



Smart Alec

Veteran British Actor
Alec McCowen
Finds It's Better
To Come Out Late
Than Never

by GERARD RAYMOND

"I don't know whether I would have come out unless I had been provoked, and very provoked indeed," says Alec McCowen, who joined the ranks of prominent, openly gay British actors last fall.

McCowen, who recently celebrated his 65th birthday, became a major theater star with *Hadrian VII* in 1969. Playing a man who imagined he was the Pope, McCowen was hailed on both sides of the Atlantic and received the first of his three Tony nominations for Best Actor during the production's Broadway run.

His other stage triumphs include the title role in Christopher Hampton's *The Philanthropist*, the Fool in Peter Brook's production of *King Lear*, and the troubled psychiatrist in Peter Shaffer's *Equus*, a role he created in London. In the movies,

McCowen is best remembered as the prim banker who accompanies his eccentric aunt (played by Maggie Smith) in *Travels With My Aunt* and the Scotland Yard inspector who heroically suffers his wife's pathetic attempts at gourmet cooking in Alfred Hitchcock's *Frenzy*. He is also the author of three books of autobiography.

The ADVOCATE talked to the actor while he was in New York for a limited return engagement of his acclaimed one-man show *St. Mark's Gospel*. He is currently rehearsing the lead for a stage adaptation of Christopher Isherwood's *A Single Man*, which is scheduled to open in London shortly.

You are perhaps the first actor of your generation to come out publicly. How did this happen?

Well, first of all, I must say that Michael Cashman and Ian McKellen have been extraordinarily brave and have set a terrific example. I really take my hat off to them.

Perhaps I was looking for an excuse to come out, but I didn't think I could just take an advertisement in *The Stage* [a London trade paper] and say, "Alec McCowen is gay." Then the opportunity came last fall during the run of the play *Exclusive* [a West End flop written by the best-selling author Jeffrey Archer].

One night, at a curtain call, cameramen rushed down the aisles, and suddenly there was a well-known interviewer standing beside me with a red book saying, "Alec McCowen, this is your life." I don't think you have done this TV show in [America] for many years, but they still do it in England. I was absolutely stunned. On the way to the recording studio, I thought, *Well, how are they going to do my life?*

The program was quite charming. My mother, my sister, and various old friends were there. They mentioned several plays and films that I'd done. But apart from my childhood, nothing was said about my life whatsoever.

My great friend of many years, the director Vivian Matalon, with whom I have had a long and loving relationship, was not mentioned. And even worse, there was no mention of Geoffrey Burrige, who had been my friend for 17 years and who died of AIDS [at age 35] in 1988. Not only was there no mention of him, but his mother and friends weren't asked to participate.

After the program, which I went through with great politeness because it would have been very offensive to the various friends who were there, I was put into a limousine and sent home on my own. I don't think I have been quite so depressed in my life.

I thought, *What on earth am I, aged 64, covering up? What are they covering up? Is*

it such a big deal, for God's sake, to mention true friends? Would they put on Richard Burton and not mention Elizabeth Taylor?

I got angrier and angrier, and by the weekend I got in a total fury about the whole thing. I rang the producers up on Monday and said I didn't want the program to go out. "It is a travesty," I said. "How can you call a program *This Is Your Life* and not mention the two most important people in it?"

What was their reaction?

They were very alarmed and said they would do anything I wanted. I said they could put out [the program] on condition they pay a tribute to Geoffrey at the end. They agreed to show a photograph of him, and the narrator said, "This program would not be complete without mentioning Alec's friend Geoffrey Burrige, who lived with him for 17 years and who died of AIDS two years ago." So that satisfied me—but only up to a point.

Meanwhile, our terrible press in England got hold of the story, and there were great headlines in *The Sun* and *The Mirror* reading, **THIS IS MY GAY LIFE**. So I became somewhat of a hero—a small hero—in the gay community for making this stand. I am very glad I did.

Had the question of your being gay ever come up before?
No.

Does the press follow some kind of tacit agreement not to talk about the subject?
Unless he is asked or there is some reason for it, I don't see why anyone should go around proclaiming his sex life or his religion or his political views. I mean, why should he? I am very understanding of people who are reluctant to come out. I was very reluctant myself for a very long time—for family reasons. It's usually for that reason—that the fact will cause distress or embarrassment—particularly if parents are elderly and you think it is going to be very difficult for them to cope with the news.

Did it affect your mother?

Surprisingly, the family [reaction] was splendid. My mother knew Geoffrey and I were friends, but she didn't know that he had died of AIDS. I had to tell her this before the papers came out with it. Her reaction was just wonderful. She said, "Oh, that poor man." She thought about him and not about herself, which I found very moving.

How did you meet Burrige?

We met when I was playing Hamlet in Bir-



*Alec McCowen played a prim English banker traveling with his eccentric aunt (played by Maggie Smith) in 1972's *Travels With My Aunt*.*

mingham. He was playing Guildenstern. I found my part very difficult to play, so it was an unexpected bonus to meet him!

Did you have any problems playing gay roles in your career? Wasn't the character in *Hadrian VII* gay?

There was an undercurrent, certainly, with regard to Hadrian. But, no, that has never particularly worried me. I took quite a daring step about five years ago when I did a film called *Personal Services* with Julie Walters. I played an ex-RAF officer who enjoyed dressing up as a woman. I don't think he was meant to be gay; he just enjoyed dressing up as a woman. So I spent a great deal of time dressed as a French maid.

The first time I went for a wardrobe fitting, it was in some little hut, and they had no mirror. The wardrobe lady said she would take a Polaroid of me in the street, so I went outside wearing net stockings, a black silk skirt, and a blond wig. A lorry screeched to a halt, and the driver whistled at me. I thought, *Boy, I bet I'll be quite good in this!*

When I go back to England, I am going to do *A Single Man*, adapted by Michael Michealian from Christopher Isherwood's book. It is set in 1962, which seems like centuries ago. The play is about an English professor's struggle to cope with his homo-

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sexuality in society, and, of course, that problem still goes on.

In your book about your childhood, *Young Gemini*, you don't talk about growing up gay. What was it like for you?

Like a lot of people of my generation, it was not discussed. When I was growing up, I didn't have anybody to talk to about this, and I wasn't sure how different I was. When I was in my late teens and early 20s, I was very lonely and had to live a life of disguise. I didn't really have any sort of relationship with anyone till I was about 27, which was very late indeed. And although I had various encounters, I lived a very guarded existence.

Homosexuality was also against the law at that time.

Yes, it was. The legal thing was very frightening, though not as frightening as I imagine it must have been during the first years of this century after the Oscar Wilde trial. But I don't think I suffered unduly as a child or as a young man. There was some loneliness, certainly, but I was lucky to manage to work as soon as I became an actor. I didn't know anything else, so looking back on it, I don't have any feelings of resentment.

What about being open around your fellow actors? Were there any problems there?

No. I was in a huge company with Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh in New York in 1952. We played *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Caesar and Cleopatra* at the Ziegfeld Theatre. At that time I made tentative explorations into New York gay bars—the well-known bird circuit, as it used to be called. [Editor's note: *The New York gay bars were named after various birds.*] I was in one of those bars when a member of the company, whom I had been sharing a dressing room with, suddenly came in. We looked at each other and roared with laughter because we had no idea. So there was that amount of carefulness.

You mentioned your close relationship with the Tony award-winning director Vivian Matalon. Tell me about him.

I met him in 1956. He was an actor at the time, and we acted together in the first British production of *The Caine Mutiny Court-martial*. I was quite surprised to meet a younger actor who found fault with my acting. I was more alarmed when I heard him criticize Olivier's acting. I thought, *This is someone who has opinions*, and we became good friends. He taught me more about acting than anybody has ever done. If I gave a good performance before that time, it was really a series of accidents.

He directed you in John Bowen's *After the Rain* in London and on Broadway. Is it difficult to maintain a personal relationship with your director?

You split the roles. You are actor and director during rehearsals, then you are friends afterward. It's lovely. It was the same working with George Cukor in *Travels With My Aunt*. We would be in an actor-director relationship all day, and then the minute we got in the car to come home, he never discussed the movie. We were this odd couple.

What was Cukor like?

I had a wonderful time with George, because he was not only this great director but also an immensely civilized and witty man. I think he found me a rather Dickensian character. I would tell him about my real aunts and uncles. He found my background comical—especially the fact that I came from Tunbridge Wells, which is a frightfully conservative town in England.

He never said anything malicious about all those leading ladies he worked with. I would try and pump him about the wonderful people he had directed, but he was very disappointing in that way. I would say, "Tell me about working with Judy Garland." And he'd just say, "Oh, poor darling Judy." Or I'd ask, "How was Marilyn?" and he'd reply, "Darling Marilyn." And you would never get anything more.

For a man in his 70s he was so buoyant, a huge pleasure. But he could be a beast on the set as well. He had a frightful temper, and I guess he was under terrible pressure from the producers. So your blood did occasionally run cold. I remember a cameraman making a very good suggestion one day and George shouting at him, "Don't teach me my job."

One day I made a terrible mistake with him. We were driving back from the studio, talking about critics, and I mentioned James Agate. Stupidly, I added that he was the leading British critic of the '30s and '40s. George said, "Oh, thank you so much for teaching this poor American slob who James Agate was! Oh, let me write this down. Where's my notebook?" And he went on, mercilessly teasing me for trying to teach him something.

What are your feelings about coming out?

It is a great encouragement, obviously, if established people come out. It gives comfort to younger people. I wish that it wouldn't happen only in the arts and entertainment professions. It would be of particular help if doctors, lawyers, politicians, and clergy would come out. But I wish to God we could reach a point where there were no minorities and there were only human beings. ■