



Schlesinger, John (1926-2003)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

A director of numerous films, stage productions, television programs, and operas, John Schlesinger was one of the most influential figures in the post-World War II British entertainment industry. Always a daring innovator, Schlesinger was a significant force in introducing homosexual themes into mainstream British and American films.

Born February 16, 1926 in London, Schlesinger attended Balliol College, Oxford, where he first became involved with acting and filmmaking. He directed a short film, *Black Legend* (1948), while a student.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Schlesinger acted a number of small roles in films. His first significant success, however, came in television; between 1956 and 1961, he directed documentary films for the British Broadcasting Corporation.

His work for the BBC led to his first feature film, *Terminus* (1961), a documentary set in a London train station. Subsequently, he was selected by producer Joseph Janni to direct a series of films that focused on the restlessness of young people coming of age at the beginning of the "swinging sixties."

Notable for their empathetic treatment of their youthful protagonists, these films featured such rising stars as Alan Bates, Tom Courtenay, and Julie Christie, and include *A Kind of Loving* (1962), *Billy Liar* (1963), and *Darling* (1965).

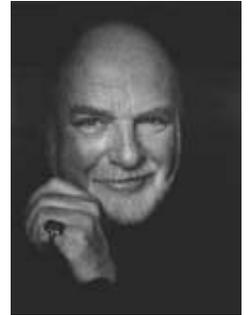
The latter film, although ostensibly concerned with the heterosexual adventures of its anti-heroine Diana Scott, a model who sleeps her way to wealth and fame but fails to find love or happiness, is informed by gay sensibilities, not only through the introduction of a sympathetic minor character who is unambiguously homosexual, but also in its casting of the two male leads, Dirk Bogarde and Laurence Harvey.

Darling, which garnered a Best Actress Academy Award for Christie and a nomination for its director, established Schlesinger's international reputation. His newfound prestige allowed him to explore controversial themes, including homosexuality, more directly in his films.

Schlesinger's first American film, *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), which won the Academy Award for Best Picture despite an "X" rating, focuses on a relationship between two men, a male hustler (Jon Voigt) and an ailing con artist (Dustin Hoffman). It also features a disturbing scene in which the hustler beats up a client.

Released in 1971, only four years after homosexual acts between male adults in private were decriminalized in Britain, *Sunday Bloody Sunday* explores a romantic triangle with a different twist: an older gay man (Peter Finch) and a divorcee (Glenda Jackson) become rivals for the sexual attention of a younger man (Murray Head).

Schlesinger later directed numerous feature films, including *The Day of the Locust* (1975), *Marathon Man* (1976), *Yanks* (1979), *Honky Tonk Freeway* (1980), *The Falcon and the Snowman* (1985), *Madame Sousatzka*



A portrait of John Schlesinger by Stathis Orphanos.
Courtesy Stathis Orphanos. Copyright © Stathis Orphanos. All Rights Reserved.

(1988), and *Pacific Heights* (1990).

A recent film, *The Next Best Thing* (1999), takes a wry look at a one-night stand (and an ensuing pregnancy) between a gay man (Rupert Everett) and a straight woman (Madonna).

Even as he continued his prodigious output as a director, Schlesinger also served, from 1973, as an associate director of the National Theatre, London, and was responsible for a number of opera productions at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, where his spectacular rendering of Jacques Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffman*, first staged and televised in 1980, was revived once again in 2000.

Schlesinger never made a secret of his homosexuality, and he lived quite openly with his partner Michael Childers from the late 1960s until the end of his life in 2003.

He became publicly "out," however, when, in 1991, Sir Ian McKellen, the first openly gay individual to be knighted by the British monarchy, was attacked in a public letter from filmmaker Derek Jarman for accepting the honor. Schlesinger was one of the dozen British gay and lesbian artists who signed a respectful response in McKellen's defense.

Schlesinger died on July 25, 2003 in Palm Springs, California, following a prolonged illness.

Bibliography

Brooker, Nancy. *John Schlesinger: A Guide to References and Resources*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978.

Phillips, Gene. *John Schlesinger*. Boston: Twayne, 1981.

About the Author

Patricia Juliana Smith is Associate Professor of English at Hofstra University. With Corinne Blackmer, she has edited a collection of essays, *En Travesti: Women, Gender Subversion, Opera*. She is also author of *Lesbian Panic: Homoeroticism in Modern British Women's Fiction* and editor of *The Queer Sixties* and *The Gay and Lesbian Book of Quotations*. She serves on the editorial advisory board of www.glbtc.com.