

## Meeting Derek

An uncompromising artist faces his future.

The Independent, August 1993

Waiting for the lift by his fourth-floor flat, Derek Jarman says he feels like an 80-year-old man, not only old, but lonely, missing all his friends.

Walking along Charing Cross Road towards Chinatown he holds a thin brown stick, too short for his needs. On this bright summer Sunday he wears black slippers, baggy blue trousers, a cardigan and a heavy wool jacket. His polo shirt is pink, his cardigan yellow – loose, lounging clothes that were hell to put on. Occasionally, Keith Collins, 27, his partner of seven years, will tuck in his shirt. As he reaches a crossing he asks Keith to hold his hand.

‘They’re always very kind to me in here,’ he says at the door of Poons, ‘they always say “Hello Derek”.’ And so they do. He orders duck, rice and mineral water. His new haircut means you can see more of his face, ruddy from drugs, dotted with small inflammations. At 51, he is a picture of wrecked beauty. One side of his mouth turns down, as if he’s had a small stroke.

Four days ago he was in hospital, one of several recent visits, this time to fight pneumonia. Three days ago he was with a specialist trying to save the sight in his left eye; at the moment he can’t read. Every morning and evening he is on a drip. He refers to his body as a walking lab, pills slushing against potions in his insides. One of his new eye drugs is called DHPG, which had the following potential side effects: rash, fever, coma, nausea, anorexia, bleeding and 33 others.

Aids has mapped out his life for about a year. He tested HIV positive in December 1986 and he has become increasingly ill as the years have passed. Now his days are measured out in medication, and the virus informs all his artistic endeavours. ‘I do feel I’ve got some puff in me still. At least I haven’t got cancer, because that’s a pretty lethal thing. I don’t know how long I’ve got. Every year I say, “Maybe I’ve got another year”, and it surprises me that I last long enough to say it again. I’m tough physically. I got that from my father.

Jarman distrusts the PC concept of ‘living with Aids’. ‘A lot of these slogans are ludicrous. I wish you *were* living with Aids, but it’s the opposite, only dying, dying with Aids. It’s much better to face the facts. I’m still surviving, but I don’t think I’m going to survive. It would be extraordinary if I did. God only knows what sort of state I’d be in. A sort of ruin. An Aids ruin.’ He laughs and chews his bony duck. He says it again: ‘Ha, an Aids ruin!’

I have come to talk about *Blue*, his new film. It is a remarkable work, even by his standards. For 76 minutes you sit in a cinema waiting for the action, but the only action is a blue screen. Four reels of blue, unchanging blue, altered only when your eyes play tricks, or when dust and scratches invade the print. It’s a great blue, actually, rich and bright, a blue you’d be proud to have on your new car. But still – 76 minutes?

Thank God there’s an inspired soundtrack. This is structured around his illness, around his hospital diary, told in tiny fragments with music and

effects. Nigel Terry, John Quentin, Tilda Swinton and Jarman himself read out grim highlights: finding a vein, night sweats, drug trials. There are also some poems, some dreamy, watery recollections and many meditations on the theme of blue: on the metaphysical, monochromatic work of the French painter Yves Klein, on bluebells in the wood, the cobalt of the sea, blue-eyed boys of yore and the blue funk of fear. It sounds like death on screen, and so it is, but it is also gripping and affirmative, never self-pitying, lots of gallows humour, terrible honesty. And slowly the blue screen works on you, a spell, a canvas for your own vision.

The stewed greens arrive. 'I thought that it would turn out to be an interesting experimental film,' Jarman says, 'but it's bizarre that the film just became a film, rather than an experimental film. It's jolly difficult to make a film about an illness. All those cancer films of the fifties, all rubbish. It will be very interesting to see how the *Sun* copes.'

I suggest that the film feels like an epitaph.

'Oh yes. I think it will be my last. There are no plans to do another one. It's a good end film, so I'm not too worried about that. In fact I've made quite a lot of films now, about eleven or twelve of them, and enough is enough. I don't feel short-changed. I've done everything I can do. I'm not an unfortunate person, thank God, who thinks that if I was given a few more years I would do this and this.'

Though it is easier to see his films in Japan than it is in Britain, Jarman believes he has had a god run artistically. He made some fascinating stuff – *Sebastiane*, *Jubilee*, *The Tempest* – well before Channel 4 became the saviour of low-budget films. His more mature work, *Caravaggio*, *The Last of England*, *Edward II* and *Wittgenstein*, explored issues off-limits for almost all his contemporaries – religion, sin, redemption, philosophy, sex, Britain's national decline. He glorified the art of elevated home movies; some of it was a little high-flown, some of it pretentious, but it was constructed with a painter's eye and much of it was thrilling to watch.

But now he says he's broke. Once he believed that *Blue* would not be his last film, but he has been unable to raise the money to make a film of *Narrow Rooms*, the James Purdey novel. 'This is a bit of a blow, because we've been working on the scripts for about a year. I don't have any income. Suddenly ... I'll just have to paint. We sell just enough to keep me going. Someone came round the hospital last week and said, 'Are you claiming any benefits?' I said no. Like most middle-class people I really didn't think about it. She said I could get disability benefit, this and that. I may be able to get £100 a week, which would come in very useful now.'

On the way back to his flat, Jarman says he would like some sweets, anything but mints. Keith arrives back with fruit-flavour Polos and Opal Fruits, which Jarman consumes addictively for the next hour. It's a tiny, sparse flat, a real artist's lair – white walls, a couple of desks and chairs, a futon, some old dark paintings. He's been here for 15 years. His Prospect Cottage, in the shadow of Dungeness power station, the backdrop of his terrific journal 'Modern Nature' and his film *The Garden*, he sees less and less – too much apparatus to cart, too far from the wards.

Jarman settles in a high-backed armchair that all but swallows him. He asks Keith for his 'Chinese Gunk', his leftover bean curd, and Keith brings it in a Styrofoam cup with some pills and a white liquid. 'Will you do me a great big favour?' Keith asks, like a mother to a four-year-old.

'You want me to take those, don't you?' Jarman asks.

'These ones are especially good,' Keith says, 'especially good after food.'  
He takes them and splutters and wipes his mouth on his sleeve.

'What am I going to do with the time I've got left, eh? That's what goes through my mind now. Please God that I don't have another bout of pneumonia. I've got fed up with that after three bouts. I look at people in hospital and they're very ill, most of them, the people who are unconscious, just lying there ...'

Jarman has become a saintly figure. He has actually been canonized, albeit by the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, a group of men who dress as nuns. He is revered by the gay community, not least for his outspokenness and Aids fundraising (although he lost some friends when he opposed Ian McKellen accepting a knighthood in the wake of Section 28).

'I don't feel saintly. I've always maintained that I wasn't a spokesperson, I was just talking about myself really. I've always felt a responsibility. It would be very hard to pop one's clogs without saying anything about it. I've tried to give people a feeling of what it was like. I try to keep a balance so that I'm a person who is making films, not just someone who is ill.'

Recently Jarman had campaigned against the closure of St Bartholomew's Hospital. Once again, he was really just talking about himself: 'There's a good deal of fun about the place. And I don't think you could get treatment like that anywhere else in the world. It's state of the art, both in treatment and in the freedom you're given. "Derek, we're going to give you this, this and that." But if you were to say, "I honestly don't want these, Mark," he'd say, "It's up to you." How long do you carry on against the inevitable? Do you let it happen? There is that freedom for you to say, "end of treatment".'

There is a line in *Blue*: 'We all contemplated suicide. We hoped for euthanasia.'

'I just wanted to know what my doctor would think,' Jarman says. 'He was very, very noncommittal about it. I said that I really didn't want to end up an absolute wreck, that I'd prefer to be quietly terminated. We discussed it and he didn't really say anything apart from a tacit agreement that it might be a possibility. What's the point of hanging on grimly if it's just a few agonizing weeks? The funny thing is, if you are very unwell you don't register everything, you come and go, half-conscious. I told one of the sisters that it's worse when you get better, when you begin to feel the pain.'

You can gauge some of Jarman's despair from his paintings. Near the door there's a small black and glass assemblage that reads, in his scrawl: 'Dear God, Please send me to Hell, Yours sincerely, Derek Jarman. Dear God, If you insist on reincarnation, please promise me that I will be queer – tho' I heard you don't approve, I'll go down on my knees ...'

His larger, more recent, garish works exploit tabloid scares. These are called *Spread the Plague*, *Blood*, *Sick*, *Panic* and *Morphine*. According to Richard Salmon, his dealer, 'He still has more energy, even when he's got tuberculosis in his stomach, pneumonia in both lungs, measles in his right foot and half blind, than anyone else who happens to be in the room. He'll run to pick up your paper if you drop it. As long as he's not in bed and half-conscious, he's remarkable. He can even make people envious of his illness, people who without the illness do one-tenth of what he does.'

Salmon says his gallery receives a stream of letters from all over the world, from young people who are really in love with the idea of what Derek does and says and makes. 'This doesn't happen with other artists. In the early eighties I worked at the Marlborough Gallery and looked after Henry Moore and Francis Bacon and Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson and somebody might write in once in a blue moon. But with Derek he inspires a whole generation.'

'How often do you see him depressed?'

'The official answer is absolutely never, because he never uses the fact that he is ill or in a lot of pain to advance himself or seek sympathy. But I know him well enough to have occasionally seen him very depressed. I know that he can be terribly saddened by it all. He did say to me once last year, "I just wish somebody would come and put a bullet through the back of my head."

'Personally, I keep on taking more drugs,' Jarman says. 'I take lots. I believe in conventional medicine. I don't believe in those therapies that people go off to Mexico for. I can't see that there's anything there that can help. If there was we'd know about it over here because there's such an urgent necessity. It's for the quacks. And, of course, I'm a target. I get these letters saying, "Dear Mr Jarman, Come along to our clinic in Mexico or Paris". They want me to put my name to their thing, but I won't.'

Jarman says the worst thing about his illness is the uncertainty. 'Suddenly my left eye is going, out of the blue. It makes you laugh in a way. So we'll cure this eye, no doubt. I hope we do, but I'm not that worried, except that it's going to be an absolute bind for Keith to have to look after a blind person. Another bloody nuisance. I have to say I'm very laissez-faire about it. I won't be the first person it's happened to. You try and make certain it doesn't win the day, you know?'

Jarman gets up from his chair and walks to his futon. 'I'll just have a little rest here.' I apologize for tiring him. He says: 'Not at all. Me and Keith wouldn't have had anything to do if you hadn't come round. Bloody things, Sundays.'

### **Derek's Funeral, 19 February 1994**

On the beach at Dungeness, it's those nuns again. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence are saying their 'Hail Saint Derek's and Derek Jarman is 'lying in state' in his wooden Prospect Cottage. In his coffin he wears a golden robe, the robe of Edward II in his film, the robe in which he was canonized by those nuns. His hands hold a plastic frog. On his head, a cap marked 'controversialist'.

In the afternoon, the coffin is driven a few miles to the Norman spire and cool stone of St Nicholas Church in New Romney, Kent. It is a traditional service, a George Herbert psalm and 'Abide With Me', a bit subdued for Derek. The action comes with the speeches. First Nicholas Ward-Jackson, then Norman Rosenthal of the Royal Academy:

Derek ... Instantly after meeting you in 1970, I was able to help you organize an exhibition of your work and that of two of your friends. I felt myself at that time little more than a hanger on, but you enthusiastically gave me the opportunity. To others you gave their first canvas or camera and they became real and good photographers. Students of literature became your scriptwriters, young girls who chanced into your life found parts in your movies – all of us refugees

from institutional constrictions imposed on us by the fake values of the moral majority. Together, and much inspired by you, we found ways to be creative ourselves ...

Then Sarah Graham, who had demonstrated with Jarman for Out-Rage. And Nicholas de Jongh, the theatre critic:

All down the exciting road of his life, as the first and greatest gay English icon, he blazed a trail. And he dared to show in our unkind and unfeeling times what it was and is to be an outcast, reviled and persecuted for a sexuality in which he rejoiced and in which he could see no shred of natural evil ... He lit so many gay candles in a hard world. No one else lit more. None shone more clearly.

We emerge into shards of sunshine. We hang around outside, four hundred or so, a few pop and film people, plenty of media, some in pale blue ribbons to mark his last work. He is buried privately at the church of St Clement, Old Romney, beneath a yew tree.

That morning, Tony Pinching, his principal doctor at Bart's, was giving students the HIV basics in an informal session called an 'academic half-day': this is what we know, this is what we're doing. Lots of questions from the floor and two student papers going around: 'The Pathology of Aids' and 'Epidemiology of Aids'. These students knew much more than their counterparts a decade ago.

At the end of one of the papers there was a paragraph on euthanasia. 'A British Medical Association working group set up to investigate the legalisation of euthanasia, wrote in its report that they rejected the need for legalisation, and felt instead we should be reaffirming the supreme value of the individual, no matter how worthless and hopeless that individual may feel'.

When Bart's was threatened with closure in May 1993, Jarman wrote an eloquent letter to the *Independent*, so eloquent and lucid that it appeared on the front page:

I have been here for two weeks, first in the casualty ward, and now in Colston, which cares mainly for the dying. My 'own' ward, Andrewes, is full; and the construction of the new purpose-built Aids ward has been postponed. Over the road is Rambling Rose, who was sedated out of kindness after two days clucking like a chicken and screaming abuse. I escape to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century court-yard and read in the pavilion to the sound of the fountain, before retiring to the hospital church of Saint Bartholomew, which itself is cool and filled with the peace of time.

Jarman quoted Virginia Bottomley's comment that she was 'not in the heritage business'. He asked, 'Aren't we all in the heritage business? Without our past our future cannot be reflected, the past is our mirror. Every profession has a history, and the medical profession's starts here.' Founded in the eleventh century, Bart's is the world's oldest hospital. It is still not 'one of the new Habitat hospitals; its rooms are high and cool, but the voracious cash-flow snake is out to strangle it'. He closed with the comment that 'Bart's is my second home and my life here is cherished.'

In his office, Tony Pinching says:

'I still owe duty of confidentiality to my patients. But I will say that as a person he was an extraordinary man by any standards. He combined a matter-of-factness about things with an extraordinary vision. He didn't hang about intellectually. He was always several steps ahead; whatever we were talking about, he always had something interesting and different to say. In many ways the way he dealt with his disease publicly was a reflection of this. Things that other people agonized about he just did and moved on.

'Most people are able to make something positive in their lives of HIV and Aids and the insights that it brings. Disease in general does, and Aids does it with a particular brightness. Derek was just doing that, but on a bigger scale. He had at least two different visual problems as part of his illness, and as somebody who is such a visual person, that's really a raw deal. But Derek's approach was always, 'How interesting!' You never exchanged a trivial word with Derek. There was no question that this was a guy of real genius. One sensed that he had maintained the childlike enthusiasm for colour and shape; he retained that sense that it was always fresh and exciting and meaningful and he never took anything for granted. He was a stunning person to look after. He did a great deal for all of us at all sorts of levels. I just hope we were able to do something for him.'