

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.

STEPHEN FRY – 11TH September 2009

SS: I was reading your letter to your younger self ... You talk about feeling 10 percent extra suffering and complexity ... is that true particularly in the film industry?

SF: The point I was making really, was that one of the blessings of being gay is that you expect your love life and your erotic destiny and your sexuality to be a problem because it's been traditionally a problem with society and work, and friends and family and everywhere and it duly is. Straight people, because they are apparently made for the world and the world is made for them, are usually rather struck dumb by the fact that their lives are rather complicated and difficult and that their erotic destiny and their sexuality brings them nothing but trouble because they don't realise that all sexuality and all romance brings you trouble. Gay people are prepared for it. And what's happened over the last few years, quite often, is that straight people started envying gay people because of the way gay people order their lives, the way they have built up structures of self help and community and all the rest of it - a literature of studies and a whole sort of world of protection and interest and mythology is something that isn't available to straight people ... and weirdly straight people are more on their own. It's an almost counter intuitive fact that astonished me growing up. What I meant, and what is still mostly true is that all the complexity and all the struggle and all the pain and horror of one's sexual life is probably ten percent worse for gay people, if not more, in the cruelty of the playground and the taunts in the street and ... I would say in the film and acting business it's a great deal easier. It really is hard to find any reason to complain. The only way one could possibly complain is if you are, as a man or woman, leading actor material, where the publicity is such that you might be persuaded that your sexuality is best hidden because you will lose a fan base, but that's not an artist problem of acting, it's a problem of career structure if you like. It is a real problem, we all know in history, we can go back to the Rock Hudsons and the Farley Grangers who we all know were gay - and couldn't for the life of them come out about it. And the bisexuality of the xxx Powers and Cary Grants is the subject of much literature and queer studies - there is a separate branch of Hollywood queer studies that I wouldn't have the time to read all of, even if I wanted to. I know the sad story of the Charles Laughtons of this world - who not a matinee idol by any means, none the less, still lived in a time when he couldn't come out. And other actors like John Gielgud or Alec Guinness - who had a rather more bisexual identity.

That's different. People like myself, Ian (McKellen), Derek Jacobi, Rupert Everett obviously, in America there are fewer. What's his name - David Hyde Pierce, and actors like that - there a few that have been brave. There are ones that we cannot name but we sort of know - it's not up to us to name them. I'm not Peter Tatchell. There's a great deal about P.T. that I genuinely admire enormously. I genuinely admire and actually feel slightly shamed by his willingness to go to Russia and do what he does. 'Cos I think I would be scared stiff by the brute skinhead nationalism and brute homophobia that awaits him there. On the other hand I can't necessarily agree or believe in outing people because ... well Ian was politicised sexually as you know by Armistead Maupin to some extent and I know Armistead, and love him

dearly, he's a great man - as is Ian. I remember once when we were doing a show, I think it was an anti-Clause 28 show, and I'd suggested that maybe we'd have a cupboard, a wardrobe at the back of the stage, and in it there would be an actor, comedian, celebrity, musician, who was gay and would choose that time to come out on stage. He'd literally come out on stage. We'd have a false back so they wouldn't have to spend the whole show in there - but we'd pretend - and say there's someone in the closet now, and I could think of about four people in my business of comedy who ... and not one of them were willing to do it. And they explained why. And in all cases their parents were alive and their parents didn't know and they just couldn't bear the idea of the parents (or not even the parents) but the parents' neighbours knowing and dealing with the whole thing. I said this to Ian and Ian said "ask each one of them when their fathers last said to them when are you going to bring home a nice girl?" A long time ago - and that means they know. And of course, part of that is true, we all know they know. They probably knew when the boy was seven. My mother certainly did - she always said she knew and she didn't mind. But for a lot of them they know, but don't know.

SS: Young actors - do I come out? How will it affect me? Are there elements of the industry adding to this? Agents, producers etc ...

SF: I think there may be agents and producers. I doubt it. It's part of an agent's job to warn any client of the full consequences of any decision they make, especially one that involves publicity of some kind about themselves, and say "yes - if you want to do that, I'm not going to stand in your way" - but I respect - and a lot of agents are gay - but they may say, "be warned - it may restrict your palette." And they may be wrong, it may become a self-fulfilling prophesy if you keep saying it and then it becomes true. There is something very ironic, I remember the first film I had a proper part in what was called *The Good Father*, and I was talking to someone about my part, such as it was. I said, I've just played this friend of Anthony Hopkins - he meets him at a party and I'm going through a divorce and he's going through the same thing. And this friend of mine said "what would you know about having a divorce?" as if I couldn't possibly play a straight person. I remember thinking, what an odd attitude. If I'd said I'd played a Gestapo torturer - would they say - "what do you know about torturing people?" But it was almost as if they were affronted that I, a gay person, would dare to play a divorced father. It was like, how dare you? That is a really strange attitude - because nobody says that of a straight actor who plays a gay character, they all say - how brave, well done. What's brave about it? Is it braver to play a gay man than for my friend Ralph Fiennes to play a commandant in a Nazi camp? I mean please, what's so brave?

SS: Is this coming from the public?

SF: It's just coming from the inbuilt residual ... much in the same way as we have a vestigial lizard part of our brain, we have a vestigial - not exactly homophobic ... it isn't the same - that's the point, it isn't and to be honest, a huge part of me says I don't want it to be the same, because I put this in my autobiography - it's a thing that Edward Said wrote - the cultural critic and scholar - he wrote something about the problem of the middle class hero in literature in the twentieth century - he wrote something in that essay that reminded me - made me think that the way I wanted to put it was as an adolescent I felt immensely strongly, and that's still something I feel, torn between two opposing impulses - one is a desire to belong, to be part of the tribe, the herd. The other is an equally strong impulse to want to be apart from it. To be a part of it and apart from it. To be special, to be different, not to be one of the herd. To be an individual whose feelings, who's ... you know ... and within that of course there are little circles of groups, in other words, I picture myself standing, watching a rugby game thinking, I'm so glad that I'm not playing in that rugby - and

another part thinking, I wish I was just a normal boy who could play rugby. It's that. And it's certainly not that I wish not to be gay. I would never want that. But there is a part of me that wishes being gay was no deal whatsoever - as was as normal as what colour walls you had in your house or what car you drove - a difference of no more importance than that. Another part of me wants to feel that were it not for growing up with a different otherness, being part of a radical outside to some extent and connecting myself to pariahs and outcasts in history and art and literature, if it weren't for that forming part of my character, maybe I worry that I would be more dull witted, less noticing, less connective in my imagination. Less sympathetic, less politically aware - all those things. I would have been more conventional, if you like. I'm not certain - because there are plenty of straight people who are - it's not logical. It's certainly not necessary and sufficient - you can't measure it. It's just a feeling I have. That word we use for those street parades, Pride, is part of it. It's not just that we want to be treated the same. It's that we're proud of our difference, of our culture, the mixture of weirdness, in terms of the drag queens and the transgender, extremities of fetish and taboo and the permission that you have within the LGBT (whatever we're calling it today) within that there is room for extraordinary amounts of self expression, and so on, and that's all great. And then there are gay people we know who want to wear a tightly buttoned harris tweed jacket and get on with voting conservative and leading a normal life. I have every respect for their wishes and every hope for their happiness and I suppose the only thing is one doesn't want to see oppression. Either the playground taunt into full homophobia or self oppression. You don't want people to be miserable because of the way they are born - because of what nature has made them. But within that - there is a very broad church indeed.

SS: Oppression, Alan Turing - timely conversation. Stonewall figures. Puttman thought leadership - most expensive - or heavily budget - where are the next generation of gay stars? Is it because our industry is just small? Where are they?

SF: It's an interesting question, I don't know. The figures in Britain who've made quite an impact, in comedy there are the Graham Nortons and the Paul O'Grady's - and in drama leaking into entertainment, there's John Barrowman who is a hugely popular figure. Although he's very upfront about his sexuality he's not as camp as a Julian Clary if you like. I suppose, my desire in terms of story is that you would have a heist movie like Ocean's 11 - where it just so happens, that one of the members of the team were gay and had a boyfriend. What it wasn't was the confessional gay friend in a romantic comedy. It's just tiresome, a cliché like the spunky woman friend, you know. It's just such a stock character and so unhelpful, I think Rupert was great in my best friend's wedding and all the rest of it, but you don't want them all to be like that. You really don't. Why wouldn't the Matt Damon character in Ocean's 11 be gay? Not for the sake of it necessarily, but also why would be straight for the sake for it? Just have a boy with his arm around a boyfriend in the same way a man has his arm around his girlfriend - or the girl has her arm around her boyfriend - or a lesbian - or whatever it is - without it being a big deal.

SS: The answer I get when I talk to producers is that they say the budgets involved are so big that it makes everybody risk averse, and people don't want to see or hear these stories. Film stats: Revolver.

SF: It's not something anyone can dismiss. It is a business; anyone who thinks it's anything other than a business is kidding themselves. And while what David Puttnam says is true, you can broadcast and disseminate ideas through film, and film traditionally, British film probably more than American film, certainly in the tradition from the 1960's onwards with the great wave of things like *This Sporting Life* and *Friday Night Saturday Morning*, *Sunday Bloody Sunday* - all those movies - the Murray Head, Peter Finch gay scenes in that were amazingly revolutionary,

obviously, and things like Ken Russell and Pinter. There was intelligence, there was social awareness, then there were the more mainstream ones – we'll never forget dear old Dirk - Victim of course, The Servant, there was a sort of move towards it - and there were bits of Fellini and Visconti and others and obviously Pasolini that made cinema, but these were not mass mainstream movies. There was perhaps Cabaret - that's the one where you get Michael York's character Brian in that - there is a male kiss - that was a moment. And that won Oscars and was mainstream and made a mint. It was a musical, it was saying that being gay was rather like being Jewish - which is not a bad comparison - and but now, I don't know. It's much harder. I don't know what the answer is. In the same way that you just don't make films like Cabaret anymore - let alone make films like Pasolini did or even if you do make them, they certainly don't have the penetration they used to have. Irrespective of their gay politics or any other side of it. It's either mainstream or it's kind of ... They call movies like 'In Bruges' an art house movie virtually. It's so much harder. The budgets are so much harder. You would think that maybe the young filmmakers coming up using all the huge advantages of red cameras and all the rest of it - more affordable high quality and all the rest of it. Instead you still kind of feel they are just trying to make promos that get them their first Hollywood movie - there must be some who are making more interesting films.

SS: Do you feel a sense of responsibility? - as you're across everything - writing, directing, producing and starring.

SF: No, I think you're counter-productive if you're seen to be trying to put in a message, it alienates. After all, the people who already agree with you don't need telling, those who, as it were, might be said to need a rising of consciousness, aren't going to be done by some clumping. But then there are films like Wilde, which one hopes - but then again hardly mainstream and hardly anything new in it - except it is trying to see again what a great man Wilde was and what a terrible thing the trial and persecution of him was. I don't know, I suppose ...

SS: Is there a movie in Turing's life?

SF: Yes, there definitely is. There was a marvellous one by Hugh Whitmore called Breaking the Code - it wasn't a cinema film - it was a stage play that was done for television with Derek Jacobi playing Turing - and it was magnificent - it was really good. I remember David Aukin saying to me "what do you think about a film about Alan Turing?" and I was so busy at the time I couldn't contemplate it.

SS: Now might be the time?

SF: I think so.

SS: Maybe you can get Pixar to find it - it could be an animation.

SF: That's a funny idea.

SS: So, I'm a 17 year old gay man who wants to be as big as Colin Farrell, I have potential to be a leading man - that awful phrase - what advice do you give me? (Ian's advice)

SF: There is much in what he says - but if I was 17 I'm not sure I have such a pure ability to reject the film industry just because it rejected me. I would say concentrate on your acting, don't pretend to be straight, but on the other hand, there's no need to mention your sexuality unless it's asked. In fact if it comes to the point that you're doing a film in which your role is important enough for you to be interviewed by somebody - an interviewer very rarely says to an actor "are you straight or gay?"

They might say “do you have a girlfriend?” I’d say, just say “no.” Just play it by ear. But concentrate on the work, concentrate on getting the part. Nobody’s going to be that interested if you are ... let’s say an actor like James Macavoy. You might think, I’d like a career like that, wouldn’t you? I cast him in Bright Young Things and remember being blown away by him. I didn’t know if he was straight or gay. I had no idea at all. It just wasn’t relevant. And then he started doing Shameless and he and Anne Marie started going out – it was probably the first time it had occurred to me that whether he was one or the other - I thought maybe he’s very easy on the eye - but I had a partner and it’s not as if I was going to be hitting on him or anything of that nature, but you just don’t ... I look at Michael Sheen and Jude Law have played lots of gay people, as it happens, they happen to be straight. Jude is Gataca, Wilde and then Ripley - and Michael played a gay character in Bright Young Things and then played Robbie Ross in Wilde - who was obviously a gay character and Kenneth Williams. You might say those parts should have gone to gay actors, but that’s silly too. That’s mad. If only gay people are allowed to play gay people and only straight people are allowed to play straight people, we’re really doing a great disservice to any sense of equality and being grown up about this.

The advice is concentrate on the work. I’m too polite as a rule ever to respond like this, but sometimes people genuinely say: “how can I get famous?” and I just want to say “go on a reality TV show or go on the street with a machine gun and kill lots of people, but don’t become an actor or writer if you want to become famous. Only become an actor or writer because you want to act and you want to write.” In the case of careers like writing, it’s like money it’s just one of the things you’re paid in or punished by. But you don’t seek the fame, you really don’t. If you are seeking the fame, it will always bite you in the ass. Just concentrate on the work. If you’re 17 and you’re good, do plays - do plays with other people, and one would hope the only reason you haven’t come out, is only because you haven’t yet worked out a way to tell your parents. There can be no other reason. If you’ve got friends who you are afraid of coming out in front of, I would say are they honestly the sort of friends worth having? So it can only be family. And, but coming out is not like it was. It’s not a party that is announced and broadcast and then you have tattooed on your forehead OUT - it’s a dance we do. For some people it’s I’m out to some people and not others. Phases, exactly. People shouldn’t be ashamed for not having come fully out, not be a shame not coming out at all.

I should say as far as acting is concerned, it shouldn’t be a big deal. There’s, I suppose, the peculiarity which is just an interesting psychological, psycho-sexual problem, if you were to do a love scene with a straight actor and you were gay. Like I did with Jude, ... it’s up to them to know I’m not getting anything morally illicit out of it. Actors are far too grown up and it’s far too technical – it doesn’t amount to that. The number of who asked what was it like kissing Jude.

I can remember Rupert Graves or James Wilby who told me - they had a love scene in Maurice - what happens is you have closed sets. So, it’s down to only about ten people. But then the scene had to be done. They were in towelling robes, and then the scene has to be done. Then they’re naked and they kiss, all sort of lingering and - Jim Ivory is watching and he went ahhh afterward and looked at his shoes ... they were worrying - what were they doing wrong? He went, spoke to his art director – “could you move that picture” It was nothing to do with them - it was the shot. If there’s nothing wrong with what the actors are doing ... say you’re shooting this. If actors are doing this fine...

Discussion of E.M. Forster and Maurice.

SS: Mentors. Who were your mentors in film in particular?

SF: My mentors in terms of my sexuality were all dead. There were people like Wilde and Auden and Robin Maugham whose autobiography *Escape from the Shadows* was very influential. T.C Worsley's work, *Flannelled Fool*. This is a literary lot, I suppose. When I was a 14 year old there was no internet, it was the school library or the local library, and you just followed a trail of index, a bibliography. You would read a biography of Wilde and you would notice other characters referring to him and you would read biographies of them and find this world of André Gide or whoever. And by the time I got to Cambridge and was emboldened to come out myself, there were fellow actors and we had our merry time. It then became a world of comedy and all the rest of it. I had comedy mentors like Peter Sellers and Peter Cook - who I miss greatly, but that had nothing to do with the sexual side of things.

Otherwise, in film, I was very lucky to work with directors like Fred Schepisi, Robert Altman, Stephen Frears and many fine directors. John Schlesinger, of course, who was gay - was very funny - he would say, "well dear I have looked at the crew, and there isn't a cute one there ... I suppose the focus puller is quite sweet ... You've got to have something to look at when you're filming."

Mentors, I guess in writing it's been the dead white males of dread memory, the old traditional things I grew up with. All the Ws, Wodehouse, Waugh and Wilde. In comedy - Peter Cook, Vivian Stanshall. In film - if you asked me who my favourite film actor was, I would say Jimmy Stewart - he was so much better than anyone gave him credit for. [Talks a lot about James Stewart] ... British actors, Alistair Sims [discusses Dirk Bogarde]

SS: Is there anything the film industry should do in order to promote on screen gay talent or stories?

SF: I think it's one of the compliance boxes that have to be ticked these days. Which is both a good thing and a bad thing. I find compliance boxes something of a horror. If you go to the Film Council, say and want to see if you can get some development money, they are tasked to make sure it's possible the story can reflect the diversity and all the rest of it. And that's fine, I'm all for that. And some films have reflected that great diversity. In a strange way I don't think you could have a film that didn't reflect it. Even if it was set in an Oxford College the chances are it would reflect diversity ... But I think we try to be more open about this. I think stories come first, and we are children of our time and we will be excited by stories that chime with our own consciousness, our own awareness, our own desires, our own aspirations, our own fears, all the emotions we are likely to live with - that are the current weather of our generation - and I think sexuality is one of those. I don't think they should forget it, they should be proud of it. There are gay film festivals and they are pretty much a minority sport, naturally, but there's nothing wrong with BAFTA, or BFI having a trawl through the gay history of cinema in the past but also having this belief in the future. But almost more important is the idea of opening up British cinema to as many British cinema goers as possible. I think the more they perceive it to be groups of earnest people, earnestly wanting to improve the world, the more it will confirm them in the view that British cinema is more a schoolroom than an entertainment. All the best British filmmakers have all been magnificent storytellers, whether you're going back as far as Hitchcock's early days here, all the way through to the great and in some way unsung heroes, people like Brian Forbes and Dickie Attenborough in movies like *The Angry Silence* were pioneering in their social awareness, if you want to put it that way. But were always first and foremost magnificent storytellers. And the Boxes - good old Sydney Box, Robert Bolt, David Lean obviously and Ealing naturally, the whole Ealing story. They were fantastic storytellers as well as being very socially aware. And Powell and Pressberger. Michael Powell was an absolute genius, son of a bitch. An absolute genius, up there with the Eisenstein's and the greats, a truly

great artist but first and foremost a storyteller. He tells stories through character, and the images are incredibly striking and the camera moves are bold – and let's hear it for good old Jack Cardiff. These were wonderful, wonderful people, but they were not earnest. Whatever our sexual politics - if we get earnest, and self righteous and sanctimonious, the story goes out of the window, entertainment goes out of the window, and you're ending up with cinema which is the equivalent of BBC Four. Now, I love BBC Four, it is my favourite channel, but it is a lucky night when it gets more than a million viewers – but we don't want our cinema to be a minority sport. Of course, it will never be Hollywood, but we want it to be full of comedy, romance, light and delight.

SS: Are films like Maurice or The Real Thing just happy accidents?

SF: And the problem with them is they are too minority. If I were to say what the answer would be, to be incredibly bold.

SS: Maybe Guy Richie did it in Rock N Rolla?

SF: And for all that, people get anti about Guy Richie, he is bold, he doesn't care, he goes in and tells his story. I'll take Sherlock Holmes and do this with it ... So, be bold. You can be bold in a minority way like Derek Jarman. Fantastically bold. Amazingly innovative and extraordinary. And of course a minority filmmaker. A genuine avant garde in that the avant garde brings new things in its trail. Or, you can just be bold like Guy Richie - in that Tarantino way. The Tarantinos and the Guy Richies will cause a lot of snarls because they often trip up and seem to be self indulgent – but they're having a go and they're bigger than life. Maybe the problem with British cinema is that it's afraid to be bigger than life ... And good old Baz Luhrmann he has a go. [discuss Australia]. But like all things, that's not the answer. All films should be different. If all films were larger than life, I don't mean theatrical, I mean mannerist

SS: Do you mean confident?

SF: There are two aesthetics. There's the Terence Davies aesthetic - which in painting is the equivalent of a Vermeer or a Van Dyck - you don't see the brush stroke, it's elegant, it's perfectly formed, and there's the mannerist style, where you see the brush strokes. I love both, you couldn't live without either. The full painterly mannerist style and the beautifully achieved and if cinema were all one thing, it would be a shame. But in Britain – what there is less of is the boldness. Hedwig and the Angry Inch is an amazing film - he's an amazing filmmaker. That's the kind of spirit we need, just great filmmaking. It's both internal and external – both inside the heads of the characters and a visual feast. And that's down to the fact that although filmmaking is collaborative, it is a directorial art. Filmmakers like that and they have their own tone and their own world. They are authentic to themselves. And that's a rare thing. That's almost the most important thing because if they create that space the sexual politics gets put right naturally. That's my view anyway...