

DEREK

'Derek'

Synopsis

In voiceover, Derek Jarman's friend and collaborator Tilda Swinton begins reading 'Letter to an Angel', a haunting and beguiling text she wrote in 2002. By then Jarman, one of Britain's best-loved and most original artists, had been dead for eight years. An honest and previously unseen interview, shot in 1991 with Jarman in the shadow of his impending death, is the core of the film. Both letter and interview are intricately interwoven with rarely seen home-movie footage of Derek and his family, archive material, excerpts from Jarman's feature films, pop promos, super-8 work, and new footage of Tilda Swinton in Dungeness and London and the director Isaac Julien exploring the Jarman archive.

Via these three strands we get to meet Derek the Renaissance man; artist, painter, writer, gay activist, gardener and, most importantly, filmmaker. We are introduced to his parents and hear revelations from his early childhood and adolescence, see evidence of his life in the pre-punk sixties as he hung out with people like David Hockney and Patrick Procter. Moving to London's Bankside he produced his rarely seen *Bankside Studio* films, a sketch book of his studio life and the vivid characters with whom he collaborated, partying with Ken Russell and Tennessee Williams – Russell went on to offer him his first job as film-set designer. Then Jarman discovered Super-8 and he was hooked.

Script-driven narrative was not for him: instead he favoured an organic painterly approach, creating vibrant montages of images and ideas. In 1976 came his first feature, the blissfully homoerotic *Sebastiane*. This was followed by the irreverent *Jubilee* (1977), one of the first punk films, establishing Jarman as an underground hero. Jarman couldn't help but react to the society he was living in, the country that would soon be Thatcher's Britain. His answer to the iron lady was to produce iconoclastic art – art that looked at history but was located in the here and now.

Alongside his feature films he worked with key musicians and artists of the day like The Smiths and dancer Michael Clarke, punk band Throbbing Gristle and The Pet Shop Boys, producing music videos and film installations for live shows.

Diagnosed with Aids in 1986, faced with impending blindness and his own inevitable death, Jarman produced perhaps his strongest work, *Blue* (1993), in which a lush and vivid landscape is conjured up with just one visual component - Yves Klein blue and a beautifully judged narration.

In interview shortly before his death, we see Jarman still upbeat and defiant; no longer fit for the rigours of film he goes back to his first love, painting. The last shot is of Jarman's Dungeness garden, thriving in the face of the nearby nuclear power station and the harsh weather conditions – a living monument to the survival of his artistic vision and spirit.

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