

Isherwood remembered

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By Hunter Drohojowska



Christopher Isherwood, Dec. 24, 1984

When we talk of Christopher Isherwood's death last Jan. 4 at the age of 81, our eyes can't mist with tears. Our voices may crack a little, but he wouldn't have tolerated anything more demonstrative. He was an artist, a man of such sensitivity that he disdained the overly emotional and dismissed messy expressions of pathos. He did not want a memorial service when he died, and donated his body to science, quipping to a friend that he didn't like the idea of staying in one place for too long.

But memorial services are for the living and more than 300 came to pay tribute to Isherwood at the L.A. Theater Center last Sunday, an event organized by theater critic Bruce Bebb who knew the writer only by his books. It is in such works as "The Berlin Stories," "Prater, Violet," "Down There on a Visit," "The World in the Evening," "A Single Man," "My Guru and His Disciple" and "Christopher and His Kind" that anyone might best know Isherwood. The books were autobiographical for the most part and all the more remarkable for being so carefully pruned of manipulation and sentimentality.

"I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking," he wrote. That line, one of the most memorable in English prose, is also the one most often quoted in regard to Isherwood's work. His gift was an unflinching acceptance of what is. People who would later become his characters were accepted by him for

what they were, an appraisal each embraced as the utmost compliment.

At the memorial service, writer Michael Lassell noted that he met Isherwood as so many did: writing him a fan letter, then being asked up to tea. Isherwood's contribution to Los Angeles society, apart from his writing, was the salon that he conducted in his Santa Monica home. With his companion of 33 years, artist Don Bachardy, Isherwood entertained writers, actors, artists, eccentrics, physical-fitness trainers and anyone else who attracted his curiosity. Often, Bachardy would invite them back to his studio to pose for a portrait; some of those portraits accompany this tribute. Those pictures provide a chronicle of the rich and famous, the broke and incidental, a record of people who walked through the lives of Isherwood and Bachardy.

Lassell went on to state what others felt in their relationship with Isherwood: "I loved him and he knew who I was."

Being known by Isherwood was quite an occasion in one's life. Art critic Peter Schjeldahl noted that Isherwood was one of those rare creatures who mythologize reality, who make any dinner party seem like the dinner party, any friend seem like the friend. Guests left parties at Chris and Don's feeling as though they'd been graced, the perfume of greatness churning their thoughts for days after. But Isherwood eschewed the role of dignified writer. Young, aspiring novelists would come to sit adoringly at his feet — only to find themselves treated as colleagues in the pursuit of a difficult art.

Though a stellar conversationalist, Isherwood managed to be witty yet never malicious. Since the people of his life were also the material for his fiction, he let them read his manuscripts before publication. Jean Ross, the model for the character of Sally Bowles, initially didn't want him to publish what became his best known story and the basis for the plays "I am a Camera" and "Cabaret." Isherwood acquiesced. Fortunately, a mutual friend persuaded her otherwise.

Isherwood left his native England in 1928 in search of a true home. After a stay in Berlin, he came to America in 1938 with his friend W.H. Auden. In "Christopher and His Kind," he wrote of himself, "If he did decide to settle in America — and, by America, he meant New York — he would be able to make himself at home there. This, he said to himself, was a setting in which his public personality would function more freely, more successfully than it could ever have functioned in London." But it was not to be New York that offered the freedom he so desired, but Los Angeles. He has lived here ever since, while Auden stayed in New York.

Here, Isherwood pursued a spiritual quest with the Hindu monk Swami Prabhavananda. Here, he became an outspoken supporter of gay rights and wrote some of his best books. Here, he found his true love in Bachardy. Here in L.A. he made friends, who now remember him fondly, with humps in their throats but no tears. We hope Isherwood would have approved.

Hunter Drohojowska writes regularly for the Herald.

Tony Richardson, director

"I met Chris when I was just a kid out of Oxford traveling around the states for six months. I met him through Aldous Huxley, then he worked on 'The Loved One' and I got to know him in that period, the early '60s. Who could not like him? He was the most charming, sweet, nicest man possible. I'd loved his writing before that but the man was just as important as the writings. He was generous beyond belief. He was incredibly curious, had an almost urchin quality being fascinated by anyone he met. He was open to the possibility of what anyone could be. I remember best his grin, he could light up. He had the gift of immediate intimacy — the blue eyes would go on, the eyebrows would be raised. Most writers are recluses, not open to what the experiences feed them, they tend to live in self-protective states where they conduct a hostile battle against the rest of the world. Chris was like open territory, peace had been declared with everyone. All the writers I've known were good fighters, Chris was a good lover. He'll be remembered as a very, very good writer. To me, his masterpiece was 'A Single Man.' He had an individual voice, a lack of pretension in his style. The 'I Am a Camera Attitude,' the tone of it was quite revolutionary in the 1930s when a fancier, more mandarin quality of writing was in vogue. His style looks forward to someone like Joan Didion and contemporary

American writing influenced by journalism. So much more direct, personal and simple where the writer let the subject speak without imposing his personality which you are so conscious of with someone like Hemingway. I think he was one of the first of the cool writers in the very best sense.

"The British are a chauvinistic, mean race and think anyone who's gone to live in America has committed some kind of treason. But Chris was always an outsider temperamentally. Chris seems classless, societyless. He was a certain kind of tourist and the pain and suffering is seen most in 'A Single Man.' He really examined himself most completely and clearly, his loneliness, his isolation. There is a line about Jane Austen, calling her a little bit of ivory two inches wide. Chris is a bit of jade an inch wide."



Tony Richardson, Dec. 30, 1966

Joan Didion, author

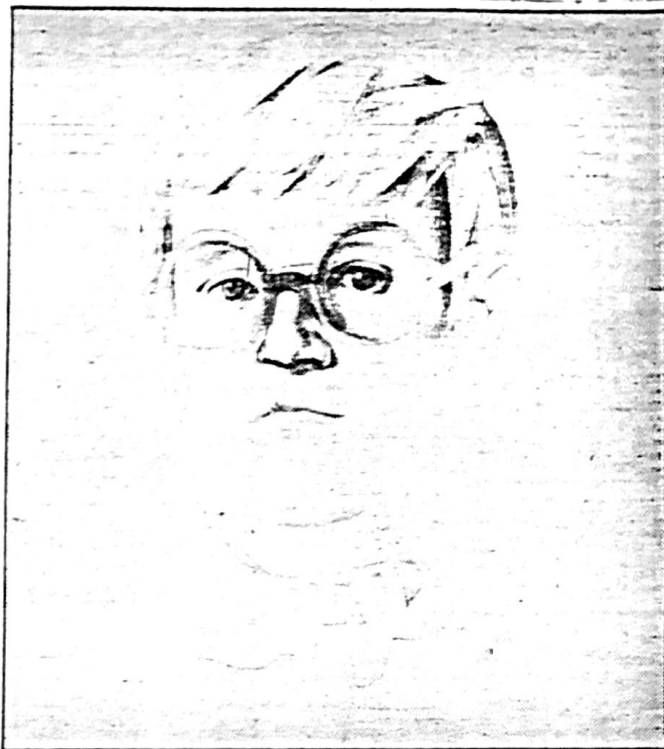
"Christopher was a marvelous man. I've known him for about 20 years, for as long as we've lived in L.A. He was immensely good. He always brought a kind of light into a room, made people laugh. He had a wonderful laugh himself. I don't know if writers influence each other all that much but his being here was a great gift to other writers in L.A. The house was always open, it was a tremendously warm place to go. There were always interesting people, interesting things being talked about, and a lot of fun. I loved the color there, that porcelain ball they had on the table, the old bits of worn sea glass they had collected, the pictures. We met at Gavin Lambert's. Immediately, we were included in Christopher and Don's ongoing life there. I'd published my first novel but nobody had read it. It was about 1966, we were poor, living on Franklin Avenue, struggling to figure out if we could do anything or not as writers. It made me feel good to see him. And over the years I saw him do it again and again, bring other young writers around."



Joan Didion, Feb. 15, 1972

David Hockney, artist

"I met him in 1964 when I first came to L.A. When I met him I was a little in awe but we quickly became pals. He was a very happy man, I think. He had a harmony about his life, a kind of sublime life that attracted me. He hated the kind of Europe that seemed divided by class. He was homosexual, he made of his life something quite marvelous. Somehow he got it all together and made it in his own way. Don has started reading the journals, a massive work that Christopher has left behind. I've no doubt that these will be published some day and show more of a clarity in the life. As a writer, he always regarded himself as a journalist. His journals are a kind of major work that we have to look forward to. Right up until the last eight months, Chris never seemed old to me. He was active in his work. I suppose if you'd met Picasso at 88, somehow he was still a young artist. Chris never gave you the impression of being the distinguished writer; he always seemed so young."



David Hockney, Nov. 2, 1969

Armistead Maupin, author

"I loved Christopher Isherwood a lot. We met at an Oscar night party in Hollywood in 1978 and instantly took to each other. I had not only admired his works, but had been affected by them. Five or six years earlier I had read his novel 'A Single Man,' which influenced me to write about being gay. He actually invented something that Truman Capote later took credit for, the so-called non-fiction novel. The invented character of Sally Bowles bears such a resemblance to Holly Golightly, it's hard to imagine he wasn't influenced. What Christopher did literally and in his personal life was to cast an objective, slightly bemused eye on himself and all his former selves. He taught me that each of us can



Armistead Maupin, April 25, 1979

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to many people in our lifetime. Growth is being aware of the ways we have changed. Chris was enormously accessible. He made it clear to sometimes large audiences that his number was listed in the Santa Monica phone book. His home was a kind of salon really for young artists and authors, and not-so-young artists and authors.

"He really was the elder statesman of the modern gay movement. Of all the visible gay celebrities, he was the one who wore it most proudly. He never hid, never apologized and led his life as a normal human being. He preferred the term 'queer' to gay, felt it was more to the point. He reveled in his individuality."

Julie Harris, actress who played Sally Bowles in 'I Am a Camera'

"He was an original person and an original person always has an impact. I've known him for over 30 years. We were always like brother and sister. He had an original voice and was so completely himself, it made it exciting to read. He was not a copy of anything else, and had wonderful humor and wit. His friendship with Don was so great because each was so free yet they were so very much together. There was a sense of personal freedom about Chris for each person to be what they wanted to be."

Peter Schjeldahl, art critic, poet

"I met Chris through director Jim Bridges. My wife, Brook (Alderson), had been in 'Urban Cowboy.' That was about six years ago and since then we regularly saw them in L.A. The quality about Christopher that everyone will comment on is his immense kindness. You tend to mythologize great artists and he had the peculiar quality of cutting through your intimidation and being completely disarming and kind without losing a bit of his charisma at the same time. I never doubted when talking to him that I was in the presence of a great man. But it was out of the question to say so. He wouldn't tolerate it. He had the quality of being the most interesting person who makes everyone around him feel interesting too."

"In terms of literary history, he was one of the significant figures in making private, personal life, continuous with public life. One of the agonies of our time is the confusion of private and public, but he made it seem like a good idea. It seemed natural for him to end up in L.A., the world capital of that confusion. If everyone did it as well as he did, L.A. would be

heaven. The main myths of his writing were the spiritual quest, the positive possibility of homosexual marriage, which was inspiring and moving whether one is homosexual or not, and Berlin, a city more or less invented by him. Even after they had personally fallen out, Brecht acknowledged Isherwood as an expert on Berlin.

"The point of Isherwood's life was to reject absolutely any sense of obligation to ideological, abstract principles. The values that mattered to him were those pertaining to private life: truth, love, loyalty. His masterpiece is himself. 'Prater Violet' is one of most delightful short novels in the English language, but masterpiece is another kind of inflated category that he would reject. He's like a solvent that dissolves all pomposities and intellectual coercions."

Stephen Spender, poet, literary critic

"He was one of my closest friends. I knew him from the time I was 18. In a very special sense, his loss is like losing part of myself. His support, his interest in my work and in my young personality, helped me all my life. I think that certain books, obviously the early books, the Berlin stories and also his later work, a novel called 'A Single Man,' are among the most enduring small masterpieces of this century. I think the main thing is the sense of characters as people who really existed in real life. He managed to give them a life in fiction that made them seem almost more real than they were as persons. He also writes perfectly. He never wrote a bad sentence. He always captured the reader in his view of whatever he was describing. I think he made me believe in my own writing. He was extremely honest, he always said exactly what he thought."

Gavin Lambert, author, screenwriter

"I met Christopher in 1960 I think, working at 20th Century Fox. I was writing 'Sons and Lovers' and he was writing a film which was never made. I had always admired him enormously, was excited to meet him and it was one of those meetings that took, and we never looked back. He was helpful to me because I had worked in movies but never fiction. My first novel, 'The Slide Area,' he looked at and was interested. He had that wonderful directness and honesty. He was so incredibly real, any thoughts one had about talking to someone talented and famous just flew out the window. He never condescended. One thing I admired so much about Chris was how very at peace with himself he was but not talking about it."



Gavin Lambert, May 3, 1967



Stephen Spender, April 15, 1978



Julie Harris, Dec. 2, 1964



Peter Schjeldahl, Sept. 30, 1978