



Lambert, Gavin (1924-2005)

by Linda Rapp

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A portrait of Gavin Lambert by Stathis Orphanos.

Best known as a screenwriter, Gavin Lambert was also a novelist and biographer. In his "Hollywood Quartet" works of fiction and his biographies of notable people in the movie industry, he captured the essence of life in the film community in a perceptive and witty fashion.

Lambert was born on July 23, 1924 into what he described as an "upper-middle-class" and "deeply conventional" family in East Grinstead, England. As a child he showed musical talent and won a scholarship to St. George's Preparatory School at Windsor Castle. It was there that, at the age of eleven, he found his first love, a music teacher who told him about the tradition of male love in ancient Greece and took him out to movies, with which Lambert promptly and enduringly also fell in love.

A year and a half later the music teacher was one of three instructors fired as a result of a complaint from a student's parents about another of the men. When questioned about his teacher, Lambert denied that there had been any "violation." The incident, he said, "taught me the price that could be paid for being sexually 'different,' and reminded me never to forget that I had to live in a secret world." Despite that statement, he became quite open about his sexual orientation as an adult. He wrote that he "never made a secret" of his homosexuality, "but was never militant."

Lambert continued his education at Cheltenham College, where he pursued his interest in film and theater. He next enrolled at Magdalen College at Oxford University in 1943, but only remained there for a year. Finding C. S. Lewis, his English literature tutor, antipathetic, he often skipped their scheduled sessions. As a result, the president of Magdalen called Lambert's parents to a meeting at which he announced that their son had not only neglected his studies but also "brought back American soldiers to his rooms at night."

Lambert retorted that he had only "picked up *one* G.I., in a pub." He apparently omitted mention of his affair with a classmate and his strategy for avoiding military service. When called before the draft board, he chose not to identify himself as gay since homosexuality was criminalized at the time, but he showed up wearing gold eye makeup. Queried about it, he stated, "A friend of mine likes it," and was promptly classified 4F, unfit for service.

After leaving college, Lambert got a job with Gaumont-British, writing scripts for two-minute commercials shown in movie theaters. He also pursued more serious writing, publishing short stories in *The Windmill*, *New Writing*, and *English Story*.

In 1948, with his school and university friend Lindsay Anderson, Lambert co-founded the first serious British film journal *Sequence*. Although *Sequence* produced only fifteen issues, it drew notice for its criticism of British films as stuffy and tired compared to the vitality of popular Hollywood offerings, generally disdained by British critics as less artistic than European cinema.

Lambert's work on *Sequence* caught the eye of Denis Forman, the director of the British Film Institute, who hired him in 1949 to edit the Institute's journal, *Sight and Sound*, and turn it into a more exciting and

contemporary publication, along the lines of *Sequence*. Lambert served as editor until 1955.

While working at *Sight and Sound* Lambert also wrote a screenplay. *Another Sky*, which he filmed in North Africa during a leave of absence in 1954-55, told the story of a strait-laced young woman's awakening to her sexuality while on a visit to Morocco. The low-budget film did poorly at the box office but won praise from the pioneering Spanish director Luis Buñuel and from American director Nicholas Ray, probably best known for *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), which starred James Dean.

Lambert and Ray met in London shortly after the release of *Another Sky* and soon began a romance. Ray brought Lambert to Hollywood as his personal assistant. Lambert worked as a writer on Ray's films *Bigger Than Life* (1956, uncredited) and *Bitter Victory* (1957).

In collaboration with T.E.B. Clarke, Lambert wrote the script for Jack Cardiff's *Sons and Lovers* (1960), which earned them an Academy Award nomination. Lambert received a second Oscar nomination, this time with Lewis John Carlino, for Anthony Page's *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (1977).

Lambert wrote the script for the screen adaptation of Tennessee Williams's novel *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1961, directed by José Quintero). Williams called the movie his favorite among the cinematic productions of his writings, in part because "Gavin has a terrific sense of humor, and all the funny scenes are done well."

In the early 1980s Williams invited Lambert to his Key West home to discuss a play entitled *Masks Outrageous*. Lambert was intrigued by the premise: "A woman who has the greatest fortune in the world is mysteriously kidnapped and wakes up in bed with her husband and her husband's boyfriend in a beach house. They don't know where they are or why they've been kidnapped."

Lambert offered some suggestions about "gaps in the play" and, at Williams's request, took away the "quite disorganized" manuscript to work on. Williams's death prevented their further collaboration, but Lambert eventually wrote a revision. A New York production of the play is scheduled for early 2006.

Lambert also wrote the screenplay for the film version of his 1963 novel *Inside Daisy Clover* (1965, directed by Richard Mulligan). Natalie Wood played the title role in the story of a poor young woman who rises to stardom in the studio system of 1930s Hollywood but eventually comes to grief. A sham marriage to a closeted male star, the decline of her career, and a nervous breakdown bring misery to the actress who once was the toast of the town.

Inside Daisy Clover forms part of Lambert's "Hollywood Quartet," along with *The Slide Area* (1959, a collection of short stories), *The Goodbye People* (1971), and *Running Time* (1983). His *Norman's Letter* (1966) won the Thomas R. Coward Memorial Award for Fiction, and he also authored *A Case for Angels* (1968) and *In the Night All Cats Are Grey* (1976).

Writer Armistead Maupin praised Lambert's depictions of the film community, stating, "Decades before it was fashionable, Gavin Lambert expertly wove characters of every sexual stripe into his lustrous tapestries of southern California life. His elegant, stripped-down prose caught the last gasp of old Hollywood in a way that has yet to be rivaled."

Among Lambert's nonfiction writing are *The Dangerous Edge* (1975), about suspense writers, and a number of biographies. He profiled gay director George Cukor in *On Cukor* (1972) and lesbian actress Alla Nazimova in *Nazimova: A Biography* (1997). A review in *Publishers Weekly* concluded that "this gossipy but reliable life of Nazimova, emphasizing her defiance of social norms, may transform her from a forgotten theatrical heroine into a feminist icon."

Lambert's other biographies include *Norma Shearer: A Life* (1990), *Natalie Wood: A Life in Seven Takes*

(2004), and *The Ivan Moffat File: Life among the Beautiful and Damned in London, Paris, New York and Hollywood* (2004).

He told his own story in *Mostly About Lindsay Anderson* (2000), the chronicle of his decades-long friendship with the British director.

Lambert became an American citizen in 1964, but between 1974 and 1989 he spent much of his time in Tangier with his Moroccan lover, Mohammed Cherrat.

Thereafter, Lambert lived in southern California, where he was, wrote David Robinson of *The Independent*, "an indispensable figure at Hollywood parties," renowned for both his knowledge of film history and his often biting gossip.

Mart Crowley, the author of *The Boys in the Band* (1968) and a friend of forty years, called Lambert "very droll" and "terribly fun to be with," adding, "He liked to go to every party and be out almost every night, but he was an intense worker every day. His work habits were extraordinary."

Lambert died of pulmonary fibrosis on July 17, 2005 in Los Angeles.

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