



## Williams, Kenneth (1926-1988)

by Chantal Stoughton

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The actor, raconteur, and writer Kenneth Williams was beloved by the British public as much for his outrageously camp persona as for his considerable comedic gifts.

British audiences had long tolerated gay stereotypes in comedy but Williams "pushed the envelope," especially on radio, at a time when homosexuality was only just becoming acceptable to a wider public. His popularity on chat and game shows--where he often displayed a highly amusing, acidulous, and somewhat hysterical temperament--could also be said to have helped to widen general acceptance of non-straight behavior.

The son of a London hairdresser, Williams was born on February 22, 1926. He studied lithography before the war, but was evacuated during the blitz. He performed briefly with the Tavistock Players, an amateur dramatic troupe, but was inducted into the army in 1944.

He began his professional performing career in Singapore just after World War II, as a member of Combined Services Entertainments.

In 1948, having returned to Britain, he embarked on a career that would encompass theater, film, cabaret, television, and radio.

After a spell in repertory theater, Williams enjoyed critical acclaim as the Dauphin in a London production of George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan* (1954) and popular success in three celebrated revues, commencing with *Share My Lettuce* in 1957.

Beginning with *Carry On Sergeant* in 1958 and continuing through the late 1970s, he appeared in 26 of the slapstick, innuendo-filled "Carry On" films. In these he played characters that were, to a degree that varied from film to film, camp, knowing, and sarcastic. The "Carry On" films were lucrative for Williams, but they stereotyped him as a campy queen and eventually limited his career.

A gifted actor, Williams periodically attempted to play roles more challenging than the campy ones with which he was associated, but audiences seemed uncomfortable with this. Even his turn as Inspector Truscott in the original production of his close friend Joe Orton's *Loot* (1965) was not well received by the audiences to whom he had become a household name.

Williams's vocal talents brought him fame through two comedy radio shows of the 1950s and early 1960s: *Hancock's Half Hour* and *Beyond Our Ken*. His ability to create vivid comic characters through voice alone was never put to better use than in another radio show, Kenneth Horne's *Round the Horne* (1965-1968).

Especially memorable, considering prevailing attitudes to homosexuality at the time, were the "Julian and Sandy" sketches. Here, Williams played Julian to the actor Hugh Paddick's Sandy: a pair of screaming queens

who burred on cheerfully and provocatively in the gay argot *polari* to a middle-class audience of millions.

Williams was homosexual by inclination but avoided sexual relationships. From his astonishingly frank diaries (published posthumously), it seems clear that he felt safer with the satisfaction afforded by masturbation rather than in an encounter with someone else.

By turns outrageous and conservative, he was plagued by disgust for what he considered to be typical gay lifestyles (promiscuous, disordered, camp, in some way sinful) and admired heterosexual family life. He wrote in his diaries of wanting to find his perfect companion, but carefully avoided involvement with any possible candidates.

Despite the ambiguity he felt about his sexuality, Williams supported the Albany Trust, which aimed to decriminalize sexual relationships between consenting male adults, a reform that was not adopted until 1967.

Williams suffered from bouts of depression throughout his life. In his final years these bleak periods were made worse by his own poor health and that of his mother, to whom he remained very close.

On April 15, 1988, he was found dead in his London flat. He had taken an overdose of barbiturate washed down with alcohol. The coroner recorded an open verdict on Williams' death.

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### **About the Author**

**Chantal Stoughton** graduated from Corpus Christi College, Cambridge and has worked as a writer and subeditor for newspapers and magazines in Japan, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom.