

# Reviews

Lambda Book Report

March 1997

## Kicking the Pricks

by Derek Jarman  
The Overlook Press  
ISBN 0879516976  
hardback \$26.95, 300 pp.  
100 b/w photographs

I was asked to review filmmaker Derek Jarman's **Kicking the Pricks** during San Francisco's rainy season. As an antidote to this seasonal dreariness, I retreated into my bed and week after week randomly plucked and read books from the pile that lay beside me. Invariably, I reached out and grabbed Genet, Passolini or Warhol.

My agreement to review Jarman's **Kicking the Pricks** (which was originally published in England as **The Last of England**) forced me to betray these bedfellows. Ironically, (but given the complexity of Jarman's mind not so surprisingly), when I opened **Kicking** I ran back into Genet, Passolini, and Warhol, artists who were either Jarman's contemporaries

and/or his inspirations.

Set up as a journal combined with interviews of himself as well as poems, text and images from his films, **Kicking** is a wide-ranging narrative on Jarman's life, art and creative process. Kicking therefore includes AIDS. After a brief scene from his film *Last of England*, Jarman takes us to 1986 and, in a section entitled "Are These Words Too Brave," we walk with him through London streets filled with Christmas shoppers. Arriving at his doctor's offices, the "sword of Damocles" takes a "side-swipe" and Jarman is told he is HIV positive. Re-entering the busy, festive streets Jarman tells us that when he first went for the test he was receiving death threats over the phone in response to the release of his film *Jubilee*. Before heading home, Jarman

wonders if he will ever fall in love again then ducks into a stationer to purchase a form—to begin writing his will.

We then then flashback to Amerika 1964. Typical of this journal, Jarman frequently alludes to the works of other gay artists to accentuate his own experience. Upon arrival in New York, Jarman meets a friend and "like the prisoners in *Un Chant d'Amour*" they share a cigarette, then Jarman moves on—into the world of closeted gay priests. Jarman's writings on New York's Continental Baths and piers are stunning and bring to mind David Wojnarowicz: "...as you stepped into the dark you entered the world of strangers, on the derelict piers you left the imprisoned daylight behind." Regarding the baths:

Like the desert, though, the Baths played disturbing tricks, down there where time dissolved you in the shadows. The handsomest were the drug dealers, sprawled out on their bunks, gently masturbating, their doors slightly ajar to

trap the unwary...later in an apartment crawling with cockroaches, staring at the ravaged features of some Adonis whose caked make-up had cracked like mud at the bottom of a dried-up lake, not all fountains could restore the dream. This life could become as wearying as the treadmill in a rodent's cage; round and round we went in the land of Cockaigne.

Like many journals, **Kicking** draws us into the artist's rich cultural milieu which in Jarman's case is both international and decidedly gay male. Honing in on the 60s, Jarman pans the London clubs filled with "Mods," moves up into the "economically advantaged" realm of emerging artists

such as David Hockney and then drops us into New York among Warhol and his fawning entourage of boys and girls. In "Andy Warhol is Dead" Jarman pens a poetic exposé on Warhol after he was shot by Valerie Solanas: "...the wigs changed and slipped...there's something frightening in those last self-portraits, like God's flashbulb had gone off in his cadaverous face, Death haunted Andy and the people round him, like moths in God's flashbulb...he mirrored the culture that was dying with him. What culture?" Jarman queries ironically before moving onto an assessment of Passolini's death.

Reflecting Jarman's history of gay activism, **Kicking** is also a relentless political critique of the straight establishment's response to his and other artist's queerness. As London's and New York's gay glitterata emerged "the straights fought back with words like 'decadent', a euphemism for queer." As the journal advances we read more and more about Jarman's struggle for straight-controlled funding for his queer art. And, in rarely covered territory, Jarman reflects on the impact of his sexual abandon on his art and decides that although he was at times

"...on the verge of being trapped in this American dream of liberated sex" these years "were not wasted, but were years of distillation."

Derek Jarman was a genius who, like the gay artists he admired, not only lived dangerously (that being queer) but created dangerous art. In this time when artistic cowardice (that being marketability) reigns, one would do well to read **Kicking**.

—Wickie Stamps