



BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Sebastiane

The mid-1970s were not an auspicious time to launch into feature film production. In 1975 the British film industry was collapsing fast. Cinema admissions had been falling rapidly since the 50s (in 1959 they had totalled 601 million, by 1970 they were down to 193 million and by 1975 to 116 million). The brief heyday of the 60s had gone – and the industry was largely at the mercy of the Americans. The Eady levy system – established in 1947 to assist home-produced films by allocating a proportion of global box-office receipts to British production – was in need of restructuring. Jarman's three feature films were financed from private sources. *Sebastiane* was made in 16mm on a budget of £30,000 brought 'in briefcases from a shipping magnate'.

Though *Sebastiane* represents a break with the poetic and experimental forms of Jarman's smaller-gauge films, it nevertheless carries forward some of their concerns, in particular an interest in the mythological aspect of the subject and a tendency to express emotions through the image rather than through the acting. But *Sebastiane* also represents a move from private to public filmmaking. The gentle camp eroticism and personalised mythology and symbolism of the Super-8s is replaced by an aggressive directness that is both socio-political and institutional.

Probably the most innovative aspect of *Sebastiane*, besides its homoeroticism, is the Latin dialogue. Jack Welch, a Latin scholar from Oxford, translated the script, a first in cinema history. Peter Wollen has commented that the 'high camp' Latin dialogue makes the experience of the film like that of watching an opera with a libretto in a foreign language, thus foregrounding the role of performance and visual composition. For Wollen this feature of the film renders it modernist, although ironically so due to the film's ostensible realism. The strong guttural sounds have little to do with the tones of a Latin mass; in *Sebastiane* Latin is the language of the streets, aggressive, lascivious, well suited to lust and rage.

Sebastiane was shot at Cala Domestica in Sardinia, using a ruined fisherman's house as both the set and the living quarters for the actors and crew. When Joe Dallesandro, the star of the Warhol/ Morrissey films, turned up, Jarman refused to use him despite the pleas of his co-workers, instinctively realising that such a move would 'completely unbalance the cast who are all equally unknown'. At another point there was a walkout on the set when the crew accused him of 'fucking exploitation' and being a 'pornographer' when Adrian (Ken Hicks) could not achieve an erection for a love scene. Even at this point in his career, Jarman was not afraid of being thought politically incorrect or of standing against the conventions of the gay subculture in which he operated in order to achieve the image he wanted.

Jarman was not a novice of feature filmmaking – after all, he had had the experience of working with a 'difficult' director on *The Devils* and *Savage Messiah* and of major ballet and opera productions, but the weight of responsibility for his own film must have been another matter. It was obviously an intense learning experience in which he showed his ability not only to take

on others' ideas but to know when to stick to his own whatever the opposition.

Richard Dyer remarks that *Sebastiane* 'astonishingly and fortuitously' received a commercial release in Britain. The review of Jarman's film in *Gay News* indicates its impact on the gay community:

'Very occasionally there appears a film of such power and authority that one emerges from the cinema feeling somewhat shaken and disorientated ... *Sebastiane* is a very special, and indeed, a quite remarkable film that represents a milestone in the history of gay cinema.'

Nearly 20 years later, Jarman gave his own judgement:

'*Sebastian* [sic] didn't present homosexuality as a problem and this was what made it different from all the British films that had preceded it. It was also homoerotic. The film was historically important; no feature film had ventured here. There had been underground films, *Un chant d'amour* and *Fireworks*, but *Sebastian* [sic] was in a public space.'

As a first film, *Sebastiane* was a resounding success. It was rejected by Cannes but taken up by the Locarno Festival in June 1976 where it was loudly barracked by the audience, some of whom demanded the festival organiser's resignation. But when the film opened at the Gate Cinema in Notting Hill it played to record audiences. It was 'a stunning success' in Italy and Spain, classed as a sex film in America, panned by the French and found difficult by the Germans.

The film has been unjustly criticised for its so-called controversial expression of the historical episode, especially since its imagery is very much at one with the traditional representation of the Sebastian story in paintings. Jarman mimics the *pietà*, while the execution and bathhouse scenes are handled very much in the style of classical art. By and large, though, the film lacks a rich context for its narrative. Jarman's use of the theatrical and the *tableau vivant* is limited to the first scene of the orgy, which in its campness makes a larger historical point about the Roman period of Diocletian but which carries no narrative weight. Campness and a postmodern-like bricolage were to become the methods by which Jarman made his political points. But in *Sebastiane* he is reduced to the narrow canvas and simple actions of a plot centred on the scapegoating of his self-destructive hero.

Michael O'Pray, *Derek Jarman: Dreams of England* (BFI, 1996)

SEBASTIANE

Directors: Paul Humfress, Derek Jarman
©/Production Company: Discdac
Producers: James Whaley, Howard Malin
Location Executives: Luciana Martinez, Jane Fields
Assistant Director: Guy Ford
Screenplay: Derek Jarman, James Whaley *
Director of Photography: Peter Middleton
Assistant Cameraman: Bob McShane
Stills Photographer: Gerald Incandela
Editor: Paul Humfress
Assistant Editors: Ian Murdoch, Colin Gittins
Production Designer: Derek Jarman *
Illustrations: Christopher Hobbs
Props: Daniel Egan
Title Design: Barney Wan, José Aguon
Music: Brian Eno
Dance Sequence Music: Andrew Wilson
Dance Choreographed and Performed by: Lindsay Kemp and Troupe
Sound Recordist: John Hayes
Dubbing Mixer: Mike Billing
Sound Assistant: Hugh Smith
Special thanks to: Ferdinando Scarfiotti, Louise Walker, Ian Kierney, Andrew Logan
Latin Translation: Jack Welch

Cast

Leonardo Treviglio (*Sebastian*)
Barney James (*Severus*)
Neil Kennedy (*Max*)
Richard Warwick (*Justin*)
Donald Dunham (*Claudius*)
Ken Hicks (*Adrian*)
Janusz Romanov (*Antony*)
Stefano Massari (*Marius*)
Daevid Finbar (*Julian*)
Gerald Incandela (*leopard boy*)
Robert Medley (*Emperor Diocletian*)
Lindsay Kemp and Troupe
(*dancers in Diocletian's court*)
Peter Hinwood, Jordan, Christopher Hobbs, Oula, Philip Fayer,
Luciana Martinez, Nicholas De Jongh, Norman Rosenthal, James Malin,
Peter Logan, Michael Davis, Eric Roberts, Graham Cracker
(*guests/courtiers in Diocletian's court*)

UK 1976©
86 mins

* Uncredited

The screening on Wed 27 Apr will be introduced
by BFI curator Simon McCallum

BIG SCREEN CLASSICS

Léon Morin, prêtre (Léon Morin, Priest)

Mon 28 Mar 17:50; Thu 7 Apr 20:40; Sun 24 Apr 12:00

Lourdes

Tue 29 Mar 20:50; Thu 7 Apr 18:10; Wed 20 Apr 20:50

Ordet (The Word)

Wed 30 Mar 17:45 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large);
Sun 10 Apr 15:30; Fri 15 Apr 18:10; Sat 23 Apr 11:50

Black Narcissus

Thu 31 Mar 21:00; Tue 12 Apr 20:45; Tue 19 Apr 18:10; Sat 30 Apr 15:00

Babette's Feast (Babettes Gaestebud)

Fri 1 Apr 18:10; Sun 10 Apr 12:10; Sat 16 Apr 12:20; Tue 26 Apr 20:50

Aguirre, Wrath of God (Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes)

Sat 2 Apr 20:40; Fri 8 Apr 18:15; Tue 19 Apr 20:50; Mon 25 Apr 18:10

The Seventh Seal (Det Sjunde Inseplet)

Sun 3 Apr 15:20; Mon 18 Apr 15:20; Fri 22 Apr 20:50

The Miracle Woman

Mon 4 Apr 18:20; Fri 15 Apr 20:50; Thu 28 Apr 18:10; Fri 29 Apr 18:10

Stalker

Tue 5 Apr 20:00; Sat 9 Apr 17:30; Thu 21 Apr 20:00; Sat 23 Apr 20:00

My Night with Maud (Ma Nuit chez Maud)

Wed 6 Apr 18:10 (+ intro by Geoff Andrew, Programmer-at-Large);
Thu 14 Apr 20:30; Fri 22 Apr 17:50; Mon 25 Apr 20:45

Une Femme douce (A Gentle Creature)

Wed 6 Apr 21:00; Wed 13 Apr 18:20 (+ intro by independent filmmaker
and critic Alex Barrett); Mon 18 Apr 13:10

The New World

Sun 10 Apr 17:30; Sat 30 Apr 19:50

The Gospel According to Matthew (Il vangelo secondo Matteo)

Mon 11 Apr 18:00; Sun 17 Apr 14:40

The Last Temptation of Christ

Fri 15 Apr 14:15; Sun 24 Apr 17:40

Sebastiane

Sat 16 Apr 14:50; Tue 19 Apr 20:30; Wed 27 Apr 17:45 (+ intro by
BFI curator Simon McCallum)

I Confess

Sun 17 Apr 12:00; Wed 20 Apr 18:00 (+ intro tbc)

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