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JUNE 1994

DEREK JARMAN

The director's
final bow

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STONEWALL 25

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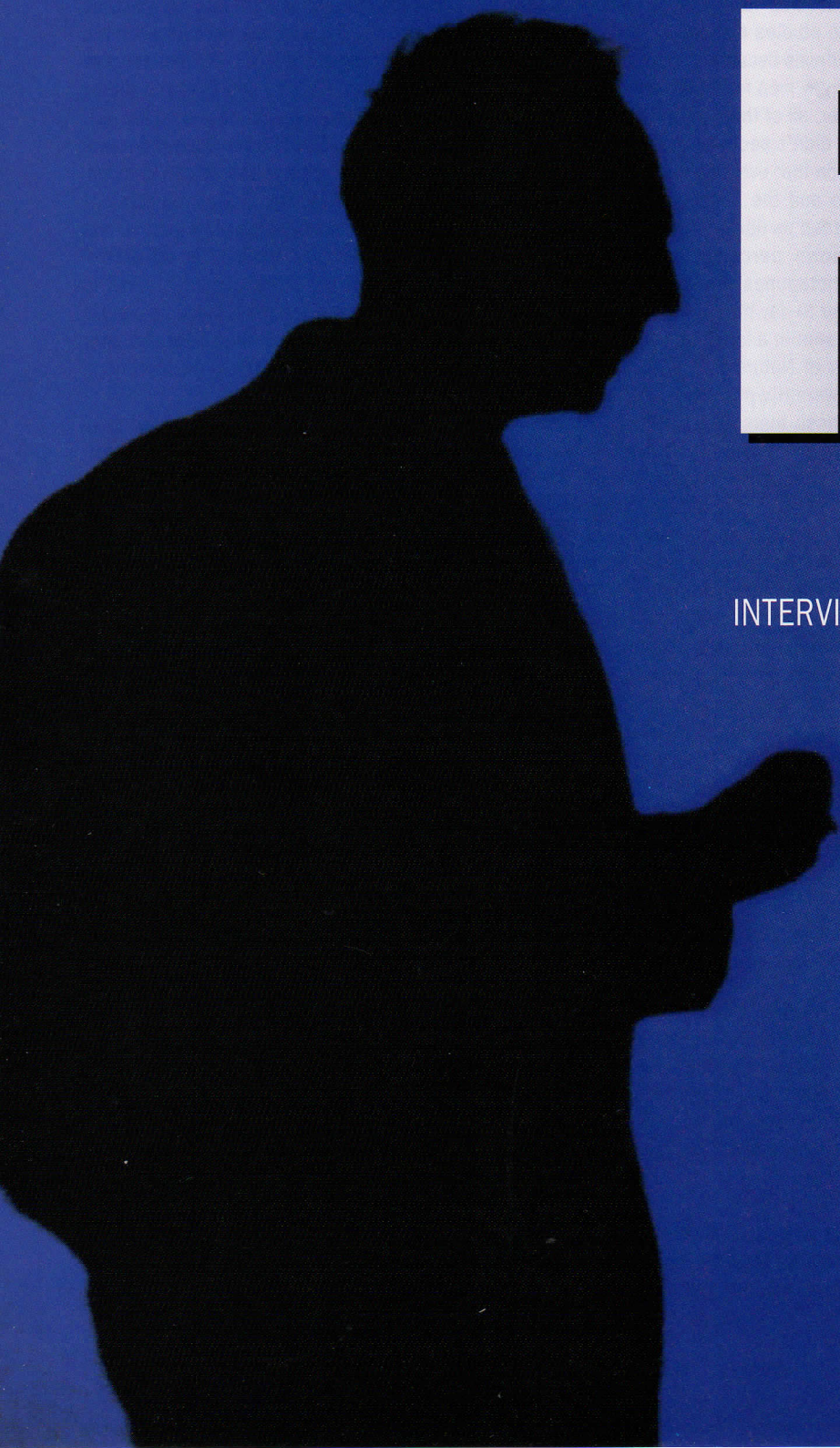
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FAD

INTERVIEW BY GERARD RAYMOND

I first met Derek Jarman at the beginning of 1992 when he was in New York promoting his film *Edward II*. Although the iconoclastic filmmaker had been living with AIDS for a while by then, he was traveling around the world and enjoying being the center of attraction at the numerous festivals and events celebrating his work. Now nearly two years later in December 1993, I am not sure what to expect as I climb the stairs to his London flat overlooking Charing Cross Road. He had recently recovered from the latest in a series of near-fatal bouts of illness, and his agents warned me that he may not be well enough for an interview.

GET COBBLER

Keith Collins, Jarman's lover, lets me in and motions me to sit down. I'm taken aback at how frail Jarman is. He seems to disappear into the large wing chair placed in the corner of the room. A large coat hangs over one side of the chair, covering his IV drip and related paraphernalia. He seems bothered by an itch on his arms, but he appears calm, even placid. There is no conversation for a while because the popular series *EastEnders* is on television. Jarman does not face the small television set, which is placed on the floor; he stares sightlessly across the room, but he is listening to the dialogue and occasionally makes comments about the characters.

Collins, who played the strikingly handsome murderer Lightborn in *Edward II*, is sitting on the floor near Jarman, engrossed in the sitcom. Occasionally he chides Jarman for not remembering a plot twist or reminds him of one of the character's dark secrets. "Close your mouth, Derek, or else people will think you are a lunatic," says Collins, giving Jarman an affectionate little squeeze to his ankle. I am immediately touched by the easy-going and loving intimacy between these two men.

The program is over, and our interview can begin. Today is one of Jarman's better days. His voice is a hoarse whisper, exacerbated by a recent throat infection, but once he begins speaking, he seems to become himself again. In contrast to the confrontational activist oft quoted in the press or, indeed, the provocative moviemaker, this is the generous and gentle Jarman that his friends all know and love. Collins attends to household chores but joins in the conversation from time to time.

YOU ARE PROBABLY TIRED OF TALKING ABOUT THE SAME THINGS.

DJ: Yes, I am. Anything but questions about films!

I'D LIKE TO TALK ABOUT YOU AND KEITH, ACTUALLY.

KC: Oh no. Sorry. [slight pause] Well what do you want to know?

FADE TO BLUE

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN TOGETHER?

KC: Eight years.

DJ: Go on, Keith, let him ask a few questions.

THE TWO OF YOU HAVE A REMARKABLE RELATIONSHIP AND YOU HAVE OBVIOUSLY BEEN THROUGH A LOT.

KC: Derek's been through a lot more than I have.

DJ: Keith's been very, very good dealing with it. I mean, it's amazing. I think one of the problems with all of this, this HIV, is that you forget that the careers also need space. It is very, very hard work. We have days when it just doesn't ever seem to stop, whether it is being injected or having to set up a new drip, or you know, a million and one details. They don't take long to do but of course they take up the day. So the two of us are sort of trapped into this illness. It is not much fun. So every now and again we get a bit frayed at the edges, but only rarely. On the whole we don't argue a lot or have any problems like that. We get on very well. If I say, "Can you get me something?" he doesn't say, "Get it yourself," he just goes off and does it. It is fabulous to have somebody around like that. I wonder what happens to people who don't. I don't know how I would get through the days. I would, I suppose, but it would be very much harder. At least with two of us, we can have a few laughs. I think we are doing all right so far.

HOW DID YOU FIRST MEET?

DJ: In a cinema. He's a cinema buff. I went to Newcastle for a film festival there. He came down later and threw his life completely in with mine. I hope it has been fruitful for him. Well he has been to a few places and seen a few people, and I think on the whole it has worked itself out.

HOW DID DISCOVERING YOU WERE HIV-POSITIVE AFFECT YOUR RELATIONSHIP?

DJ: That happened before I met Keith. I told him about it the moment we met. It seemed the best thing to do. I didn't want him to find out later and say, "Why didn't you tell me?" I had already adapted to the whole thing.

AND DIDN'T YOU MAKE IT PUBLIC FROM THE START?

DJ: Yes, because I couldn't see any point in pretending it wasn't happening. Everyone was being so weird about it, "Better be careful, you'd better not tell people. They are going to be awful to you." I just thought, *This is ridiculous*. If they are horrible, let them be horrible. Bugger them! So I made it very public from the very beginning. At the time, of course, no one had [gone public about being HIV-positive].

KC: Derek, I am going to take your sputum to the hospital now.

DJ: That's very nice of you. [*Collins puts a new bottle in Jarman's drip and leaves, telling me to let myself out when the interview is done.*] You see, he is wonderful. He does all of that. It is an amazing commitment.

HIS LIFE IS INEXTRICABLY TIED UP WITH YOURS NOW, ISN'T IT?

DJ: Absolutely tied up. He never argues or anything. Sometimes it's a few grumpy words at two in the morning, but he seems very

happy. I ask him quite regularly, "Are you all right, are you happy coping with all this?" And he says, "Yes, I love doing it for you." It's extraordinary. I don't know what you'd call it, but it's like someone completely sacrificing his life for another person to make certain that he is all right.

I GUESS YOU COULD CALL THAT LOVE.

DJ: It is actually true love. I'm very lucky. I don't know anyone else who has this sort of love affair. I know people who have lived with people, but I mean to have this sort of commitment as well. It is very lucky to find one's true love, which is what I did.

THERE IS A LINE IN YOUR MOVIE BLUE: LOVE IS LIFE THAT LASTS FOREVER.

DJ: I feel our love affair will go on even when I am dead somehow. It will be going on in his mind still. I have said to him on several occasions, "You should not be wedded to my past. I would like you to find someone else and do whatever you want to do." But he might very well just...I don't know. You can't tell, can you?

AS THINGS STAND, I UNDERSTAND YOU ARE HOPING TO GO TO NEW YORK FOR THE OPENING OF BLUE?

DJ: Oh, I want to, but I don't know whether it is going to happen. And we may be doing this other film.

IS THIS A NEW FILM?

DJ: It's based on a novel called *Narrow Rooms* by James Purdy. It is awfully unacceptable, which I think is great. The characters are not particularly attractive—all sorts of gay boys murdering each other and generally being horrid. But it is rather good, a bit like *Wuthering Heights*. If we get the money in the next few weeks, then we'll make it. But they are going to have to hurry up because my health is deteriorating so rapidly. I am going to work with my friend Ken Butler, who has always been my assistant. He's going to do the hard work, and I am just going to sit in the wheelchair and every now and again say something. I am not going to rush off at seven in the morning. I told everyone I will get in about 10:30.

SO IT HAS BEEN SCRIPTED ALREADY.

DJ: Yes, it should have been made by now, but Channel 4 went and turned it down. They put money into it and then they suddenly said they were not having Keith in it. I said that I couldn't possibly just turn round to him after three years of us working on it together and tell him he can't be in it. I thought it was very impolite, so we didn't make it.

WHY DO YOU WANT TO FILM THIS STORY?

DJ: I don't really know, Keith was really keen. He kept going on about it, saying it would make a great film. We got talking about it and suddenly he said, "I'll write a script for it," and he did. Very well done actually. It happened just like that.

I think it will upset a lot of straight-down-the-line gay people because they are not portrayed in a particularly nice way. But why should they be? I think this business of gay filmmaking is past its zenith. It was good for a while, but quite honestly, at this stage, I think it can be a ball and chain round people's necks. It is just a ridiculous classification. I keep on saying that I am not making gay films anymore. It is so much more liberating to just be making films and not to put them into some sort of category. If it happens to be gay, it happens to be gay. It is something that has crept up on me in the last years. It is terribly boring when everywhere you go they talk about you as a gay filmmaker, you become a terrible cliché. This is not a

horrible moment of denial, I just think that we need to be let off the hook sometimes.

ARE YOU STILL PAINTING?

DJ: Well, yes. We sorted out some money for some canvases today, so we should start next week sometime.

BUT SOMEONE ELSE DOES IT FOR YOU PHYSICALLY?

DJ: Yes, my friend Carl, who is lovely, he does it. He is not a painter or anything, he's just a very nice normal boy, charming. I sit up and say, "Right, paint that canvas red, Carl," and he does. And I say, "Get the purple," and then I come over and draw the place where it is to go, and he will put it on. So we work like this, together.

CAN YOU SEE THE FINISHED WORK?

HOW IS YOUR SIGHT AT THE MOMENT?

DJ: I can get an idea of what we have done. My sight is pretty ropy. I can't recognize people. I can't see you. I can see your shape, but I can't see any details. So it makes things a bit difficult. I bump into people in the streets, they say hello and I don't know who they are.

But [with the paintings] basically I know what I'm doing. It would help to see just for a second. But you usually have a very good idea if it is something you have done a lot. I have painted all my life, so I know what is happening. It is quite a boost actually because I always say I won't go completely blind if I paint.

IT'S INTERESTING YOU SAY THAT.

MAY I ASK WHAT IT IS THAT KEEPS YOU GOING?

DJ: Well, it is so boring doing nothing. I am so fortunate to be able to do all these things. It would be silly to fret away. So I feel I should carry on, for myself, you know. I am not working unduly hard. I am just pottering along really.

DOES IT MAKE YOU ANGRY THAT YOUR MIND IS STILL BRIGHT AND YOU HAVE SO MANY THINGS IN YOUR HEAD, BUT YOUR BODY IS NOT UP TO IT?

DJ: I'll never be angry about the illness. I don't want to get up in the morning feeling fury. When I wake up sometimes I think, *Gosh, it would be lovely just to be able to see straight, to feel all right*, but that is not going to happen so one sort of comes to terms with it. I don't regret anything really. I have had a wonderful life. I have met marvelous people. The HIV thing is just an annoying interlude.

AND YOU ARE DOING WHATEVER YOU CAN TO FIGHT THE ILLNESS?

DJ: I am not actually fighting the illness, I just fight for the space to paint. That's all right. Certainly at some point I am just going to give up, because obviously it is getting more and more difficult as the weeks go by. I don't know how quickly that will happen. But if it's going to be at the rate it has been going on, I should be able to work til next April, just. Keith has ordered a wheelchair, which will help a lot because it is hard work getting from A to B.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR DOCTORS?

DJ: Doctors and nurses have been absolutely brilliant. I get on very well with them, they are treating me fantastically. I am certain I couldn't be treated better anywhere else in the world. You just sit there and they

are really kind. They always have time for you—that's amazing—I don't know how they find it. My doctor, Peter Keller, is saintly, I think that is the best way of describing him—like a very quiet Irish saint.

YOU SAID YOU FEEL IT IS A DAY-TO-DAY THING FOR YOU NOW.

DJ: Yes, you take the day as it comes really. I don't know. I mean, I'm still here, but I don't think I'll survive another hospitalization. I think whatever comes lurking around the corner gets me. So I don't expect to survive very long, but that doesn't really bother me at all. One hopes one doesn't have to go through years and years of illness, that one will just suddenly be very ill and that's it. That's what I would like to happen. The doctors are very honest with me. The last time I went in [to hospital] they said, "You are not going to get out." I got out but I am pleased that they were prepared to say that, especially because I have made the very same effort to be as open about what was happening to me as possible.

I'm not keen just to be kept alive for the sake of being kept alive. I have had a conversation with the doctors, if they think it is worthwhile to fight something, let's do it. I think [right now] it is just about on the cusp of being worthwhile. I am still quite happy.

About one and a half months after this interview, Derek Jarman asked to be taken off his medication; he died two weeks later at St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London on February 19, 1994. He was 52 years old. ●

