

Independent researcher Sham Sandhu interviewed some of the people featured in the “Pink Portrait” collection.

The views and opinions expressed here are those of the individual participating in the interview and do not necessarily reflect the views of the UK Film Council.

SIR IAN McKELLEN – 26th August 2009

SS: Coming out as an actor in 1988. Why you chose to do that and what effect it had on your career?

IM: I had never really been totally closeted in that there wasn't anybody in my business that didn't know I was gay, as I didn't hide it. I didn't talk to the media about it. That's an added bit of the coming out journey, if you're in public life, that you have to go through. And the occasion for coming out with Section 28 was a law to inhibit schools from talking about homosexuality. As far as I know it had no deterrent effect on my career at all, and in fact the first job I took after coming out was to play John Profumo in the film of (sic) Scandal ... On the grounds that if I was openly gay it didn't mean I couldn't play characters whose most remarkable feature was that they were heterosexual. And pretty well, soon after, my film career took off. But people would say you were playing wizards and men of magic and not gay characters.

SS: But not in Gods and Monsters?

IM: Yes, Gods and Monsters was a gay character wasn't it? They would say I wasn't playing romantic leads. But I have done since coming out. I have played a whole range of characters. It hasn't made a difference to me at all. Before that, when I was marginally closeted, the only example I know of a bad effect of me being gay was when Harold Pinter wanted me to be in the film of Betrayal and Sam Spiegel was the producer. I went to meet with Pinter and that was all going well, and that was all going very well, until I don't know, it came out that I was gay and I was shown the door pretty soon after that. Pinter confirmed later that I had lost the job because I was gay.

SS: Is it more of a Hollywood problem then? 'Cos it's a bit like Premiership footballers isn't it. On the one hand we can name actors and actresses who are out. I can name seven box office actors who are gay. But there have to be more. If I was a young actor going through drama school now ...

IM: It's not the same as football at all. I don't think there's any pressure from football managers to say don't come out. But there is a lot of pressure from managers in Hollywood.

SS: And commercial sponsorship.

IM: Yes, I suppose there's that connection. And umm the process as far as I can see in the culture like Hollywood, where there are openly gay producers, studio heads, managers, agents, designers, writers, masseurs, make up artists ... why alone the actors should be discouraged from coming out is I think because they fear the backlash from the bible belt. They don't want an awkward squad actor who's going to

stress his homosexuality and risk his programme or station being picketed by anti gay people.

SS: You don't feel it's the same here?

IM: There aren't those pressures here. As far as I know. I'm very sorry for people who can't come out. But the pressures on them not to come out these days in our business are ... there is no pressure from the business not to come out. Young actors start their careers by being open and honest about being gay. The pressures are more likely to come from personal reasons; they don't want their family to know. Something like that.

SS: Apart from the Harold Pinter experience there haven't been experiences in your career, you could...?

IM: I'm sure there must have been many conversations about 'we can't have him because he's gay' but I don't hear about them.

SS: What advice would you give young actors who are struggling with this perhaps for the very reasons you are saying, maybe it's not coming from the industry, but it's coming from within or within their personal circle. What advice would you give them? Is it better to listen to these voices or is it better to be out?

IM: That would be the best thing you ever do is to come out. There is no question about it. If as a result of coming out, you lose your job, because you've got ambitions to be Prime Minister or to be ... there's no job I know that is worth lying about your sexuality for.

If Hollywood decides it doesn't want any young gay actors, you have to decide is that the industry you want to be part of. You can go into the industry and fight. Good for you. But do you really have to act? Do you really want to be one of those five studs at any one time who attract attention because of their heterosexuality? Is that really all you want to do with your life?

SS: And if it is, maybe ask yourself why?

IM: Why would anyone want to be a priest, if they were gay, in a homophobic church? Go find a church that isn't homophobic. But for their own private sake, yes come out, come out, come out. Do it as soon as you can with the help of your friends and good luck to you. I don't think it's ... there are so many openly gay actors that I can't see it's a problem as it used to be. Now women will tell you, don't ask me to be lesbian. It's bad enough being a woman in this business. And I think there is some force in that. I think casting directors and directors can be short sighted and think because an actor is openly gay they can only play gay parts. But that's patently not true, 'cos what we do in this business is act.

SS: Looking at the British box office, British produced films, why do you think there is only one film that's got any sort of form of gay storyline in it. This was Brideshead in 2008? Does the industry feel it's not commercial, warranted?

IM: I'm surprised at that; one of my favourite films of last year was Milk which couldn't have been more in your face.

SS: We're talking about British made films here.

IM: Well, nobody goes to the film industry to advance social progress. It might be chance. In another year there might be more. There are independent gay films that

I've seen this year that maybe don't make it into the reckoning because they've gone straight to video or something like that. But you can't force people to make stories they don't want to make and you can't force people to see movies they don't want to see. So, I don't know that I would take that figure as particularly significant.

I would be much more concerned to examine those films with gay content to see that the gay content was treated in the same way as if it were straight content. I think there are frankly more interesting stories to be told about gay contemporary life than *Brideshead Revisited*. It's a bit disappointing.

These days as far as social change is concerned, the film industry may this year have been behind the times. But there have been plenty of gay plays going on and plenty of openly gay people on TV.

SS: That brings me onto my next question - how do you see film bearing up with TV and theatre?

IM: I'm not an expert. I have no case to make. But if you say the only British film with any gay content was *Brideshead Revisited* your conclusion would be the film industry last year wasn't addressing contemporary social issues. That would be the point. I don't think you could say on that basis that the film industry is homophobic.

SS: If agents were putting pressure on young gay actors not to come out, what would your advice to them be?

IM: I think I've already said it. Gay people will not be happy until they come out. If they want to be unhappy, that's their lot. I think anyone who advises anyone to stay in the closet is out of touch with the world today. It might be a dangerous thing for some people to come out of the closet, it might have effects on their lives that they find regrettable, but the answer to that is not to stay in the closet.

SS: Looking back on your career, what advice would you give to your younger self?

IM: I did for me, what was absolutely right. I wasn't trying to make it; I was trying to be a good actor, so I took jobs and went to places where I felt I could learn. I didn't go to drama school, so I had a lot of apprenticeship to catch up with. As for coming out, I regret I didn't do it when I was at the outset of my adulthood, but I didn't. I regret that. What difference it would have made to my career, I'm not sure. What difference it would have made to my own personal self confidence, a great deal I would have thought. I've had the career I've wanted, really. It's not the career I planned, but I did step by step judge each job, would it help me become a better actor?

SS: And it worked. And an additional question: you're a role model to so many actors, who were your role models? Who were your mentors who you worked with?

IM: They weren't actors, they were directors. Tyrone Guthrie (?) would be the main one when I was a young man. As for gay role models, there weren't any - as they were all closeted. I'm surprised you think it's only seven, but perhaps you're right.

SS: Simon Russell Beale is the premier actor of

I can't think of any actors who I know to be gay... there's XXX who says he's not gay. Who else is there? Most of them are out aren't they? I don't really know, in America there is a strong division between coming out for actors in New York and coming out in LA. New York, actors are always picking up their TONY awards and thanking their boyfriends and girlfriends. An openly gay actor is yet to win an Oscar. There's the same division here. Most of the actors I know are in theatre and television. But I think

another problem perhaps with film more than theatre. The personality is played so much. You are expected to give interviews not just on your work, but your life. So the press is invited to become interested in areas of your life. So an actor like Paul Schofield could quite rightly say that's my private matter and didn't give interviews. A happily married man with children who didn't give interviews. Lawrence Olivier didn't give interviews. These days it's in your contract when you make a film that you give interviews. The interviews will be about your private life, where do you live, who do you live with, what do you like? I don't talk about all sorts of things in my life; I don't talk about my private life at all. You don't have to, when you're out, to talk about being gay.

SS: When you've done those great blockbusters or even the smaller independent films, has that become a problem?

IM: The press still doesn't like talking about being gay unless you bring it up. 'Cos the press is so old fashioned, they think it'll be the worst thing you can say about anybody. That's why there has been collusion in the past between Hollywood and the media. And the phrase "coming out" was one invented by William Henry III who was the film critic for Time magazine. A closeted man himself, to express the dilemma, what does a paper do when it knows a person is gay but that person doesn't like it to be known they are gay. Do you out him or not? In conversation, people out each other the whole time. There were times when my friends were closeted and didn't talk publicly about being gay. Does that mean I was to deny that I know that I knew they were gay, when I'd been to their house and known their partner for years and years and years? Is it outing to say, from one's own evidence that someone's gay. I don't think it is. I think it's just a fact of life. That's another problem about being gay, they assume that their friends and everyone are prepared to lie – and collude - so it's all very unseemly. But I would very much doubt that there are many gay men pretending to be straight and getting away with it in the way that Rock Hudson and many others had to get away with it to survive. But maybe there are.

DISCUSSION ABOUT 2 HOLLYWOOD ACTORS

But we are in a period of transition. And the more gay people are accepted in society, the less reason there is for people to say I can't come out because society won't let me. Society is very happy to have gay people have civil partnerships and declare their sexuality ... and if young actors are being told they shouldn't be gay for the sake of their careers, they should decide, do they want to work in the business where that sort of advice is thought to be good advice.