

Peter and I

by David Christopher

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We meet.

Looking back, it amazes me how events in one's life add up to surprising conclusions. It was the summer of 1963. I had finished my first year of teaching in New Jersey. My partner, Reynolds, and I had just moved to an apartment on West 76th Street in Manhattan. It was a renovated brownstone building, the only one in the block between Amsterdam and Columbus. It wasn't a classy block by any means, with hookers shouting out the windows of the old brownstones, and seedy types walking down the sidewalks at all hours. But we loved it.

The apartment was on the 2nd floor, with only two rooms, beside the tiny kitchen and bathroom. But the perk was that off the bedroom was a door that led onto the roof above the large living room of the apartment below. Therefore, in the warmer months, we had a "backyard", where we could put a barbeque and lawn chairs on the tar roof. On summer evenings, we would sit drinking cocktails and laughing while we watched what was going on in all the many apartments around us.

We were also lucky to have two gay couples living on the first floor. Below us was Fred Grades and his partner. Fred was an actor/dancer who later would get me hooked up with The Prince Street Players. The year before he had played one of Ethel Merman's newsboys in "Gypsy". We hit it off very well and were friends with him for years.



Freddie Grades

Also, on the first floor was a lesbian couple, Duke and Jeanette. Duke was the *butch*, a cab driver with a crew cut, who claimed to have worked for the mobs in the past. Jeanette was the *fem* -- quite a beautiful, feminine woman. They were a great couple, and we became friends with them as well.

That first summer, however, Reynolds was unable to enjoy our “backyard”, because he got an acting gig in a summer stock company, The Allenberry Playhouse out in Pennsylvania. He was there for the whole season. In the Volkswagen Beetle that I had purchased to drive myself to my teaching job, I traveled to Allenberry several times that summer to see the plays that Reynolds was in. While there, I met some of the other actors, specifically David Christmas and Jane Farnol.

I saw David Christmas several times in the city afterwards. He was in the original production of *Dames at Sea* at the miniscule Café Cino, playing opposite Bernadette Peters. I saw the show one night and visited David in his dressing room afterwards. There I met the then unknown Bernadette. I loved the play and was lucky to be in a production of it many years later.

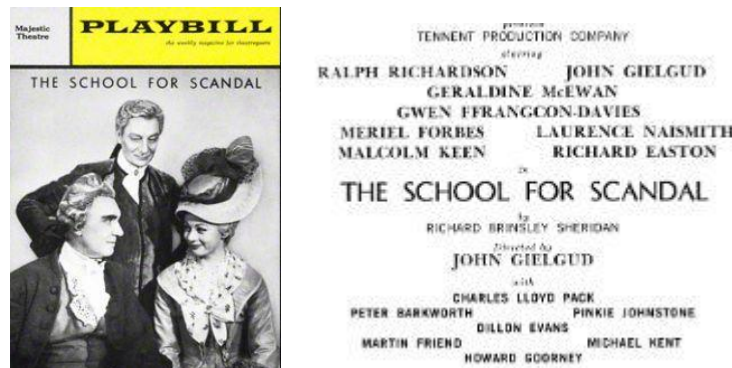


David Christmas and Bernadette Me in a production of “Dames at Sea”

But it was knowing Jane Farnol that led to the rest of this story. She was a lovely British actress, who had recently moved to New York, but who had trained at RADA in London. The Allenberry summer stock was the first thing she’d been cast in in the USA, so she didn’t know too many Americans. Happily, we became very close to her when that job was over.

In the fall, a stellar company came to Broadway from London with a production of “The School for Scandal” directed by and starring John Gielgud, with

Ralph Richardson, and Richard Easton. And in the cast was Jane's drama teacher from RADA, Peter Barkworth.



We went to see this marvelous play and were blown away by these stellar British actors. Jane wasn't with us, but she told us to go backstage to meet Peter. However, we were too intimidated, so we didn't. A couple of weeks later, Jane told us that she was throwing a party for some of the actors in the play, including Peter Barkworth, and urged us to come. Of course, we did.

Therefore, that was the night that I first met wonderful Peter, which began a long friendship that lasted until his death.



Peter at about the age when I met him.

I used to have a photograph from that party that showed Peter with his face lit up from the flashbulb, and I always thought he looked like an angel coming down to earth—and into my life. We immediately hit it off, laughing and telling stories about our varied acting careers (his being the successful one). He had done quite a bit on the West End and in Stratford-upon-Avon, working with some renowned actors like Irene Worth, Ralph Richardson, Penelope Keith, and Gielgud. He wasn't quite famous at that point, but constantly working, nonetheless. He still taught acting classes at RADA, too.



*Peter as Edward VIII with Wendy Hiller
in "Crown Matrimonial"*

It was clear that he was gay, too, but it didn't really come up in conversation. And for some reason, he didn't take a shine to Reynolds. But Peter and I spent most of the party in each other's company. Another friend of his was in the cast and at the party, Richard Easton, so he joined us for a while. I liked him too, and later we became friends as well.

When the party was over, Peter and I exchanged addresses and phone numbers and vowed that we'd see more of each other. But the play was about to close, and he would be back in London very soon, so we didn't get together in New York again, until several years later. I would, however, visit him in London often.

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London.

With Peter in England, we understandably didn't see each other for over a year and a half. But we did communicate with letters—yes, on paper with a postage stamp. I learned that he was on the West End in a play with Irene Handl, but I don't remember what. I longed to visit him, and the opportunity came on my summer vacation from teaching. I decided to take a trip to London for a month. Reynolds didn't want to leave New York and his acting classes, so I went alone, which suited me fine. It was one of the best months of my life.

Peter wrote that I could stay in his home for the whole time, so I wouldn't have to deal with hotels, or bed-and-breakfast places on Gower Street. I was thrilled!

He lived in a charming house in Hampstead, a couple of blocks away from the famous Heath. It was on an adorable street called Flask Walk (you must pronounce this *Flahsk Wawk*). At one end of the street were some typical British shops, like a greengrocer, a butcher stop, and a cheese seller. Then it became residential, with beautiful slender houses on both sides of the street. Peter's house had a staircase leading up to the front door, which led to the first floor. Here was the parlor, the kitchen, and a door leading to the back yard garden. The floor below held the tiny dining room—with ceilings so low that I had to stoop the enter. There were two floors above with a bedroom on each floor—I was to use the top floor. The one toilet and bath were on the 2nd floor. I couldn't have loved it more.



Peter in the tiny dining room with his close friend, another David

Soon after I arrived, Peter threw a party in my honor. He invited several of his actor and RADA-student friends—all male. Included in the boisterous group were two actors that I'd never heard of but were to become big movie stars very soon.

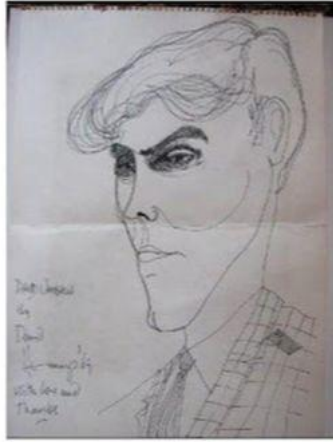


*David Hemmings
before he was in "Blow Up"*



*John Hurt
before "Man for All Seasons"*

Of the two, David Hemmings was the friendliest and at one point in the party we were asked to make a drawing of one of the other guests. Hemmings said that he would like to draw me. I did one of John Hurt, but I've since lost it.



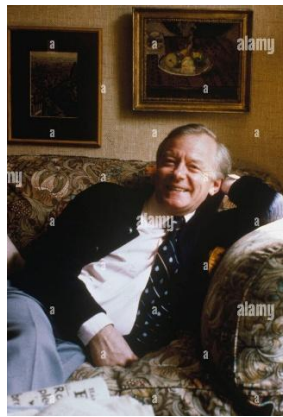
David Hemming's drawing of me
(note the American flag – they loved that I was from the States)

As the party was breaking up, David Hemmings insisted that he take me to his favorite restaurant the next day. I was excited to be going *on a date* with this handsome young actor. So, the next evening I eagerly awaited his arrival at the curb in front of the house. Half an hour later, David roared up in a tiny, two-seat MG convertible with the top down. I was quite disappointed, however, to see that he had brought a girl with him. There was no room for me in the two seats, so I was perched up on the back, sitting precariously on the “boot” with my feet in between David and this girl.

He took off like a bat-out-of-hell through the streets of London, out into the suburbs, then beyond to the countryside. I spent the whole time clutching desperately to the back seat, trying not to slide off as he whipped around the curves. He chatted noisily to the woman sitting next to him and paid very little attention to the terrified passenger behind him. It was an unmemorable meal in a picturesque country pub, but the time spent in that beastly little car remains the scariest ride of my life.

I often wonder if Mr. Hemmings was sadistically playing this prank on the naïve *American Actor*. Perhaps he was proving that he was straight and showing off to the girl, or maybe he was just self-centered and unaware. Happily, the return trip was more subdued, but I was never happier to see Peter's adorable house.

For my whole time there, Peter was a gracious and entertaining host, but by no means did I spend all my time in London with him. We always had breakfast together—typical toast and soft-boiled egg—before I left for my wanderings to explore the city. Some afternoons and evenings I spent in his lovely parlor listening to classical music, reading or sometimes playing card games. He always regaled me with theater stories about his experiences. I was particularly intrigued by his working with Irene Handl (pronounced the British way, “Irenee”). Famous for her wild and funny characters on stage, she had only a small following in the States. But I had grown to love her after seeing her play David Warner’s mother in the film *Morgan*. I told Peter that I liked to fancy myself as the USA President of the Irene Handl Fan Club. Peter got a kick out of that and told me hilarious tales about her.



Relaxing evening in Peter’s parlor

On two occasions, Peter took me to The National Gallery. There he introduced me to the glorious works of J. M. W. Turner, which just blew me away. He told me that Turner was very prolific and there were hundreds of these huge canvases, each one marvelous in its detail. I’ve been a huge fan ever since.



Two of the multitudes of Turner classic paintings

The other lovely part of my London stay was Geoffrey. He was a handsome, blond, Cockney boy I met in a pub and with whom I spent many a pleasant night. I was having a pint when I heard this delightful Cockney dialect from the guy next to me. I thought, *I just must get him into a conversation just to hear him talk*. Geoffrey was a charming photographer who had pulled himself out of the slums of London by his love of photography. He was as fascinated by my American dialect as I was of his Cockney one.

This was not a gay bar, since I really didn't know how to find them back in the 60s, so I didn't expect anything to come of it; I just wanted to hear him talk. But as our conversation went on, I realized that he was interested in a more intimate relationship, and I was happy to go along with this. We spent many nights together in his flat.



My Cockney friend, Geoffrey

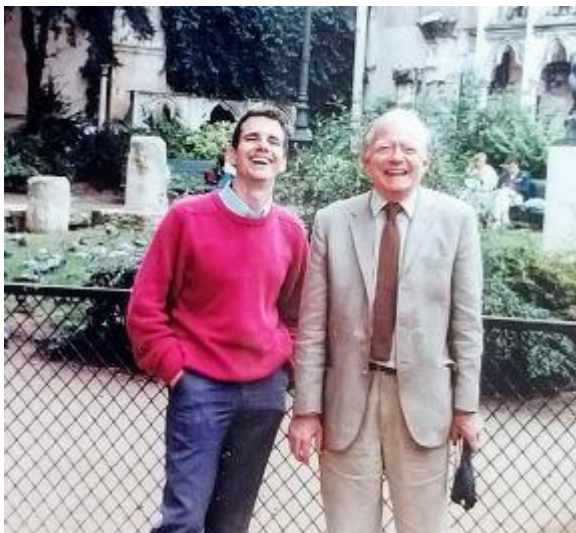
One night I did bring Geoffrey to Flask Walk for a night in my little room. However, I got the feeling that Peter was not pleased about this, since I fear he wasn't free of class snobbery. It was at this time that my lovely month in London was at an end. I may well have overstayed my welcome, though Peter would never have said anything. We parted on excellent terms, with Peter urging me to return any time I liked. And I did visit Flask Walk many times after that, but never for such an extended period.

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Thanksgiving et al.

In the years that followed, Peter and I kept in touch, but both our lives were getting busier, so we couldn't get together for quite a while. His career was blossoming, getting better roles on stage and becoming rather famous from some British *Telly* appearances. We had a very brief time together when my new partner, David Munro, and I were visiting Paris. Peter actually flew over for lunch, just to meet Munro. While we were dining, a British couple came over to Peter and asked for his autograph. They knew him from some popular TV show he was in.

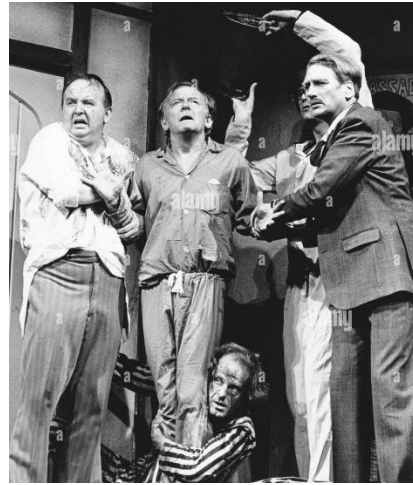
In 1986, Peter came to New York for some reason, and we had him out to our house in New Jersey for Thanksgiving dinner. He and Munro got along very well, and it was a splendid party. That time we also went into New York for an Off-Broadway gay-themed play, "The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told" with Peter and our friends Tom Lynch and Barry Monush. Some audience members recognized Peter but didn't say anything—we just noticed them turning around and staring. We felt that we were with a real celebrity. On that trip, he offered to take us to a Broadway show, that turned out to be "Titanic, the musical", which none of us particularly liked.



Meeting Munro in Paris and his serving Peter a Thanksgiving feast

I didn't get to London often in the years to come, because I was heavily involved in a regional theater, Celebration Playhouse. So, when I wasn't teaching, I was acting or directing. Peter and I kept in touch through letters. I was able to take

a short trip to London with Gary Cohen during that period, in 1976. While we were there, we saw Peter in “Donkeys’ Years” on the West End. Peter graciously invited us to his house for dinner. He was quite tired from the exertions of this play, but he made a point of welcoming us.



“Donkeys’ Years”, Peter didn’t have a lead role, but it was a strenuous part

Our friends, Tom and Barry, went to London and saw his production of “The Winslow Boy”, and they were very graciously received in Peter’s dressing room after the show for champagne. They reported that the play was terrific, too.

Peter twice won the BAFTA TV Award for Best Actor, in 1975 for “Crown Matrimonial” and in 1978 for his role in “Professional Foul”, which was written specifically for him by Tom Stoppard.



Peter receiving a BAFTA for “Crown Matrimonial”



Peter in Stoppard’s “Professional Foul”

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The Later Years.

And it wasn't until 1990 that I was able to take a London vacation again. I went with Munro and while visiting Flask Walk, Peter introduced us to his now partner, David Wyn Jones. Actually, I met the third David back in 1966 during my first visit there, but I don't think that they were together as partners then. David Jones stayed with him until the end of Peter's life, taking good care of him.

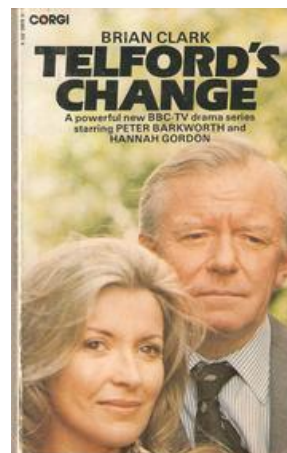


Peter and David Jones, with Munro

While there we got to see a wonderful play that he was in on the West End, "Hidden Laughter". By this time Peter had become a major star, primarily from his many TV appearances. He had been in an extremely popular series called, "Telford's Change" that ran for many years. He played a senior banking executive who was downsized, leaving his wife and moving to Dover to start his life over again.



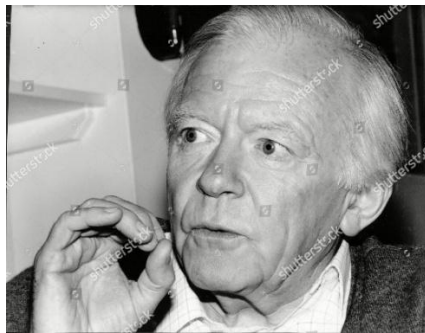
Peter in "Hidden Laughter"



and his TV hit

Researching his accomplishments on Wikipedia, I found that he was in 24 films and 84 TV shows, not to mention his many stage productions. What a career!

In 2002, I flew to London for Peter's 73rd birthday. It was a bit of a shock, because he was failing a great deal. David Jones was with him and was obviously a huge help. Peter's memory was very poor, and I remember a lunch we had together where he kept repeating the same story over and over. He must have told me that he had lived in the house across from the restaurant every 10 minutes. I was saddened but relieved to bring him back to Flask Walk, where David Jones was waiting.



Peter in his later years



with David Wyn Jones, his partner

In 2006, I got a call from London. It was David Jones to let me know that Peter had passed, after a stroke and a fatal case of pneumonia. Of the many losses I've endured in my long life, Peter Barkworth is one of the ones I most dearly miss. And his friendship will always be one of my most beloved.



A painting of Peter in his beloved garden