to cool killer are especially unnerving, and the film is a triumph of style and economy that retains its impact."

The celebrated director Alfred Hitchcock was impressed with Granger's performance and cast him in his next film, *Rope* (1948). Inspired by the notorious Leopold and Loeb murder case, Granger and co-star John Dall (whose homosexuality was also well known in the Hollywood community) were cast as two affluent young men who strangle an acquaintance merely as an intellectual challenge to commit the perfect murder.

Although the two men's sexuality is never made explicit in the film, the relationship between Granger's and Dall's characters has a strong homoerotic subtext, skillfully engineered by Hitchcock and his actors through staging, art direction, and nuance. "It was just a thing assumed," Granger said many years later of his character's homosexuality. "Either you got it or you didn't."

As the film's screenwriter, Arthur Laurents, explained, "There wasn't a word of dialogue that said [the two men] were lovers or homosexual, but there wasn't a scene between them where it wasn't clearly implied."

Shot entirely in one apartment set in uninterrupted 10-minute takes to ensure a continuous flow of movement, many critics found the film too "stagey." It was not a box office success, though Granger again received generally excellent reviews for his performance.

Shortly before he began work on *Rope*, Granger had met Arthur Laurents at a party given by mutual acquaintances. The attraction was immediate for both men.

"As striking and improbable as Farley's looks were," Laurents wrote in his autobiography, "he seemed unaware of them; and once you knew him, what you marveled at was his sweetness. He was generous with praise for his peers and with presents for his friends as though he himself wasn't enough to give."

Granger and Laurents began living together soon after they met, although the two men had to pretend they were merely roommates because, as Laurents later explained, "we didn't have friends with whom we could be what we were." Granger was also obliged to disguise his sexuality for the sake of his career, and he and Laurents often double-dated with young actresses while continuing to live together.

They separated four years later. The break-up was amicable, and the two men remained friends. As Laurents explained, he and Granger simply "grew up and grew apart."

Granger was later to have affairs with both women, such as actresses Shelley Winters, Janice Rule, and Ava Gardner, as well as men, including Leonard Bernstein, before settling down with a male companion, Robert Calhoun.

When, late in his life, he was asked about his sexual preferences in a *New York Times* interview, Granger replied, "I've lived the greater part of my life with a man, so obviously that's the most satisfying to me."

Three years after starring in *Rope*, Granger again worked with Hitchcock in the classic thriller *Strangers on a Train* (1951), based on the first novel by acclaimed lesbian writer Patricia Highsmith.

The actor stars as Guy Haines, a socially ambitious tennis star romantically involved with a senator's daughter while waiting for a divorce from his wife. On a train one day, Haines encounters a psychopath named Bruno Anthony (memorably played by Robert Walker), who seems infatuated with Guy and overly familiar with his romantic entanglements. Smoothly, almost seductively, Bruno suggests the two men "swap" murders--Guy's unfaithful wife for Bruno's hated father. Guy, of course, does not take the proposition seriously, but Bruno does.

Although Hitchcock himself was famously dissatisfied with the final results, laying most the blame on the casting of the lead roles and a weak script, the film was a box office hit and the first major success of Granger's career.

During the early 1950s, Goldwyn attempted to exploit Granger's boyish good looks and turn the actor into a "teen idol." He was subsequently cast in a succession of well-made but ultimately forgettable romantic melodramas, often teamed with Joan Evans, a young actress Goldwyn was, unsuccessfully, grooming for stardom.

Granger's films of this period include *Side Street* (1950), *Our Very Own* (1950), *Edge of Doom* (1950)--in which his character murders a priest--and *I Want You* (1951). He was also cast in George Beck's ill-conceived comedy *Behave Yourself!* (1951) about a group of gangsters tangling with a Welsh terrier named Archie. In 1953 he was loaned out to MGM for the amiable but uninspired musical *Small Town Girl* and the Vincente Minnelli-directed segment of the anthology film *The Story of Three Loves*.

Granger's final film for Goldwyn was Charles Vidor's *Hans Christian Andersen* (1952), a wholly fabricated biography of the Danish fairytale writer, in which Granger co-starred with Danny Kaye as Andersen. Not surprisingly, Andersen's bisexuality was carefully avoided in the script.

Granger had become discontented with his career at Goldwyn Studios and asked to be released from his contract. Instead, Goldwyn allowed the actor to go to Italy to star in Luchino Visconti's *Senso* (1954). The film, with dialogue by Tennessee Williams and Paul Bowles, is a visually stunning, historical saga of love and betrayal set against the Italian *Risorgimento*, or struggle for unification and independence, in 1866. Many

critics consider Granger's portrayal of a cynical, heartless young Austrian soldier to be perhaps his greatest performance.

Uncertain how to proceed with Granger's film career, Goldwyn finally allowed the actor to buy out his contract upon his return from Italy.

Granger immediately moved to New York and began appearing regularly on television in such anthology shows as *Toast of the Town* and *Kraft Television Theater*. His film career, however, stalled. He made only two more films in the 1950s--*The Naked Street* (1955), as a small-time playboy on death row for murder, and *The Girl in the Red Velvet Swing* (1955), playing the sociopath millionaire Harry K. Thaw--and did not appear in any films during the 1960s.

Granger also turned his attention to Broadway, appearing in several memorable productions. As he later explained, "I developed a great love for the theatre. I wanted desperately to work in it. I began more and more to prefer that to film, because I felt you were freer and could do more on stage than in a film."

His first effort on Broadway, however, was less than triumphant. Appearing in *First Impressions*, a musical based on the Jane Austen novel *Pride and Prejudice*, Granger played Darcy opposite Polly Bergen's Elizabeth Bennet. The musical opened in March 1959 and closed a scant two months later.

In 1963, he fell in love with Robert Calhoun, a production supervisor for touring companies of Broadway plays. The two would be together for the rest of Calhoun's life.

Granger finally achieved success on Broadway in the 1964 revivals of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*, as well as the 1965 revival of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* as Tom Wingfield.

From 1970 to 1974 Granger appeared in a series of low-budget, Italian-language films with such titles as *La rossa dalla pelle che scotta* (released in the United States as *The Red-Headed Corpse*, 1971) and *Alla ricerca del piacere* (*Leather and Whips*, 1972).

Granger returned to the United States in the mid-1970s and starred in the soap operas *One Life to Live*, as Dr. Will Vernon from 1976 to 1977; *The Edge of Night*, as Trent Archer in 1980; and *As the World Turns*, as Earl Mitchell from 1986 to 1987. He also appeared on Broadway in 1980 in Ira Levin's successful mystery, *Deathtrap*.

In 1995 he was one of the on-screen actors interviewed for Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman's groundbreaking documentary *The Celluloid Closet*, discussing the depiction of homosexuality in film, in particular *Rope* and *Strangers on a Train*.

In the final years of his life Granger continued to act occasionally in theater, television, and film. In 2001, he appeared in the independent film *The Next Big Thing*, playing an urbane Manhattan art dealer.

In 2007, Granger published a memoir, *Include Me Out*, which he co-authored with Calhoun.

The following year Calhoun died of lung cancer

On March 27, 2011, Granger died in New York City of natural causes.

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**Craig Kaczorowski** writes extensively on media, culture, and the arts. He holds an M.A. in English Language and Literature, with a focus on contemporary critical theory, from the University of Chicago. He comments on national media trends for two newspaper industry magazines.