



CHRIS & DON

a love story

A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

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A sleeper hit at the Telluride Film Festival, CHRIS & DON: A LOVE STORY is the true-life story of the passionate three-decade relationship between British writer Christopher Isherwood (whose *Berlin Stories* was the basis for all incarnations of the much-beloved *Cabaret*) and American portrait painter Don Bachardy, thirty years his junior. From Isherwood's Kit-Kat-Club years in Weimar-era Germany (the inspiration for his most famous work) to the couple's first meeting on the sun-kissed beaches of 1950s Malibu, their against-all-odds saga is brought to dazzling life by a treasure trove of multimedia. Bachardy's contemporary reminiscences (in the Santa Monica home he shared with Isherwood until his death in 1986) artfully interact with archival footage, rare home movies (with glimpses of glitterati pals W.H. Auden, Igor Stravinsky and Tennessee Williams), reenactments, and, most sweetly, whimsical animations based on the cat-and-horse cartoons the pair used in their personal correspondence. With Isherwood's status as an out-and-proud gay maverick, and Bachardy's eventual artistic triumph away from the considerable shadow of his life partner, CHRIS & DON: A LOVE STORY is above all a joyful celebration of a most extraordinary couple.

SYNOPSIS

This feature-length documentary depicts the remarkable life of artist Don Bachardy and his relationship with the distinguished writer Christopher Isherwood. The film includes some never-before-seen footage shot by Chris and Don in the 1950s and features interviews with actress Leslie Caron (star of *Gigi*), director John Boorman (*Deliverance*, *Hope and Glory*), Liza Minnelli, and others.

Growing up in the suburbs of Los Angeles, in the late 1940s, Don Bachardy and his older brother Ted became avid movie star fans. They crashed premieres and took pictures of themselves with Joan Crawford, Marilyn Monroe, Bette Davis, and hosts of other celebrities. At eighteen, Bachardy met Christopher Isherwood, who was then forty-nine years old. Isherwood was the world famous author of *The Berlin Stories* (later to become the film and musical *Cabaret*). His close friends included Aldous Huxley, W.H. Auden, Igor Stravinsky and many film celebrities. Bachardy soon moved in with Isherwood and the two embarked on a relationship that was unique in Hollywood. Don quickly began to meet the stars he had photographed. Encouraged by Isherwood and worried about his future, Don decided to take art classes and learned his true vocation—that of the artist. And soon, he began to draw the very stars he had so admired.

Isherwood and Bachardy were open about their life together, regardless of the waves it caused. This was during a period when gay relationships were not acceptable. The age difference in their relationship brought obvious personal problems that had to be addressed. Don often felt disregarded by Chris's famous friends and frequently was. Nevertheless, Bachardy pursued his art career with great energy, painting and drawing every day. Finding a vocation gave Don a sense of fulfillment and independence. He began to realize that he could function independently, which made him question whether he wanted to stay with Isherwood. Don toyed with leaving the relationship and striking out on his own, however he decided not to as he realized his love for Chris was too important.

During the 1970s, Chris and Don began to collaborate on various writing projects, such as *Frankenstein: The True Story*, an unusual take on Mary Shelley's famous novel.

In 1981, Isherwood was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Bachardy nursed him throughout the course of the disease and for the last six months of Chris' life, Don gave up painting any one else but him. What began as way to spend more time together, quickly became the project of a lifetime, a project Chris and Don did together until the very end. After Isherwood's death, Bachardy's career has continued to flourish. A number of books about Bachardy's art have been published, the latest being *Stars in My Eyes*. Bachardy's work resides in many permanent collections around the world, including the National Portrait Gallery in London, the Smithsonian Institute, and The Norton Simon Museum.

DIRECTORS' NOTE

Our idea for the documentary was to create a very intimate story, with Don Bachardy at the center, as a thread between the present and the past. We certainly had to give the audience some biographical information about the main characters in our story, but, from the very start, our main focus remained on Chris' and Don's love story. What interested us the most was their relationship, the obstacles they had to overcome, and how they managed to stay together for such a long time. Don opened up his heart and provided us with full access to his photographs, archival footage and memorabilia of his life with Chris. The fact that we have known him for a long time also gave us an advantage as we did not have to win his trust. He already knew us as friends and as filmmakers, and this made him feel comfortable in front of the camera. Don is a natural storyteller, and we wanted to capture this in our film.

Our documentary is unique to us because we followed the inspiration of their love stories from the '50s. We were flexible, and did not try to stick to a particular style or form—we used everything that we felt was appropriate in telling the story, old movies, recreations and archival footage of different kinds. The idea behind this was to make it a personal story, not only for Don, but also for us, the filmmakers. We wanted the freedom to explore different possibilities. It was important for us to treat their story with respect and objectivity, but also with lightness and fun because, after all, both Chris and Don have incredibly fun and witty personalities. This also helped us to avoid making a nostalgic film about the past. We feel it would have been a mistake to fall into a common, typical documentary format.

We started filming with no budget—charging a camera and editing system to our credit card, taking off in a typical independent filmmaking style. We were confident though, that in the process we would find the resources to bring the documentary to completion, and we did. We shot on and off for over three years, using different formats, mostly Mini-DV and 16mm. Eventually, we collected all the archival material that we needed, and started editing. We had previous experience working with mixed formats, so we had an idea of what to expect. The reason for our choice was mainly financial, but the mix of styles and formats helped us to create a balance between all the different parts of the film, between the past and the present as well as between Chris and Don.

—Guido Santi & Tina Mascara

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

BIOGRAPHY

The son of a British Lieutenant-Colonel belonging to the upper gentry, he was born in his family's ancestral seat, Wyberslegh Hall, High Lane, near Stockport in the northwest of England, and spent his childhood in various towns where his father was stationed. After his father was killed in the First World War, he settled with his mother in London and at Wyberslegh. He studied at Repton School and in 1925 at Corpus Christi Cambridge, where he deliberately left without a degree. In the same year, he was reintroduced to W. H. Auden, whom he had known slightly at school, and became Auden's literary mentor and partner in an intermittent, casual liaison, as Auden sent his poems to Isherwood for comment and approval. Through Auden, Isherwood met Stephen Spender, with whom he later spent much time in Germany. His first novel, *All the Conspirators*, appeared in 1928. In 1928-29 Isherwood studied medicine in London, but gave it up after a few months to join Auden for a few weeks in Berlin. Rejecting his upper-class background and attracted to males, he remained in Berlin, the capital of the young Weimar Republic, drawn by its deserved reputation for sexual freedom. There, he "fully indulged his taste for pretty youths. He went to Berlin in search of boys and found one called Heinz, who became his first great love." He worked as a private tutor in Berlin and elsewhere while writing the novel *Mr. Norris Changes Trains* (1935) and a series of short stories collected under the title *Goodbye to Berlin* (1939). These provided the inspiration for the play *I Am a Camera*, the subsequent musical *Cabaret* and the film of the same name.

Auden and Isherwood then traveled to China in 1938 to gather material for their book on the Sino-Japanese War called *Journey to a War* (1939). Having visited New York on their way back to the UK, they decided to immigrate to the United States early in 1939. (The timing of this move, coming just as Britain was about to be engulfed in the Second World War, placed them under a cloud with the patriotic crowd.) After a few months with Auden in New York, Isherwood settled in California, where he embraced Hinduism. Together with Swami Prabhavananda he produced several Hindu scriptural translations, Vedanta essays, the biography *Ramakrishna and his Followers*, novels, plays and screenplays, all imbued with the themes and character of Vedanta and the Upanishadic quest. Arriving in Hollywood in 1939, Isherwood joined an extraordinary band of mystic explorers that included Aldous Huxley, Bertrand Russell, Chris Wood (Heard's lifelong friend), John Yale and J. Krishnamurti. Through Huxley, Isherwood befriended the Russian composer Igor Stravinsky. On Valentine's Day, 1953, at the age of forty-nine, he met the eighteen-year old Don Bachardy among a group of friends on the beach at Santa Monica. This began a partnership, which though interrupted by affairs and separations, continued until the end of Isherwood's life. The more than thirty years age difference between them raised the usual eyebrows at the time, but the two became a well-known and well-established couple in Southern Californian society, with many Hollywood friends.

Isherwood's later books include *Prater Violet* (1945), *The World in the Evening* (1954), *A Single Man* (1964) and *Christopher and His Kind* (1977). From 1959 to 1962 Isherwood taught as a guest professor at Los Angeles State College and the University of California at Santa Barbara. In 1965-66 he taught at the University of California at Los Angeles. In 1975 he won the Brandeis Medal for Fiction. With his explicitly autobiographical works Isherwood became in the 1970s a leading spokesman for gay rights. He was one of the first internationally known figures to admit that he was homosexual.

DON BACHARDY

BIOGRAPHY

Born in Los Angeles on May 18, 1934, Bachardy began drawing as a child. By his early teenage years, he was specializing in portraits rendered in ink and acrylics. Bachardy attributes his interest in looking at people to his childhood obsession with movies, a passion carried into his adult life. The close-ups of screen actors upon which he gazed as an impressionable child are at least partially responsible for his lifelong interest in portraiture. Bachardy was only eighteen years old when he met Isherwood, who was thirty years his senior. The discrepancy in their ages shocked many of their friends; but in his memoir *My Guru and His Disciple* (1980), Isherwood observes that “I myself didn’t feel guilty about it, but I did feel awed by the emotional intensity of our relationship, right from its beginning; the strange sense of a fated, mutual discovery. I knew that, this time, I had really committed myself.” In another memoir, *Christopher and His Kind* (1976), Isherwood describes Bachardy as “the ideal companion to whom you can reveal yourself totally and yet be loved for what you are, not what you pretend to be.” Bachardy was a student of languages and theater arts at UCLA when he met Isherwood in 1952 and began a relationship that lasted until Isherwood’s death in 1986. The novelist was Bachardy’s first live model, and his initial sitting in 1953 marked the beginning of a series of portraits that, to Bachardy, “encompass[es] the full range of my work as an artist and...represent[s] my best effort.”

Bachardy was still drawing Isherwood—along with several of Isherwood’s friends, many of them celebrities—when he enrolled at the Chouinard Art Institute in 1956. In 1961 he began study at London’s Slade School of Art; that same year heralded his first solo exhibition, held at the Redfern Gallery in London. Bachardy’s drawings and paintings are included in the permanent collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian, the National Portrait Gallery in London, Princeton University, the Fogg Art Museum of Harvard University, and the University of California at Los Angeles, among many others. His published works include *October* (with Isherwood, 1980), *One Hundred Drawings* (1983), *Drawings of the Male Nude* (1985), and *Last Drawings of Christopher Isherwood* (1990). Bachardy also collaborated with Isherwood on a television script, “Frankenstein: The True Story” (1973) and on a dramatization of Isherwood’s 1967 novel *A Meeting by the River*, which failed on Broadway in 1979. Most recently, University of Wisconsin Press published Bachardy’s book *Stars in My Eyes* (2000), a richly illustrated account of numerous sittings with various actors, writers, composers, and directors that Bachardy and Isherwood knew. The book’s prose is culled from a journal Bachardy kept at Isherwood’s urging, and validates the novelist’s precept that art is often a record of the artist’s own experiences, even when the focus is on the subject.

BEHIND CHRIS & DON:
AN INTERVIEW WITH GUIDO SANTI AND TINA MASCARA
by David Shepard

Q: I understand it's taken you a long time to complete this project. When did you start the project and what was the original inspiration for it?

GS: About ten years ago. The idea came from one of the other producers of the project, Julia Scott, whose family has known Chris and Don for many years. Julia introduced me to Don and suggested making a documentary about his life with Chris. Don showed us this fantastic 16mm home footage that he shot in the 1950s while vacationing with Chris, and that was very much the inspiration for the project. Would it not have been for Tina Mascara's new perspective and enthusiasm, it would have been very hard if not impossible to do it on my own. We felt compelled to start right away, and began planning our production schedule, bought a camera, an editing system-which we are still paying for-and, in a matter of days from our decision to join forces, we started shooting.

Q: Ten years is a long time. What kept the idea alive?

GS: Yes, it is a long time, but it is not unusual. There are so many different reasons involved in making a movie, not least financial, and you have to find help and collaborators willing to work for close to nothing. It takes time, patience and a strong commitment. In our case, what kept the project alive for such a long time was the way we felt about Don and his relationship with Isherwood. A relationship which was extraordinary in so many ways, because of their age difference, because they were both artists and because they were two men who never hid the fact that they were gay and in love with each other in a time, the 1950s, in which this kind of relationship was most unusual and, certainly, not well accepted by the majority of people.

TM: We knew we had a powerful story to tell, a story that inspired us-and keeps inspiring us-and that is what kept the idea alive.

Q: Since you had a lot of material, it must have been hard to find a starting point. Where did you begin, and how did you decide how to approach it?

TM: We started by interviewing Don several times over the course of a couple of years—about nine times. We would interview him for a few hours, go back home, look at the material and try to decide the best way to tell our story. We knew we had a story, but we didn't know exactly how to organize it in an intelligible and powerful way. What we knew for sure was that we did not want any third person narration over the documentary because we wanted to preserve a sense of intimacy which, otherwise, would have been lost. And Don was of great help to us. Not only did he allow us to look and search in any part of his life by making available diaries, letters, films and photographs, but he also shared with us his most intimate thoughts and feelings with incredible grace and abundance of details. Don is a 'natural', he is a fantastic storyteller and an exceptional human being who gave 100 percent to the project.

GS: This was quite important because the documentary is very much Don's story. It's a love story between a young boy who doesn't know who he's going to be in life, and a famous writer-mentor who sees how this young man can turn into a great artist and human being. In a sense, it's a coming of age story. Some people thought that since Isherwood was the one who was more famous, we should have concentrated more on him, but, in reality, Don is the heart of our film. It's his perspective and it's his

side of the story. We have many other interviews with friends and scholars, and we have actor Michael York as the voice of Isherwood, but the documentary is mostly 90 minutes of Don recollecting his life.

Q: Who were some of these other interviewees? Since they weren't all in LA, you had to do some traveling, didn't you?

GS: Many of the interviews were done in Los Angeles, but we also went to Paris to interview Leslie Caron, to London to interview Katherine Bucknell-the editor of Isherwood's diaries-and to Ireland to interview the director John Boorman.

TM: It was almost like guerilla shooting. We didn't have a real budget and we had to save every single penny we could. We couldn't afford a taxi from the airport; we were sleeping in hostels and carrying all our equipment through the subways of London and Paris. The lighting equipment was so heavy we literally would sit and study the map of the subways, trying to select exits which had elevators. At the end of the day we were completely exhausted.

Q: You also reenacted some scenes, didn't you? With so much material that Don and Chris shot themselves, why add more?

TM: Well, the last thing we wanted to do was a lot of recreations because that would have been very TV-like, but there were parts of the story that we felt needed to be told in a visual-poetic way, and we didn't have the archival material to cover it. The idea we came up with was to try to do recreations in their style and make it look like they shot it. We shot with the same film stock they used, for some parts, a camera similar to the one they had. We shot everything in an amateur-style way, with shots that sometimes go purposely out of focus. We worked with our cinematographer, Ralph Q. Smith, finding a very natural "unlit" look for the film and I think we succeeded. We were lucky because we also found an actor who looks very much like Don, but we could not find anyone that looked like Christopher. Anyway, we avoided showing much of their faces, most of the time, we just see their silhouettes.

GS: We also recreated one of the key experiences in Chris and Don's relationship. It was during the time that they went to visit Paul Bowles in Tangier in 1955 and smoked hashish and ate majoon. They had this terrifying hallucinogenic experience, which really tested their relationship. It was very much a revelation to both of them because it brought them closer and it made them realize that they could completely trust each other, no matter what. They were in the early years of their relationship and the experience proved to them that their union was strong and solid, and it was there in case of turmoil.

TM: Because we were committed to making this sequence as emotional as possible we enlisted the help of an amazing production designer, Francisco Stohr, who helped us in turning our apartment into an almost exact replica of Paul Bowles'. Despite our limited budget, Francisco was able to create something special for the scene. Signe Johnson, our associate producer, did the rest by finding some great costumes for the actors.

Q: You've mentioned quite a few names. Who else played a role in helping you finish this project?

TM: Well, we can start with Signe Johnson, our Associate Producer. She is the first one who really helped us raise money for the film. She inspired us and she inspired other people to help us. And it was amazing because after Signe, things began to happen.

GS: Yes, that's true. When James White (Producer, Executive Producer) came on board, things started to change rapidly. James has been giving us incredible support, without his help, we wouldn't have been able to finish the film. Other people who worked with us are Ralph Smith, our cinematographer; Francisco Stohr, our production designer, Rodney Ascher, our after-effects artist; Andy Hay, the supervising sound editor and mixer of the film; and Miriam Cutler, our composer, who has done an incredible job with the music.

TM: We also had two very talented twin sisters, Katrina and Kristina Swanger, who did some fantastic animations for the film. They animated "Kitty and Dobbin", the kitten and the horse that Don and Chris "adopted" as their animal personas. In the animations you actually see the two animal characters coming to life from one of the birthday cards that Chris wrote to Don. They also come back in the last sequence of the film and are part of the ending. They add a very humorous and intimate element to the story which we couldn't have achieved otherwise. So, eventually, other people came on board and we have a full crew right now. Everyone's been very generous with their time.

Q: Did your constraints hold you back from including anything?

TM: No. I think this film succeeds despite not having a lot of money.

GS: Not having a big budget is not always a disadvantage because you are forced to be more creative and resourceful. A big budget would have meant less control, creating difficulties for us since we had a very strong idea on how we wanted to tell our story.

TM: There were several times when we were really close to getting a grant early on, and had we gotten it, this film would not have been as good. Not having much money we were totally free. We had Don's full support and that was enough for us to continue.

Q: Looking back from being mostly done with the production part, did you originally think that was going to take this long and this much effort?

TM: I didn't think about it, and that's one of the beauties of the way we work. If we had, we never would have made it. If you think about it rather than just jumping in and doing it, then I think you would never approach any artistic endeavor.

GS: It has been a journey and we loved every second of it. Once you commit yourself, the work takes over and you always find unexpected ways to get things done. Most of all, Don has been a great inspiration to us. We love him dearly and we deeply admire his work and discipline.

TM: Since the late 1950s, Don has been painting every day, almost with no interruption. His commitment to his art has no equal among most of the artists I know. His life is very much work and films, which sounds pretty good to me! It is all that Guido and I enjoy doing.

THE FILMMAKERS

Guido Santi (Producer/Director/Editor)

Born in Italy, Guido Santi started his career writing and directing short films, and collaborating with “Ipotesi Cinema”, a group of young filmmakers coordinated by Awards winning director Ermanno Olmi (*Il Posto*, *The Tree of The Wooden Clogs*). After receiving his Master’s degree in Film Production at USC, Guido has worked producing and directing TV special and documentaries. He lives in Los Angeles where he co-founded with Tina Mascara Asphalt Stars Productions.

Tina Mascara (Producer /Director/Editor)

Born in West Virginia, Tina Mascara is a graduate from the Film Program at the Los Angeles City College. She wrote, produced and directed two independent feature films: *Jacklight* (2000) and *Asphalt Stars* (2002). Both films have been shown and awarded at several domestic and international film festivals, including the Calcutta International Film Festival, The Palm Springs and the Madrid Film Festivals. She lives in Los Angeles where she works as a freelance writer, editor and producer.

Julia Scott (Producer)

Julia Scott’s career in the film industry spans over 14 years and includes working on films with such notable directors as David Lynch, John Frankenheimer, Charles Shyer and Sean Penn. Beginning as a production coordinator on feature films, she eventually worked as a production executive at MDP Worldwide and then went on to produce documentary films until 2002, when she enrolled in law school. In 2004, Julia received her J.D. and began practicing entertainment law. More recently, Julia has acted as legal counsel on a variety of films including *Premonition*, *Fur: An imaginary Portrait of Diane Arbus*, *The Contractor* and *Into the Wild*.

James White (Producer/Executive Producer)

Author of several novels (*Birdsong*, *The Ninth Car*, *The Persian Oven*, *California Exit*, *Clara’s Call*), James has been awarded the Guggenheim and other fellowships. He formerly directed the Masters of Professional Writing at the University of Southern California and has taught at UCLA and the University of South Alabama. He is Executive Director of the Christopher Isherwood Foundation. He has also written several scripts for the cinema.

Ralph Q. Smith (Director of Photography)

With over fifteen years experience shooting film and video, Ralph has worked on a wide range of projects from documentaries and dramatic narratives to commercials, industrials and music videos. His work has been viewed on Bravo, The Independent Film Channel, PBS, and at such film festivals as Sundance, Slamdance, The New York and Aspen Film Festivals, and the Festival du Cinema Americain de Deauville. Ralph is an M.F.A. graduate of USC’s Department of Cinema-TV Production where he received the prestigious Eastman Kodak Scholarship for Cinematography.

Francisco Stohr (Production Designer)

A native of Venezuela, Francisco holds a degree in Architecture from La Universidad Central de Venezuela. After graduating from UCLA in TV and Film Production, he began his career working in commercials, theatre and independent films. He created and developed illustrations and storyboards to set design, and art direction for productions like: *Jack Frost*, *Glory Dayz*, and *Promised Land*. Francisco also designs for The American Theatre Art Foundation and he is the recipient of the prestigious Artistic Merit Award 2007.

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Edited and Directed by GUIDO SANTI & TINA MASCARA

Narration of Isherwood's diaries MICHAEL YORK

Director of Photography RALPH Q. SMITH

Production Designer FRANCISCO STOHR

Character Animation KATRINA SWANGER and KRISTINA SWANGER

Photo Sequences by RODNEY ASCHER

Supervising Sound Editor ANDY HAY

Original Music MIRIAM CUTLER

Associate Producers SIGNE JOHNSON MARTINA BATTISTICH

Produced by JULIA SCOTT TINA MASCARA GUIDO SANTI JAMES WHITE

Executive Producers JAMES WHITE ANDREW HERWITZ

USA • 2007 • 90 mins • Color • In English

Digital • Aspect ratio: HD 16x9 full-frame • Sound: Stereo

High res photos are available for download at:

<http://www.zeitgeistfilms.com/film.php?directoryname=chrisanddon&mode=downloads>

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