



## Hawthorne, Sir Nigel (1929-2001)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Before his 1994 performance in the title role in Nicholas Hytner's film *The Madness of King George*, Nigel Hawthorne's reputation was that of a highly professional and versatile character actor. His long career comprised mostly supporting roles for stage, film, and British television.

In March 1995, in the wake of tremendous critical acclaim for his most noted role thus far, the American gay magazine *The Advocate* described Hawthorne as "the first openly gay actor to be nominated for a Best Actor [Academy] Award." This article marked the beginning of one of the most unlikely and apparently reluctant self-"outings" of a public figure in recent years.

Nigel Barnard Hawthorne was born April 5, 1929 in Coventry, England, and emigrated with his family to South Africa at the age of two. He was educated at a strict Catholic school for boys, where the faculty's favored mode of discipline was corporal punishment. It was here, according to his recollections, that he first realized he was gay.

In 1951, after a short stint at the University of Cape Town, Hawthorne made his acting debut in a South African theater. He moved to England the following year and made his London debut in the musical comedy *You Can't Take It With You*. Success and significant roles eluded him, so he returned to South Africa, only to return to England once again in 1962.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Hawthorne appeared in numerous British stage productions, demonstrating his versatility in Shakespearean roles as well as in contemporary drama and light comedy. His motion picture career began inauspiciously with an uncredited role in Richard Attenborough's *Young Winston* (1972), and he occasionally played character roles in film and on British television over the next two decades.

Though success had not come to Nigel Hawthorne during the first quarter century of his career, the second quarter century proved very different. In 1977, he received his first major recognition as the recipient of the Clarence Derwent Award and the Society of West End Theatres Award for Best Supporting Actor in Peter Nichols's *Privates on Parade*.

Subsequently, he began what would be his most enduring role, that of the scheming Sir Humphrey Appleby in the popular British television comedy *Yes, Minister* (later *Yes, Prime Minister*), which ran from 1980 to 1992. When these series were aired on PBS, Hawthorne's bravura performance as Sir Humphrey made him a familiar face to American audiences.

In 1989, Hawthorne starred as C. S. Lewis in the London production of *Shadowlands*; he then earned the 1991 Tony Award for his performances in the play's two-year run on Broadway. (Anthony Hopkins, for reasons of name recognition, was chosen as the lead for the film version.)

Hawthorne's sensitive portrayal of a man awakening to love in middle age garnered him the lead (as George

III) in Nicholas Hytner's 1992 London staging of Alan Bennett's *The Madness of King George III*, for which he won the Olivier Award. He was subsequently cast in the same director's 1994 film version, entitled simply *The Madness of King George* so that audiences might not think it was a sequel to two earlier movies, and received the British Academy Award for Best Actor as well as a nomination for the American Academy Award.

Beginning in the late 1970s, Hawthorne lived openly with his partner, writer Trevor Bentham. While never exactly "closeted" about his sexuality, Hawthorne had chosen to protect his private life from the intrusion of the press.

Shortly before the 1995 Academy Awards ceremony, however, he granted an interview to *The Advocate* in which he discussed his life and relationship. Although the ensuing article was sympathetic, Hawthorne has stated that the magazine did not honor his request that his privacy be respected, and he was apparently traumatized by the sensational press coverage that resulted from the article.

Following that traumatic outing, Hawthorne spoke more openly and freely about his personal life and made a notable film appearance as an unambiguously gay character in Hytner's *The Object of My Affection* (1998). Moreover, his outing did not diminish or alter the success for which he strove over nearly five decades. Indeed, in 1999, he was knighted by Queen Elizabeth II.

Hawthorne also contributed an acclaimed performance as the authoritarian father in David Mamet's 1999 film adaptation of Terence Rattigan's *The Winslow Boy*, a study of a family under the stress of public scrutiny.

After battling pancreatic cancer for two years, Hawthorne died of a heart attack on December 26, 2001.

### **Bibliography**

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