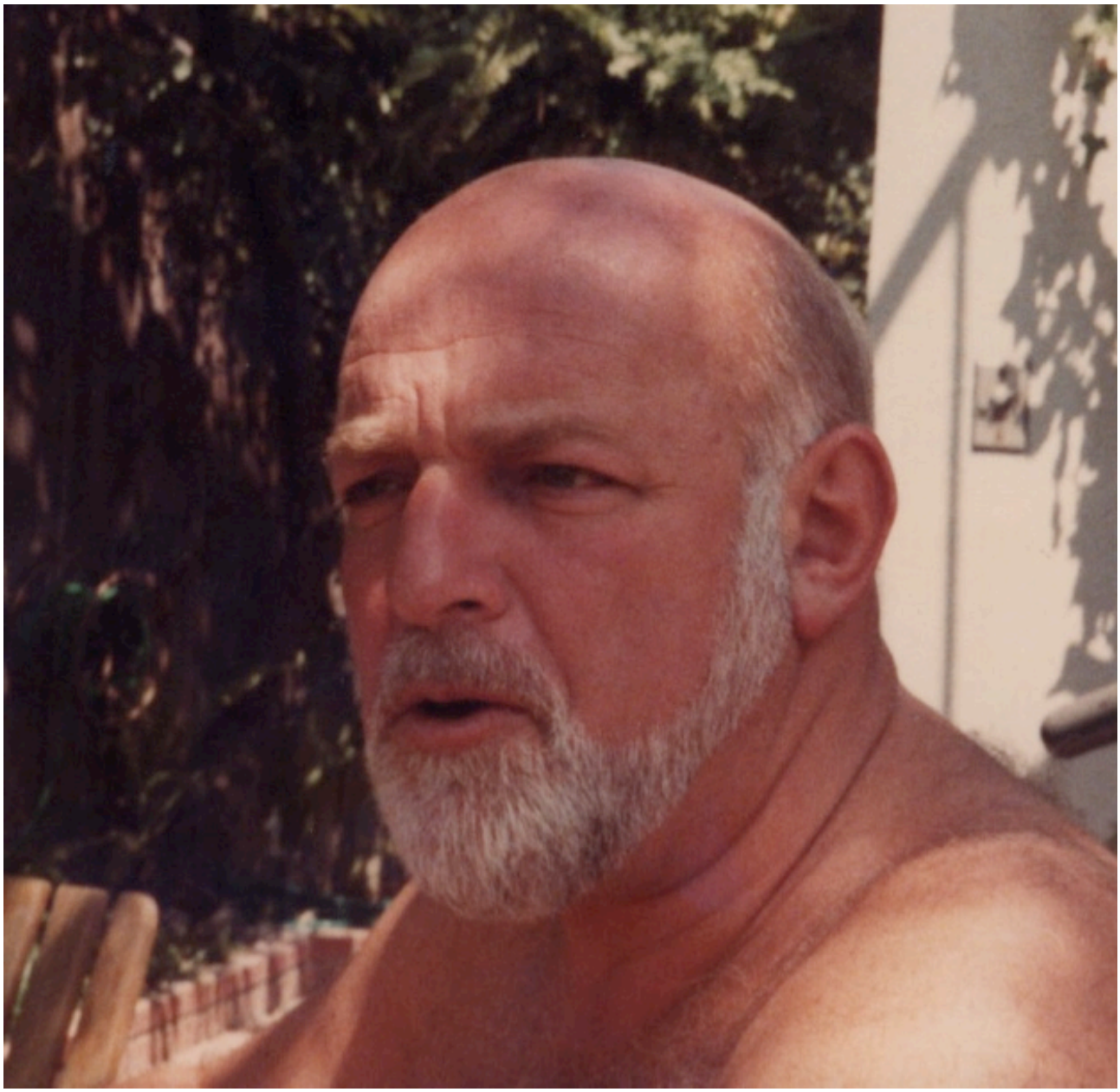
JOHN R SCHLESINGER 1926 - 2003



From Jeremy's 2006 Memoir: 'No Make Up - Straight Tales from a Queer Life'

When I first met Derek, he was spending many nights with the celebrated film director John Schlesinger at his house in Victoria Road, Kensington. John was larger than life. He was quite short, overweight,

thickset and balding with an attractive face and personality and naturally, as a distinguished film director, he had many glamorous connections. He was a close friend of Alan Bates and Michael York and a host of other stars. He had won an Oscar for his greatest success, Midnight Cowboy, starring Dustin Hoffman and John Voight. In 1977, he was at the height of his career.

To start with, I was somewhat jealous of John and he of me. He had the irritating habit of mimicking my public-school accent, which annoyed me, particularly as he himself had been educated at a public school and had a mellifluous, theatrically trained, voice. Derek was having a sexual relationship with John despite John having a longstanding boyfriend, an American called Michael Childers. He was seldom around, they had been lovers for many years but Michael preferred their Hollywood house and spent most of his time living there. Michael's photographic work was mostly in America. They had an open relationship that satisfied their prodigious sexual appetites.

Derek moved out of his own flat to live with me almost as soon as our relationship started. We continued to see a great deal of John and often had dinner together. John gave glamorous parties at Victoria Road to which we were invited. We met Joan Collins, Zoë Wanamaker, Bill Devane, Julie Christie, Twiggy and a host of others. Twiggy was always a favourite; she was wonderfully natural and unaffected quite unlike so many other self-important stars. In real life, she was just like her slightly scatty and childlike film persona. I found most film stars to be mainly or only interested in talking about themselves and their own little world.

John made us laugh. He had a fund of stories and anecdotes and an impish, scatological sense of humour. He referred to Elizabeth Schwartzkopf as "Betty Blackhead" and Herbert von Karajan as "That old Nazi". He was full of scurrilous tales of the sexual exploits of the stars, "She was a good friend of Mrs Rimmer", he would say about a certain well-known male actor, always with a twinkle in his eye.

He was not particularly fond of Dirk Bogarde and he told us the reason why. On Dirk's return from his long exile in France, John decided to give a dinner party for him to re-introduce him to many old friends. On arrival, Dirk took one look at the opulent surroundings at Victoria Road and exclaimed, "Why John, such a magnificent house, and I thought all your films had been flops".

John himself could be cutting and even cruel, especially towards those who thwarted him in the film world. His final film, The Next Best Thing, starred Rupert Everett and Madonna; he had hardly a good word to say about this demanding diva. According to John, she was high-handed and dictatorial and in effect usurped directorial control from him, especially with regard to the editing. The studio bosses would always defer to her wishes rather than his; she had more clout at the box office. John held her responsible for ruining the film and ultimately its commercial potential.

John loved opera and was called upon to direct at La Scala and Covent Garden. Classical music and especially opera was always playing in his house. John had a great musical ear and talent. Some of his finest work, into which he put the most love and concentration, was for the operatic stage. Music always figured largely in his movies and was always carefully and appropriately selected. Music expressed the passion in his life. He was aggressive and forceful in all his artistic endeavours, always determined to see his precise vision realised.

Numerous boyfriends came and went. They were always gorgeous and sexy, "Americans are star fuckers, my dear, unfortunately the Brits are not", he would explain. He adored the adulation of Hollywood but was keenly aware of the capricious nature of the place - "You're hot one minute but after a failure the telephone goes dead. You're only as interesting as your last success". He truly loved England and his English friends with whom he could have a giggle and who stood by him through triumphs and failures. We

shared the view that Americans are often fickle in their friendships and only a very few can ever be close friends in the way other Englishmen become. We don't share the same sense of humour.

John was a greedy man and partook of all life's pleasures to the full, regardless of the health implications. He was driven in his work and found it hard to relax. He was a perfectionist; his brilliance as a director depended upon his minute attention to detail and his constant striving for perfection in his art. He was often deeply frustrated by producers and the money-men whom he felt did not understand what he was trying to do and were always tailoring a film to a budget and not out to achieve the best result. The studios would ruthlessly drop a film within days of its failure to perform financially. John would often be on the telephone to Hollywood cajoling and haranguing studio executives to try to get them to see things his way. Then he would slam down the receiver and launch into a torrent of invective on the iniquities of Hollywood.

John was generous to a fault. He was rich by many people's standards but was not an accomplished manager of his own resources. He had a long list of dependants that included his old friend, Noel Davies. Noel lived in John's houses in London and as he became increasingly infirm, his needs became more costly; a lift had to be installed because he could not manage the stairs.

Noel was an accomplished casting director and worked on a number of John's films, and also for Warren Beatty on Reds. He was a misogynist and scathing about most women, but he was also entertaining and frequently had us all in stitches with his stories and his theatrical delivery. John loved him as a friend and came to rely on his companionship. Noel was always short of money - I don't believe he ever paid John any rent.

During the filming of Yanks in the late 1970's, John invited us up north to visit the set. It was my first real glimpse of how a film is made on location.

There were hours of tedium. I could never understand the reason for the interminable delays. John was too busy to look after us, so we had to make our own fun. We left the set to explore the wild countryside and enjoyed romantic lunches at tiny village inns. I did get to meet the stars of the film: Richard Gere; Bill Devane; Vanessa Redgrave, and Lisa Eichhorn, John's beautiful new discovery.

John had liberal, even left-wing, political views at odds with my own. However, he believed his friend Vanessa Redgrave was extreme in her views, and even a bit unhinged. He hadn't quite the courage to refuse to support her when she called up to ask for money for one or other of her hare-brained schemes. He put the practicalities of maintaining a good relationship with her before his principles.

John made some truly fine films. Derek and I especially loved Madame Souzatzka starring Shirley Maclaine and we went to see some of the action being filmed. One scene was shot in Pimlico School, right behind where we live. The music he chose for it was both sublime and apposite. The character vignettes, such as Peggy Ashcroft as the owner of the London townhouse full of letting rooms, were moving and funny. Twiggy gave an endearing performance as one of the lodgers.

He also did some outstanding work for television most memorably, An Englishman Abroad starring Alan Bates as the traitor, Guy Burgess. It tells the true story of the marvellously catty Australian actress, Coral Browne, who played herself in the film. While in Moscow on tour she encountered Guy Burgess in her dressing room. He asked her to lunch in his dingy flat. It transpires that he wants her to buy him a new wardrobe of clothes in London, and especially a fresh Old Etonian tie. The dialogue, written by Alan Bennett, contains some of the cleverest and funniest lines imaginable; the film was a critical triumph.

Another television piece was his production of the Stella Gibbon's classic, Cold Comfort Farm, a dark, comic tale centred on a mad farming family, the Starkadders. The elderly female lead was brilliantly played by Sheila Burrell, a friend and, curiously, related both to Derek and to me. She is Derek's mother's first cousin, and she is connected to me through her marriage to my stepfather's brother, David Sim. We only learnt of this curious coincidence after having lived together for some years.

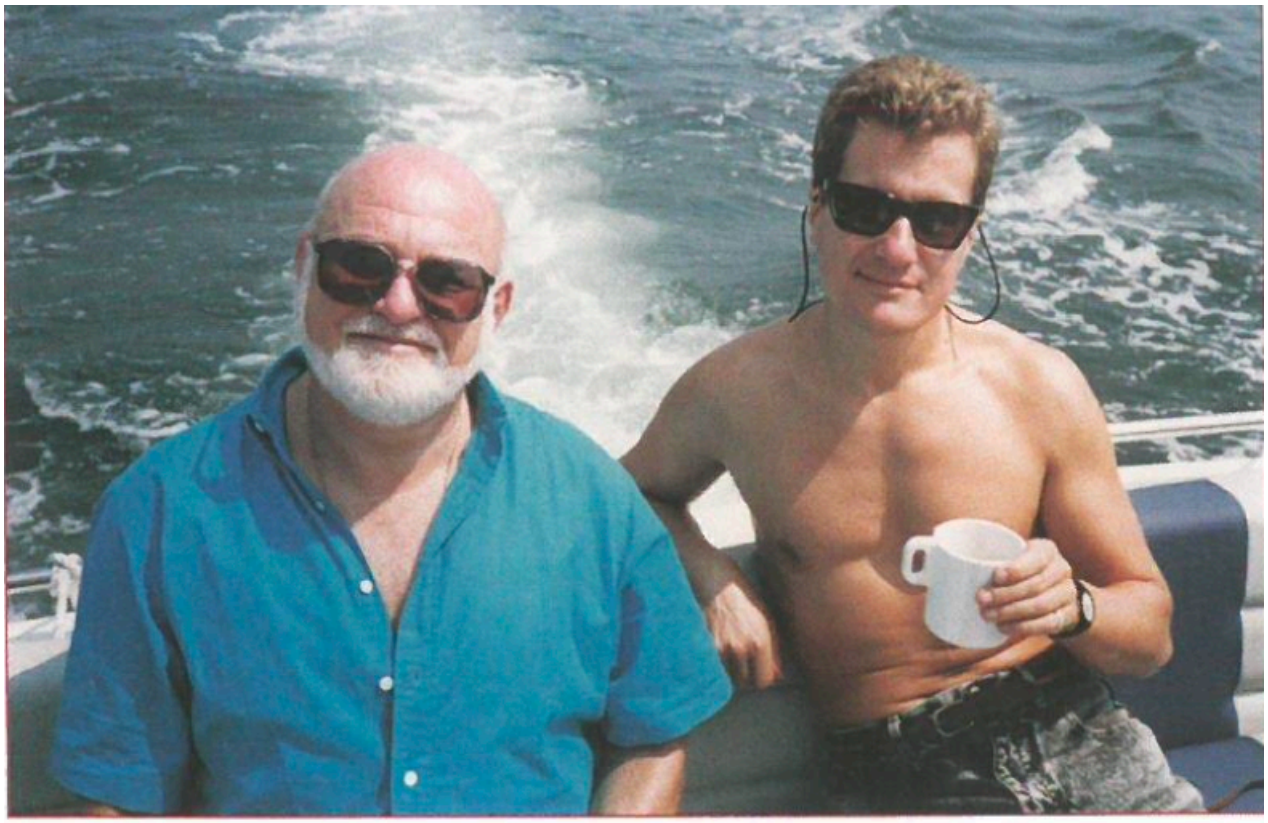
John never disguised his gay life from those who knew him, but he was reticent in his professional and public life, in spite of having made an autobiographical film, Sunday Bloody Sunday about a three-way relationship between a handsome young man (Murray Head) and his simultaneous male and female lovers (Peter Finch and Glenda Jackson). He only came out fully late in life when he co-signed a letter to The Times supporting a knighthood for Ian McKellen, who had starred in Cold Comfort Farm. I wonder how differently he would have led his life and managed his film career had he felt able to be more open about his sexuality sooner. He believed that Hollywood was au fond a deeply homophobic place and that any revelations would damage his career.

In spite of much critical success, John did not have many financial successes - he certainly had his share of failures such as Honky Tonk Freeway. This film had the dubious distinction of being one of Hollywood's ten greatest loss makers of all time. Making comedy was never John's strongpoint, although he had an excellent sense of humour and was a polished raconteur. He loved black humour and being Jewish himself, loved Jewish jokes. His ironic style did not find favour in America. The scene in which a deceased's ashes are snorted like cocaine went down especially badly.

Derek decorated John's house in Victoria Road and latterly his last flat in Old Brompton Road, South Kensington. John loved and appreciated

Derek's prodigious talent as a decorator. This was a great compliment from someone of such taste with a sophisticated and developed visual sense.

In spite of many health scares and warnings from his doctors, John never let up. He could not conceive of life without work. He did not have much internal life and only loved and valued himself in terms of his work and the prestige it brought him. He had one illness after another until sadly dying far too young. His love of life and his great sense of humour are sadly missed by us all – especially, of course, by Michael Childers.



John and the Author

From Derek's 2006 Memoir 'Living and Loving in the age of Aids'

John Schlesinger, the Oscar-winning film director, acclaimed for a string of great movies including Midnight Cowboy, Sunday Bloody Sunday and Marathon Man, comes to Mary Fox Linton Ltd looking for a carpet to replace his Hicks original. We meet, and I handle John's enquiry. The new carpet is fitted and, for me, a dinner invitation follows. John's seduction technique includes a liberal toke of quality grass and beautiful music. Unlike David Hicks, he proves successful.

John, I discover, has for many years been in a loving relationship with Michael Childers. They share a deep love and commitment to each other which will never falter. Michael enjoys success as an acclaimed photographer working mostly in the US. This keeps him, for a good part of the time, away from England. Both allow the other certain licence. Michael signals his approval and John and I will continue to see each other as more than friends.

In addition to his great talents, John has a devilish sense of humour; he gleefully refers to his friends and musical supremos Elizabeth Schwarzkopf and Herbert von Karajan as "Betty Blackhead and the old Nazi". I meet many interesting people at their Hicks-designed house on Victoria Road. Michael York and his wife Pat are regular houseguests. Who can forget the beauty of Michael in the movie Cabaret, when he and Liza Minnelli both admit to having fucked the same man? Probably one of the first positive image of gay men in the history of cinema. Cabaret was based on Christopher Isherwood's 1939 novel Goodbye to Berlin. Christopher and his younger lover, the artist Don Bachardy, are often with us at John and Michael's table.

Am I still the school tart going with older boys? Why am I interested in glamorous older men? Am I looking for a father figure who might have been

partially absent for me? Am I some sort of courtesan looking for a glamorous life on the back of another's success? I suppose I might be. Certainly I am entering a world of people that I might otherwise never have known.

…… In the US, we visit Los Angeles and stay with John Schlesinger and Michael Childers. J has become as fond of them as I. We stay at their house high in the Hollywood Hills. It's everything you'd expect from the combined force of acclaimed film director and successful photographer……..

Immediately post Jeremy's HIV diagnosis:

…… Nature, with its healing power, calls us away from London. It's May and the English countryside, exploding with new life and vibrant greens, enfolds us in its arms. We first stay in the attic room of an old timbered hotel in the seaside town of Rye, East Sussex, where we continue to cry and to hide. Then on to John Schlesinger and his house in Kent. Together, the three of us walk along the towering chalk cliffs at Far Hills near Hastings where the sea breeze caresses us and the sun on our faces warms us. Hope, purpose and courage slowly start to return…….

……..John Schlesinger has decided to move from his Hicks-designed house to a new London address. He asks me to reconfigure the spaces and to redecorate his new home. It's a challenging project. Working or a close friend who has a highly developed aesthetic, an impressive collection of art and who accepts only the highest standards is exactly the sort of project I love……

…….I feel overwhelmed by the demands of DFA. There are so many design drawings to be completed. Why am I accepting new work when so much else demands my attention? A Saudi prince has asked me to design

the interiors of his new palace in Riyadh. The prototype for Rapier Boats is starting to look good, but will it be ready for the Earls Court show? Three magazines want to publish pictures of John Schlesinger's completed apartment. I need to close my design business……

……..John Schlesinger continued to be a friend to us both. It was to John that we first went looking for comfort immediately following J's HIV diagnosis. His loving concern at that time will never be forgotten. Together with Michael Childers, his husband and devoted lover for more than 30 years, they moved to Palm Springs, where, in 2001, John's health took a severe dive. So unlike his former self, he withdrew into himself, stopped talking and chose to see few people. Travel was no longer possible. In July 2003 I was saddened to learn of his death at the age of 77. I regret that we saw little of John during the last two years of his life. I hope that, despite this, he died supported by the knowledge of our love……

…….The glorious music of Johann Sebastian Bach will, I suspect, keep his memory alive for as long as our human species exists. To a lesser extent, the same may apply to friends John Schlesinger, through the films he made, and Del Kolve, who has written so extensively and importantly about the medieval world. For most of us, like the sands of time, all memory of us will quickly be extinguished……