

DRUMMER REVIEW

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Drummer Views the Flicks...

SEBASTIANE

**Derek Jarman Strikes Again
for the First Time
A Review of a Film in Latin
by Derek Jarman**

by
Jack Fritscher

- This entire review "Sebastiane" is available in Acrobat pdf.
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AUTHOR'S HISTORICAL CONTEXT INTRODUCTION written October 21, 1999

About the Titanic 70s, Derek Jarman, painter and set designer and filmmaker and diarist, wrote: "It's no wonder that a generation in reaction should generate an orgy which came as an antidote to repression."

Derek knew decadence.

And its cause.

He was a gay saint rightly canonized by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence.

I was compelled to report on his work in *Drummer*, because so many images he created were suitable for coverage. Perfection would have been to have scored him to contribute to *Drummer* just as I scored Robert Mapplethorpe to shoot a cover, and Fred Halsted, whose S&M films *LA Plays Itself* and *Sex Garage* are in the MOMA, to write a column. One problem: in the 70s, England was farther away than it is now, and I was lucky to get five photographs from *Sebastiane*.

On May 1, 1969, I had flown to London on a prop-jet that had three seats on each

side of its one aisle. A week later the first jumbo jet rolled out at LAX. That spring, all of Europe was reeling still from the student rebellions of 1968. London was Carnaby Street, Beatles, and on May 16, the notorious gangsters the Kray twins—one of whom was gay—were sentenced. London was wild. I was a sex tourist who spent my first night in London on the back of leatherman John Howe's motorcycle, flying past Big Ben as midnight chimed. I was staying at the home of the even-then legendary Felix Jones who was a centrifuge of London leather and art. Derek Jarman was twenty-seven that spring, unknown, inventing himself, and floating about in probably two degrees of separation when Felix Jones and John Howe were introducing me to artists like the sweet Mark Haddon who was the artist "Orson."

Derek and I lived parallel lives until we didn't. We both grew up during World War II when violence and terror freaked out an entire generation of us young gay boys. No one has yet studied how that 1940s trauma contributed to 1970s queer art, gay literature, masculine-identified homosexuality, and gay behavior such as sado-masochism. Do the math. A boy who was five when the war ended in 1945 was only thirty in 1970 and forty by 1980.

Such was the pedigree of the first generation of gay liberation after Stonewall.

I encourage some book publisher to build an anthology of memoirs written by guys who were no more than ten years old in 1945. Those prepubescent roots would reveal the psychological source of 1970s gay behavior. Our childhood created our gay desire for brave men in uniform who would save everyone.

My analysis of *Drummer* content in the 70s shows a direct erotic connection to the military culture of World War II. Publisher John Embry, who seemed old enough to me to have fought in the war, frequently introduced features about Nazi and Japanese atrocities as in *Drummer* 22, "You Die, Amelican Fryboy [sic]: History from the Wonderful Folks Who Brought You Pearl Harbor." In truth, it's typical in gay art to see Nazi regalia turned into fetishes: swastikas, Nazi uniforms and helmets, and blond Aryan soldiers. Tom of Finland, at our first meeting, told me how much erotic impact Nazi men had on him. I've observed my friend the artist Rex listening, while he draws, to German marching music that plays over a small television that only gets the Leni Riefenstahl channel. Martin of Holland draws images of his own private concentration camp. Skipper pens drawings of Nazi doctors performing medical experiments that can only be found in gay fantasy. For *Drummer* I wrote several war stories like "Corporal in Charge," "Cigar Sarge," and "The Shadow Soldiers," and produced war pieces like "Duty Stations" by William Sufleski and "Soldier" by another "Derek."

Susan Sontag has not gone far enough writing that men romanticize war.

Men eroticize war.

Drummer 22 was my war issue featuring, along with *Sebastiane*, "Corporal in Charge," "Cigar Sarge," "Duty Stations," "Soldier," "Amelican Fryboy," and "Strip-Shaving the Raw USMC Recruit."

I was nearly three years old when Derek Jarman was born in England during the blitz, January 31, 1942. His father was in the Royal Air Force, and the family traveled with the military. His first film, *Sebastiane* (1976), was a sensuous war film about Roman legionnaires and the queer soldier they execute. His *Queer Edward II (QE2)*, whose premiere engagement Mark Hemry and I attended in London, was built on war iconography: uniforms, guns, men barracks pushing in naked scrums, and another military execution—all turned into a metaphor of a war on AIDS.

Derek Jarman shared our generation's interest in the post-war images of Bob Mizer's *Physique Pictorial* which Derek cut up to make collages for his theater designs at the Slade School of Fine Art. In 1945, Mizer began shooting hot young veterans as they returned to hang out in LA before heading back to Minnie in Minnesota. Derek's rival, Robert Mapplethorpe, long before they heard of each other, was also at art school cutting up the homomasculine images of physique magazines for his own early collage work. At the same time Mizer cued our lust, we teens were all walking about shooting little films with our 8mm and Super-8 cameras which were essential equipment to creative gay boys in the 50s and 60s.

When Jarman sent a copy of *Sebastiane* to me, I recognized his homomasculine film as perfectly *Drummer*. It was sex and art—with dialog in Latin! That was meaningful back in that smart decade before all culture was dumbed down by the government which, discovering that the anti-war forces in the streets were mostly university students and professors, decided that the best way to curtail dissent was to curtail education. The uneducated are easy to control; make the uneducated religious and they become obedient.

Derek and I had both attended boarding schools that were driven by muscular Christianity. Sure, it had its own inherent homophobia. But what an irony! We were taught to hate queers, but we were encouraged to identify with the muscular, bearded, nearly naked Jesus, suffering spreadeagle on the cross. What a great religion! A crucified bodybuilder is the main image of Western art and culture! How gay is that? In *Sebastiane*, the handsome Saint Sebastian—the most utterly gay of saints—is an analog for Christ, once again tortured in a military execution.

No wonder Derek and I, like so many other Christian gay boys, including Pier Paolo Pasolini, shared the black anxiety and pink panic over the contradiction. We were supposed to worship Christ and deny our attraction to iconic males. Genius director Kenneth Anger, who admits to being about twelve or thirteen in 1945, mixed Christ and Nazis together in his gay leather biker film, *Scorpio Rising* (1964). That piss-soaked film influenced every gay man, artist or not, leather or not, in the 1960s, and is probably the root of the piss scene in *Sebastiane* as well as of Andres Serrano's controversial "Piss Christ."

Scorpio Rising certainly is, even more than *The Wild One*, the signature film of 1960s and 1970s leather, and probably the greatest leather orgy film ever made. Anger, saying he was age 17, had earlier filmed *Fireworks* (1953) in which straight sailors kick the shit out of a gay adolescent who loves the military bullies. Derek Jarman also was expert at portraying rough men in uniform who killed Sebastiane with arrows and Edward II with a hot poker up his ass.

Derek Jarman is perfect template for the evolution of the 1940s boy who became a 1950s gay teen who became a 1960s queer who became a 1970s liberated gayman equipped to create the emerging gay culture and its media. This is the same profile for the audience reading *Drummer* in the 1970s.

Like ships passing in the night, Derek and I both visited San Francisco at nearly the same time. Lunging out of the 1950s, I arrived first in 1961; Derek in 1964. We both headed directly to the beatnik scene of North Beach and City Lights Bookshop. In parallel, we hit 1960s New York. He favored the Continental Baths; I, the Everard. His sun-splashed Roman bath sequence in *Sebastiane* captures the romantic quintessence of 1970s bath house culture. Derek hated pop art while I was dropping around at the Factory with Warhol whom Derek, for all of Warhol's influence on his films, thought a plague-

meister in his persona and in his art. Derek liked Fassbinder and Lindsay Kemp and 1970s punk and glam. I liked leather and the Mine Shaft and I liked stuffing *Drummer* with what I liked, including Derek, and including Mapplethorpe whom Derek did not like. Derek was putting his travels and tastes into his films; Mapplethorpe, into photographs; I, into *Drummer*.

Laced with alcohol, cigarettes, and 70s drugs, Derek was a hard man hard on others. Years later, he denounced the wonderful gay actor Ian McKellen for accepting a knighthood from the conservative Margaret Thatcher who, like Ronald Reagan, had done nothing about AIDS. Derek, however, achieved his own knighthood. From the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence he received an offer his wrist could not resist. On September 22, 1991, the Sisters decamped at his storied little garden at Dungeness, Kent. In the shadow of the nuclear power plant next door, they gave him a robe, a halo, and canonized him with the title, "Saint Derek of Dungeness of the Order of Celluloid Knights." Thirty months later, the brilliant artist went blind and died.

About the twin decades of the 60s and 70s, Derek wrote, "Those were years not wasted, they were years of distillation."

Art and artists, that is gay art and gay artists, emerged because of the combination of sex and psychedelia that had similarly fueled the opium and morphine poets Coleridge, Byron, Shelley, Keats, and Poe.

In *Kicking the Pricks*, Derek wrote, "...the dance was on," and that very disco metaphor floating in the *zeitgeist*, prompted Andrew Holleran and me to name our respective 70s novels, *Dancer from the Dance* and *Some Dance to Remember*. As a diarist like Derek, I had kept a journal from the 1950s onwards. The entries beginning in 1970 were the base of *Some Dance*.

Derek and I shared a passion for the art and politics of Pier Paolo Pasolini whom I featured in *Drummer* just after Pasolini was murdered by a Roman hustler at midnight in a shadowy sucking ground. Derek, who made his own films on low budget, showed how financing can help express genius when he created the set design for Ken Russell's *The Devils* (1971) and *Savage Messiah* (1972). Through Ken Russell, Derek crossed paths with Larry Kramer who had written the screenplay for *Women in Love* (1969) which Russell directed—including the most famous, and absolutely essential, homomale wrestling scene in the history of cinema.

Both Derek Jarman and Larry Kramer rather much turned into parallel persons later in life: both stricken with AIDS, both driven by HIV to radical politics commingled with art. Jarman, once diagnosed, returned to painting—a much better painter, and actually mellowed. As Sharon Stone said to David Letterman about her brain hemorrhage, serious illness can change a diva into a kinder person. (Mapplethorpe suffering from AIDS worked harder and more focused on his art without politics; yet his art became more politically famous than anything ever done by Jarman or Kramer, and people will look at his photographs five hundred years from now.)

Larry Kramer, whose play, *The Normal Heart*, was successful and championed by Barbra Streisand, never reached again the romantic quality of his *Women in Love*, which, if it were the only thing he had ever written, would be enough to justify his reputation as an artist who was a writer. Derek exited life rather gently. And that is a mercy. On the other hand, Larry Kramer goes on so abrasive and rude that his anger has lost power and meaning.

Talk about trouble in paradise! Kramer exploded on stage at the 1997 Key West

Literary Conference whose theme was “Literature in the Age of AIDS.” What a nightmare. In the presence of Edmund White, Tony Kushner, Anne Beattie, Jewelle Gomez, Andrew Holleran, Mark Doty, Sarah Schlman, as well as the Davids Leavitt and Bergman, and the Michaels Bergman, Bronski, and Denny, Larry Kramer, burning under the hot stage lights, so savaged the auditorium that the very polite straight hosts wisely invited everyone to please leave, and disbanded the conference early. It was unforgivable. It wasn’t even a rabble-rouser like one of those mad scenes in a camp movie where some crazy diva tells everyone off. It was one of the most shocking, rude, and embarrassing displays of alienation I have ever seen.

Derek’s films include, beside *Sebastiane* (1976), *Caravaggio* (1986), the Pre-Raphaelite *The Last of England* (1987), and *Edward II* (1991). He based *QE2* on Christopher Marlowe’s 1594 drama which he modernized but fucked up dramatically tacking on a jarring AIDS-activist ending. His state of health and mind turned those last twenty minutes of his screenplay from art to politics and diminished the film greatly. In a way it was the same reduction of art to movie-of-the-week issue that Kramer has done.

Of course, Derek had a very definite opinion about my bi-coastal lover, photographer Robert Mapplethorpe who was, in Derek’s terms, the epitome of urban art with its glass-topped coffee table with the precisely poised flower arrangement.

British art critic Edward Lucie-Smith in the erotic memoir, *Mapplethorpe: Assault with a Deadly Camera*, said that Derek Jarman was Mapplethorpe’s *bete noire*, because Jarman, always on a low budget, often criticized Mapplethorpe, who had a millionaire sugar daddy, for his commercialism.

At their last encounter, at the disco called (now ironically) “Heaven,” Derek Jarman going down a flight of stairs passed Robert Mapplethorpe going up another flight of stairs.

Robert called out a hello. “I have everything I want, Derek. Have you got everything you want?”

Derek and Robert were jealous, but good-natured, competitors over the years, right up to the end.

Robert Mapplethorpe, age 42 (November 4, 1946-March 9, 1989), died at New England Deaconess Hospital, Boston.

Derek Jarman, age 52 (January 31, 1942-February 19, 1994), died at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, London.

Who won?

One thing Mapplethorpe had: he had shot a *Drummer* cover; a second thing he had was me.

In 1994, when painter and filmmaker Derek Jarman went blind, his final suffering was exactly like the blindness that struck *Drummer*’s art director A. Jay in the last two months of his life. (See *Drummer* 107.)

Derek, in hospital and separated from his famous garden at Dungeness, died two months before his last film premiered at the International Gay Film Festival, Turin, Italy. *Glitterbug* is one long montage edited together from fifteen hours of Derek’s personal Super-8 footage. Imagine Derek as a drowning man seeing his entire life flash by.

My last chance at Derek Jarman ended at death's door.

In 1994, I shot the cover photograph for James Purdy's novel, *Narrow Rooms*, which the Gay Men's Press, London, published in Autumn 1996.

Narrow Rooms was, GMP wrote, "a cult book that Derek Jarman planned to film. Gore Vidal wrote that this 'dark and splendid affair by an authentic American genius' is a shattering novel of sexual passion in the remote Appalachians, and a journey into the dark night of the American soul."

Derek could have made a brilliant film

In an unedited, and perhaps unpublished, transcript given to me of a "Sundance 92" interview with Derek Jarman conducted by and copyright by Dan Humphries, Derek says: "If there is anyone out there, I would give anything to do James Purdy....I'd love to do *Narrow Rooms*. I'd give anything to do it....If I was to come to the States to make a film....That I could do James Purdy here. I would really love to do that. I could actually see how I could make the leap that everyone does across the Atlantic without losing myself."

All along, I had wanted to import him across the ocean into *Drummer*.

The must-have books written by Derek Jarman are *Kicking the Pricks*, *At Your Own Risk: A Saint's Testament*, *Modern Nature: the Journals of Derek Jarman*, and, especially, the gorgeously produced film script with photographs, *Queer Edward II*.

—Jack Fritscher, October 21, 1999

**The review as published in
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4-STARS. *Sebastiane* is a must-see two-cum British movie about a Roman soldier who refuses the love offered by his commander. The plot is the same as Rod Steiger kissing John Phillip Law in *The Sergeant*, or Captain Marlon Brando coveting Private Robert Forster in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, or the officer torturing the enlisted man in James Purdy's ultimate S&M novel *Eustace Chisholm and the Works*. The moral of all these encounters is that when a senior man offers his sexual attention, the younger man had

best put out. *Sebastiane* is gay British director Derek Jarman's first movie and the sexy dialog is—also a world's first—in Latin with English subtitles. (Jarman also worked on films like Ken Russell's *The Devils*.)

ULTIMATE PIERCING

Sebastiane, who likes to suffer and be degraded in pigstys, refuses love when it's offered. He is strung up, always stripped naked, whipped, stretched spreadeagle across burning sand dunes, taunted, tormented, beaten, suspended, and finally led across rocks to a stake where in absolute cinema realism, his naked and leathered comrades one by one take deliberate aim with their bows and slowly, carefully, deliciously shoot his naked and bound body full of arrows.

Sebastiane's true story first appeared in the Roman martyrology. More recently his story was obliquely told by Tennessee Williams in *Suddenly Last Summer*. In one very literal version the spear-n-sandal epic starring Rhonda Fleming called *The Revolt of the Slaves*, Sebastiane is shot full of arrows for being straight. (This guy can't win for losing!)

CLASSIC BATHS

This British *Sebastiane* was beautifully photographed on location in Sardinia. Lots of blond English meat. Lots of dark Mediterranean meat. Cut and uncut. *Sebastiane's* bath-house scene by itself is worth the price of admission. The soldiers slowly bathe, lit by incredible shafts of sunlight. They scrape sweat and sand from their naked, oiled bodies using the ancient strigil. Tableau after tableau, *Sebastiane* is full of scenes based on those bookplates that strangely turn on (and bring out) freshman high-school boys in their Latin grammars. And Latin is, for all you cunning linguists, the spoken language of this subtitled film where "Motherfucker" translates to "Oedipus!"

In some footage the film is a little too pretty, a little too Fire Island, a little too much of a five-n-dime imitation of Ken Russell, whose *Devils'* set designer laid a bejeweled finger on *Sebastiane's* production. The inimitable (and why would one bother?) Lindsay Kemp opens *Sebastiane* with a Cockettes burlesque orgy. Once you get beyond the first seven minutes you can fairly much get behind the plot, character, and technique of this well made 90-minute feature.

One motivational dissatisfaction on the level of character development, is the ultimate martyrdom of Sebastiane, who is the great masochist saint of Christianity. The commander who loves him should be the executioner who shoots the final arrow that in its phallic entry delivers Sebastiane from his own too mortified flesh.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

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