



Richardson, Tony (1928-1991)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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British film and stage director Tony Richardson was instrumental in challenging the censorship codes of the Lord Chamberlain's office, which--until the 1960s--held tremendous and repressive powers over the language and subject matter that was allowed to be presented on the British stage and screen.

While Richardson had a long history of controversies with this government office, one of his most notable victories resulted in the first sympathetic portrayal of a homosexual character in British film; indeed, one of the first in international cinema. Although Richardson himself was publicly heterosexual, he had a quiet--if not completely closeted--gay life as well.

He was born Cecil Antonio Richardson on June 5, 1928, in Shipley, Yorkshire, the son of a pharmacist. He was interested in the stage from an early age, and, as a student at Wadham College, Oxford, became involved with the Oxford University Dramatic Society.

At college he also began to write for various drama and film journals and became acquainted with Lindsay Anderson and Gavin Lambert, who, like Richardson, would be instrumental in advancing British New Wave cinema (or "Free Cinema"), film based in social realism and focusing on the lives of the lower classes.

After receiving a baccalaureate in English in 1952, Richardson became a television director for the British Broadcasting Corporation, and even as he continued his career there, began as a stage director at the Royal Court Theatre and helped found the English Stage Company. In the latter capacity he directed the first performances of John Osborne's plays *Look Back in Anger* (1956) and *The Entertainer* (1957), which spearheaded the "Angry Young Men" trend that swept through British drama, film, and literature in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In 1956, Richardson began his career in cinema with *Momma Don't Allow*, a short film about young people in a jazz club, which he co-directed with Karel Reisz. Soon thereafter, Richardson and Osborne founded Woodfall Films, mostly for the purpose of filming *Look Back in Anger* (1958) independently.

The film's critical success led to more works of the New Wave genre, including *The Entertainer* (starring Sir Laurence Olivier, 1960), *A Taste of Honey* (1961), and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1962). His rise to acclaim culminated with *Tom Jones* (1963), which won Academy Awards for Best Picture and Best Director.

Of these works, *A Taste of Honey*, adapted from Shelagh Delaney's controversial play (1958), made film history by shattering many long-standing taboos regarding the representation of illegitimacy, miscegenation, and homosexuality.

In this film, Jo (Rita Tushingham), an unwed pregnant teenager, abandoned by her mother and separated from her black sailor boyfriend, is befriended by Geoff (Melvin Murray), a gay art student who, in spite of the abuse he receives from other characters, remains consistently kind and dignified.

Although Geoff might seem stereotypically effeminate by today's standards, it is a tribute to Richardson's determination in fighting censorship that so obvious a gay character was portrayed with complete sympathy.

From 1962 to 1967, Richardson was married to Vanessa Redgrave (whose father, Sir Michael Redgrave, was also bisexual) and had two children with her, the actresses Natasha Richardson and Joely Richardson. Even though he was married, and subsequently had a well-publicized affair with French actress Jeanne Moreau, he nonetheless had various relationships with men.

After a severe reversal of his previous successes, Richardson relocated to Southern California in the early 1970s, where fellow British expatriates Christopher Isherwood and David Hockney were among his closest friends.

His two French films with Moreau, *Mademoiselle* (1966) and *The Sailor from Gibraltar* (1967), were commercial and critical failures, as was his epic *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1968), a ferocious deconstruction of military bravado and blind obedience.

None of Richardson's subsequent films, including *Ned Kelly* (starring Mick Jagger, 1969), *Joseph Andrews* (1977), *The Border* (1982), *Hotel New Hampshire* (1984), and *Blue Skies* (1994), achieved the acclaim of his earlier work.

Richardson died of AIDS-related illness in Los Angeles on November 14, 1991. His memoirs, discovered after his death by his daughter Nastasha, were published in 1993.

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