

Interview With Richard Chamberlain: From Dr. Kildare to Beyond

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CHICAGO – Still regal and debonair, Richard Chamberlain has graced both the screen and television with a memorable presence that has spanned 50 years. He recently introduced “The Four Musketeers” at The Hollywood Palms in Naperville, Illinois.

Chamberlain made a superstar splash on TV in 1961 when he played the title character in “Dr. Kildare,” gaining fame in nearly Beatles-like proportion. Moving from that show in the 1960s, he went to England near the end of that decade, to study stagecraft, and eventually became the second American (after John Barrymore in 1929) to play Hamlet while in residence.

His film career then picked up again, as he played a major role in the 1970s schlock classic “The Towering Inferno” and both versions of the Musketeers films (explanation below), before becoming “King of the TV Miniseries” with unforgettable turns in “The Thorn Birds,” “Shogun” and Centennial, among others.

Recently, Chamberlain wrote his autobiography, “Shattered Love,” in which he revealed that he was gay, and followed that up with his scene stealing role in “I Now Pronounce You Chuck and Larry.”



A Florid Life: Richard Chamberlain in Chicago, March 13, 2010

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Richard Chamberlain sat down with HollywoodChicago.com for a comprehensive interview on his life and times, a potpourri of memorable success.

HollywoodChicago.com: Let's talk celebrity during the early 1960s. What was the strangest fan incident or celebrity-style moment you had during Dr. Kildare-mania?

Richard Chamberlain: A lot of car chases. I had a powder blue Stingray with the top down most of the time, I loved that car. Every once and awhile a car-full of girls would see me and we'd have these chases through the Hollywood Hills, because I didn't particularly want to stop. I usually outfoxed them, and would take off in my great car. [laughs]

There was a few episodes of getting naked pictures, which were charming [laughs] and wonderful.

HollywoodChicago.com: Because of Kildare, you got to embark on a singing career, charting several singles. You've subsequently done several musical theater roles and sang in the 'Slipper and the Rose.' Is there anything, based on the training you had afterward, that you'd want to change about your earlier recordings?

Chamberlain: I was taking singing lessons right from the beginning. I had a nice voice, a pleasant voice. But I didn't have a singer's 'personality.' There is a kind of an energy that goes into singing. The more totally yourself you can be, the better. There is no place to hide when you're singing, and I was rather shy and inhibited in so many ways. And that was not conducive to really great singing. I could have

never have done pop or rock 'n roll. [laughs] I sang the standards, and they were okay. It wasn't until fairly recently that I've had the type of freedom to really sing.

HollywoodChicago.com: Right after Kildare, you embarked on the Broadway musical stage version of 'Breakfast at Tiffany's,' which closed during previews. Why do you think that production was so snakebit and can you describe the back stage feeling among the cast and production staff regarding the many changes that took place?

Chamberlain: Everybody good in the world was involved in it. Abe Burrows wrote it, Michael Kidd did the choreography and Bob Merrill did the songs. And it was a hugely expensive production. It was suppose to be the big hit of the decade. There is a thing called 'magic' and sometimes it happens and sometimes it doesn't. One of things that happened is that Abe was forced to go into rehearsals before finishing the second act. So he would go home and write and come back and direct, and as brilliant as he was, he just really got tired.

Meanwhile, I was having a great time playing opposite Mary Tyler Moore [as Holly Golightly]. I was playing George Peppard's part from the film. And we played a month in Philadelphia, the audiences were nice, the reviews weren't, but the audiences were nice. And then we played a month in Boston. The gypsies [chorus people] knew the show was trouble right off. But I didn't, I was green as could be, I was having a fabulous time. [laughs] So in Boston I realized we were in trouble. Abe was close to exhaustion and then they brought in Edward Albee, of all people, to rewrite it. He wrote this very dark musical.

We closed for two weeks before we opened in New York for previews. This dark musical. And we were in this huge theater, The Majestic I think it was, packed of course because everyone smelled death. [laughs] The sharks smelled blood. And the audience hated the show, they had never seen a dark musical before. They just hated it and they started yelling at us. And Mary would go off between scenes and just cry. No one had ever experience anything like this before. And Mary closed it herself after four previews, with an enormous advance sale that all had to be returned. It was heart breaking. It may have been a good show, nowadays it might even work.

HollywoodChicago.com: What was your initial reaction when you saw the final cut of 'Petulia' [1968]? What the unique narrative structure planned in the beginning or did it come about while you were sequencing the shoot?

Chamberlain: Richard Lester [the director] didn't tell us anything. [laughs] He was totally secretive about it. He'd say, 'I want you to do this scene and I want you to be totally secretive about it. I want you to be really angry, I mean cool it but be really angry.' And I didn't know why.

He would put me at the top of the enormous structures at the top of San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, looking down in a white suit. And I didn't know what it was all about. [laughs] He always had three or four cameras going, long shot, close up, medium shot. And he would keep them rolling between scenes, just to catch moments. And it drove Julie Christie [as Petulia] crazy because she liked to know what was going on. She was a very big star and wanted to know what was going on.

HollywoodChicago.com: What about George C. Scott?

Chamberlain: I never talked to him. He was either acting or in his trailer, smoking cigars with his co-horts and playing poker. [laughs] I didn't have much to do with him.

When I finally saw it, I thought it was wonderful. Very ahead of its time.



With Barbara Stanwyck in 'The Thorn Birds'

Photo credit: Warner Home Video

HollywoodChicago.com: What role in your long career best exemplifies the duplicity that you had in your personal life, and what nuance did you bring to the performance that you had never felt before?

Chamberlain: I played Tchaikovsky as a gay man in 'The Music Lovers' [1970], which was directed by Ken Russell and co-starred Glenda Jackson. I suppose I related to the tortured aspect of his life, and some of the terror of it. He married the Glenda Jackson character, and there was an extraordinary scene where she takes off her dress and she's ready to go, and Russell filmed it like it was an enormous vagina. [laughs] And the set was shaking, Ken was playing Sostakovich full blast on these huge speakers. The camera was above shooting down and we were rolling on the floor. Finally Glenda ends up naked on the floor, and I was tormented as Tchaikovsky. Ken was slightly sadistic, and filmed it over and over again. We would leave between takes and just sit, trying to stay sane. I suppose there was a certain reality to the terror, that I might not have experienced otherwise.

HollywoodChicago.com: Let's briefly talk about the Musketeers films. Instead of two films, it was originally slated to be one three hour film, correct? But it was cut in two without the knowledge of anyone in the production. What was your reaction to that?

Chamberlain: We were all flabbergasted by that, by the fact we made two films instead of one film. Funny enough, Richard Lester [director] said to the press that everybody knew, but nobody did. It said 'Intermission' in the middle of the script.

Raquel Welch had something in her contract that made it possible for us to sue for some added dinero, and we did get more money for it. As a result of this, there is now a 'Salkind Clause' in every contract, saying that a work can only be released as one film, and if its released as two films you get paid double.

HollywoodChicago.com: Are you glad you reached the point in American social history where you could be a proud and out gay man?

Chamberlain: Yes and no. It's fine with me, because I finally reached a point at age 65 when this magical thing happened. I was writing my book, and one day it was as if I was visited by an angel. This inner voice just said 'enough already, you've been putting yourself through this for nothing.' The fact that I'm gay was totally benign. Think about it. What does that tell you about somebody. Nothing.

It's very interesting that we blow this up to be a huge and scary fact, when it isn't very interesting at all. So now I'm fine.

On April 10th and 11th, the Hollywood Blvd Cinema in Woodridge, (Illinois) and the Hollywood Palms in Naperville continues their series of stars introducing their films with the reunited cast – Rita Moreno, Russ Tamblyn and George Chakiris – of 1961's "West Side Story."
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