

Actor Dirk Bogarde dead at 78

David Walsh
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British film actor Dirk Bogarde died of a heart attack in London Saturday at the age of 78. He had suffered a serious stroke, which disabled him, a year before. Anyone concerned with art in film will mourn his passing.

The future actor was born Derek Niven van den Bogaerde. His father, of Belgian origin, was art editor of the *Times* of London; his mother had been an actress. Bogarde grew up in a milieu of artists, journalists and actors.

For a brief time Bogarde attended art school, where he was taught by Henry Moore, among others. He first found work in the theater in 1939, but was called up by the army the same year. The world war had a significant impact on him. He was involved in the Normandy invasion and visited the Belsen concentration camp shortly after its liberation. "At twenty-four, the age I was then," he wrote in one of the volumes of his autobiography, "deep shock stays registered forever. An internal tattooing which is removable only by surgery, it cannot be conveniently sponged away by time."

Bogarde's first leading role in a film came in 1948. With the help of his talent and good looks, the actor became something of a matinee idol. In the mid-1950s he was Britain's number one box office draw, starring in the comic "Doctor in the House" series. Bogarde also spent an unhappy period in Hollywood, where he starred as Franz Liszt in *Song Without End* (1960). (He later satirized life in Hollywood in his novel, *West of Sunset*.)

Bogarde, ironically considered "the British Rock Hudson" at the time, made a remarkable decision in the early 1960s, one which not very many film stars make: to abandon a successful and lucrative career in the commercial cinema and devote himself to more complex works. The film that signaled a significant shift in Bogarde's work was Basil Dearden's *Victim*

(1961), the first British film to deal with the problems of gay men in public life. He alienated some of his erstwhile admirers as a result of his performance.

Joseph Losey's *The Servant* (1963), based on the script by Harold Pinter, represented a turning point in Bogarde's artistic career. The actor played a vengeful, malevolent servant to James Fox's bewildered young aristocrat. No one who has seen the film can forget the disturbing pleasure Bogarde takes in cruelly destroying his master.

Bogarde went on to make several more films with American expatriate and blacklist victim Losey, *King and Country* (1964), *Modesty Blaise* (1966) and *Accident* (1967). He also starred with Julie Christie in *Darling* (1965) for John Schlesinger.

By this time Bogarde was perhaps Britain's most serious international film performer. He had the opportunity to work with the great Italian director, Luchino Visconti, on two films. *The Damned* (1969) is a remarkable study of a family of German industrialists, its psychic disintegration and embrace of Nazism. Bogarde was brilliant as Gustav von Aschenbach, the aging, dying composer in love with a young boy and with beauty itself, in Visconti's extraordinary adaptation of Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*.

In his autobiography, Bogarde recounts the story, told him by Visconti, of the first screening of *Death in Venice* for "the American Money," i.e., a room full of studio executives. "[W]hen the lights went up in the Los Angeles projection room," Bogarde writes, "there was not a sound, and no one moved. Visconti said that this encouraged him enormously: obviously they had been caught up in the great emotional finale of the film.

"Not at all. Apparently they were stunned into horrified silence.

"No one spoke. Some cleared their throats uneasily, one lit a cigar. A group of slumped nylon-suited men stared dully at the blank screen.

"Feeling perhaps that someone ought to say something, anything, a nervous man in glasses, got to his feet.

"Well: I think the music is great. Just great. It's a terrific theme. Terrific! Who was it did your score, Signore Visconti?"

"Grateful that anyone had shown the remotest interest in his film, Visconti said that the music had been written by Gustav Mahler.

"Just great!" said the nervous man. 'I think we should sign him.'"

In 1973, Bogarde returned to the theme of German fascism in *The Night Porter*, directed by Liliana Cavani, playing an ex-SS officer who encounters the daughter of an Austrian Socialist. He co-starred with John Gielgud in Alain Resnais' *Providence*, based on a script by David Mercer, in 1976.

Bogarde had moved to Provence in southern France in 1968 with his manager and long-time companion, Anthony Forwood. He worked less and less in films, describing the majority of the scripts he was offered as "crap," and began to write. He would eventually write seven autobiographical works and seven novels. Bogarde wrote wonderfully about his own life.

In 1977 he was lured back into filmmaking by the prospect of working on German director Rainer Werner Fassbinder's version of Vladimir Nabokov's *Despair*, scripted by Tom Stoppard. This proved a happy choice. Bogarde did excellent work for Fassbinder as a German businessman in the 1930s who chooses to go mad in the face of an impossible social and personal situation.

Bogarde wrote about the experience: "Rainer's work was extraordinarily similar to that of Visconti's; despite their age difference, they both behaved, on set, in much the same manner. Both had an incredible knowledge of the camera: the first essential. Both knew how it could be made to function; they had the same feeling for movement on the screen, of the all-important (and often-neglected) 'pacing' of a film, from start to finish, of composition, of texture, and probably most of all they shared that strange ability to explore and probe into the very depths of the character which one had offered them."

After *Despair*, the actor made only four subsequent appearances on screen, two of them in television productions. *Daddy Nostalgia* (1990), directed by Bertrand Tavernier, was his last feature film. He moved

back to London in the 1980s when Forwood's cancer required hospital care; the latter died in 1988.

Toward the end of *An Orderly Man* (1983), his third autobiographical work, Bogarde has this to say: "No longer do the great Jewish dynasties hold power: the people who were, when all is said and done, the Picture People. Now the cinema is controlled by vast firms like Xerox, Gulf & Western, and many others who deal in anything from sanitary-ware to property development. These huge conglomerates, faceless, soulless, are concerned only with making a profit; never a work of art ...

"It is pointless to be 'superb' in a commercial failure; and most of the films which I had deliberately chosen to make in the last few years were, by and large, just that. Or so I am always informed by the businessmen. The critics may have liked them extravagantly, but the distributors shy away from what they term 'A Critic's Film', for it often means that the public will stay away. Which, in the mass, they do: and if you don't make money at the box-office you are not asked back to play again.

"But I'd had a very good innings. Better than most. So what the hell?"

What one remembers, above all, about Bogarde was the sensitivity and precision of his expressions and gestures, the obvious high intelligence of his choices, his relentless artistic commitment. I don't believe it would be an exaggeration to say that one could read something about the tortured character of the middle and late twentieth century in Bogarde's face and body.



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