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film

Of Angels and Apocalypse

Northwest Film Center screens Derek Jarman retrospective
by Christopher McQuain

When Tilda Swinton was awarded her Best Supporting Actress Oscar for *Michael Clayton* earlier this year, it's a safe enough bet that the majority of the televi-

sion audience was unaware of her roots as a compatriot of the late, notorious Derek Jarman, an English filmmaker whose work was more queerly avant-garde than anything before and almost anything since. But Swinton, who acted in the majority of Jarman's films between the mid-1980s and his AIDS-related death in 1994, brought his spirit with her: In the midst of all the high-toned self-congratulation, she saw fit to tease co-star George Clooney about his best-forgotten turn as Batman, making sure to dredge up those notorious bat-suit nipples to emphasize—as Jarman always did—the gaudy, disreputable and always potentially homoerotic outrageousness lurking in the corners of our culture.

Swinton appears in, and wrote and spoke the narration for, Isaac Julien's 2008 documentary *Derek* (7 p.m. July 11-13), which kicks off an upcoming Jarman retrospective at the Northwest Film Center. It's a fine biography of the artist and summarization of his art, with images of Jarman's life and work cohering around Swinton's very personal tributes to a man she clearly regarded as a dear friend and important inspiration. As she wanders through modern London, her touching, often wryly funny voice-over venerates and mourns Jarman's perennially anti-commercial, rebellious artistic spirit, noticeably absent from so much of today's cinema. Julien's documentary is an excellent introduction to Jarman's work for

those unfamiliar with it, and it includes a bounty of insights and reminiscences for longtime admirers.

Next up is 1976's *Sebastiane* (8:45 p.m. July 11), a retelling of the story of St. Sebastiane explicitly inspired by his status in art history as

an enduring icon of homoeroticism. (Before making films, Jarman intended to be a painter, and he continued painting on the side throughout his life.) As in any Jarman film, the "story" is secondary to the visual impression. The almost religiously erotic fervor evoked by a half-dozen or so barely clad, very fit men stuck together in the desert is the film's real subject, and the film perfectly synthesizes a contemporary softcore aesthetic with a very astute classicism. By turns

tender, cruel, languorously and feverishly sexy, the film perfectly bears out Jarman's claim that his films were not topical but rather "political by their very existence." *Sebastiane's* celebration of homosexual eroticism was a defiant gesture meant to complement the then-blooming Gay Liberation movement, and it certainly has an ongoing value as both a symbol of its time and an ongoing reaffirmation of the vitality of gay desire.

Perhaps a bit more topical, 1978's *Jubilee* (8:45 p.m. July 12) is a somewhat backhanded tribute to the dominant, quasi-nihilistic punk music and aesthetic of its time. With its episodically structured glimpses into the casually violent and sexually radical lives of the youth of a phantasmagorically dystopian near-future England, the film expertly captures the saucy, overeducated-and-underemployed attitude of Britain's punk culture. It's also, however, a funny, somewhat satirical cautionary tale about the ease with which such showy rebellion can be incorporated and commercialized; for all the affection it has for the punks and their spirit, they hated it. (Watch *Derek* through the end credits, and you'll see Jarman telling a hilarious anecdote in which punk fashionista Vivienne Westwood created a T-shirt viciously mocking him, making him the only person besides the queen to receive that particular honor.) In retrospect, Jarman the elder statesman, middle-aged at the time he made *Jubilee*, was more of an outsider—more "punk"—than most punks, and *Jubilee* stands as the ribald, anarchic, relentlessly critical film the movement deserved.

1985's *The Angelic Conversation* (7 p.m. July 16) is a sonically and visually stark, audacious meditation on same-sex love, with the incantatory voice of Judi Dench reciting Shakespeare's famous



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Jarman muse Tilda Swinton narrates Isaac Julien's documentary *Derek*.