

just entertainment

"Maurice" — the inside story

Once he became Maurice, James Wilby had no problem kissing the men Maurice loved. "If it were me doing it, I'd be terribly self-conscious. My hair would go all red."

BY STEVE WARREN

In 1913 Edward Morgan Forster, then 34, began writing a novel about his own kind of people — homosexuals — the kind whispered about since Oscar Wilde's trial but still not discussed openly in polite company.

The author of *A Passage to India*, *A Room with a View* and 17 other books finished *Maurice* in 1914, dedicated it "To a Happier Year" and began the laborious process of hand-picking its readership, one at a time, from among his circle of friends.

Because he had insisted that "in fiction anyway two men should fall in love and remain in it for the ever and ever that fiction allows," E.M. Forster dared not think of publishing the book when he wrote it; and despite the legalization of homosexuality in England in the '60s the book never saw the light of day until 1971, the year after its author's death.

In 1986, when his film of Forster's *A Room with a View* opened to great acclaim, director James Ivory could not acknowledge his plans to bring *Maurice* to the screen, he says now, because he was still haggling over the rights.

Ivory has been making films with his partner, producer Ismail Merchant, for 25 years. As *Maurice* represented a posthumous coming out for Forster, will their version mark a similar coming out for Merchant and Ivory? The question is offered with the option that his response can be off the record, but Ivory doesn't request it.

"I wouldn't say that," he replies. "We've done it. Now let the chips fall where they may."

James Wilby is rather more interesting than Maurice Hall, whose romantic and sexual awakenings he enacts in the film, but toward the end of another day of non-stop interviews on a whirlwind tour of the U.S., he's having trouble focusing. Sentences that start promisingly trail off into "... Do you know what I mean? I'm having trouble putting my thoughts into words." We're going to have to paraphrase a lot.

Wilby ... or won't he?

Two hours after our interview Wilby is on the stage of *Maurice*, a benefit for Coming Home Hospice, making an earnest but barely coherent speech: "My girlfriend in London [soft groans from the audience were less because he's not gay than because he felt the need to establish it] has worked with an environmental agency for seven years, and two years ago they started focusing on the AIDS issue."

"We were so slow in picking up on the AIDS issue in England, I knew about it before almost anyone else." For that reason (?) he says he is glad to be doing a benefit for an AIDS-related cause. He is especially glad to be doing it with *Maurice*, which he describes as "a universal positive statement."

While the film, like the book it so closely follows, is ultimately pro-gay, the actual content is not all that positive, except from an all's-well-that-ends-well standpoint. The first two-thirds concerns Maurice's becoming aware of his homosexuality through his love for Clive Durham (Hugh Grant), his schoolmate at Cambridge. They never have sex, and Clive ultimately marries a woman. After trying to be "cured" Maurice has one night of love with Clive's gamekeeper, Alec Scudder (Rupert Graves), then fears the man wants to blackmail him while Alec thinks Maurice was "just amusing (him)self."

Only after more than two hours of various agonies do two men join together in a loving physical relationship and stand up proudly to

the world.

You must keep in mind that *Maurice* depicts homosexuality in a culture so different it might as easily be on another planet as in England shortly before World War I.

The Burma road

Wilby says he could relate to the lack of information about homosexuality available to his character in those days because his own boyhood many years later was somewhat cloistered. Born in Rangoon, he moved with his parents to Ceylon and Jamaica before settling "in the north of England, where things hadn't changed in 30 years" to attend public (boarding) school. When he got out, at 18, "I had a lot of catching up to do."

But aren't England's public schools a hotbed of homosexuality, as we saw in *Another Country*? "That does happen to some people," Wilby admits without saying whether he was one of them. "The idea of being in a one-sex society at the age of puberty, when sex is beginning to happen to you, is very unnatural. ... It's the same as in the navy — you have these needs, and very intimate friendships form. ..."

Wilby and Hugh Grant were teamed five years ago in *Privileged*, a contemporary story of life at Oxford directed by Michael Hoffman, an American who went on to make *Restless Natives* and *Promised Land*. Hoffman told us he included a scene at the annual drag ball of the Piers Gaveston Society, even though it "didn't really fit in with the rest of the picture," because he wanted to show "the last gasp of (homosexuality) for a lot of people ... the final bloody blowout before they have to grow up," where "even the people who are supposed to be straight are giving blow jobs under the table!"

"(Hoffman) was quite obsessed with that idea," Wilby says. "I'd never experienced it and maybe he had, so perhaps I shouldn't speak, but to me it's a lot of pretentious rubbish." The idea of an orgy — gay, straight or mixed — "just doesn't smell right to me," the actor insists, unable to put his reasons into words.

If this makes him sound rather strait-laced, Wilby claims he had no trouble playing the intimate scenes in *Maurice*, once he got into the character. "We did some of the love scenes rather early on, in the second week of filming, but that was enough time for me to have found who Maurice is."

Once he became Maurice, Wilby had no problem kissing the men Maurice loved. "If it were me doing it I'd be terribly self-conscious. My hair would go all red," the blond actor offers.

Until three weeks before shooting started last September, Julian Sands (the romantic lead in *A Room with a View*) was set to play Maurice. He bowed out and Ivory was stuck for a replacement. Wilby had interviewed earlier for a minor role and been rejected because of his resemblance to Sands. This handicap suddenly became an asset, as did Wilby's previous work with Grant. "We had to read about a dozen scenes together for the audition, and Hugh came by and went over them with me the night before. I'm sure that was helpful," Wilby says.

Wilby ... or won't he? II

"I'm not a homosexual," the actor volunteers; but because styles have changed so much he thinks he has more in common with Maurice than a modern gay man would. "There's nothing modern about his homosexuality. He's dead straight in the beginning of the film."



Maurice (James Wilby)

This begins to change as Maurice meets Risley (Mark Tandy), a flamboyant upperclassman who impresses the impressionable student. He soon meets Clive and forgets Risley, as did Forster in his novel — although Ivory brings him back later, partly for what Wilby thinks are political reasons. "He was a little bit worried modern audiences would (believe) that Clive suddenly turned heterosexual."

Ivory and co-writer Kit Hesketh Harvey added a scene — one of the few liberties they took with the novel — where Risley is arrested for having "attempted the corruption of a social inferior." The judge gives him a lenient six months at hard labor because he knows Risley will also lose his political career and social position. Clive, observing the trial, decides his feelings for Maurice — and men in general — are not strong enough to be worth such a risk.

(Incidentally, Grant has a split lip in this scene which seems somehow connected to a fight Clive has with Maurice later. Wilby says it's just an unfortunate coincidence that Grant "showed up with a bruised lip the day we were to shoot that scene. We didn't know if someone had hit him or he'd got drunk and fallen down."

He told us he'd walked into a door — that old story.")

The relationship between Maurice and Clive is physical, though not sexual. "It was not uncommon for young men in those days to go around campus arm in arm," Wilby points out. In one cozy scene, however, Maurice strokes Clive's hair until they wind up in an embrace and are clumsily attempting to kiss when the arrival of friends interrupts them. "If they'd been allowed to get on with it then," Wilby speculates, "things might have been different." (That's silly, as they have many more private opportunities in the course of their three-year relationship.)

Bluebloods with blue balls

Many who see *Maurice* are unaware that the love between Maurice and Clive is never consummated, despite clues to that effect, perhaps because people today — including some gays — are better able to understand a physical relationship between two men than an emotional one.

Forster wrote that their platonic romance "... does not seem to me at all unlikely."