



## On A PRIVATE MATTER

**Roger Tucker**

with

**Aanel Victoria**

Thanks to the initiative of Hawaii-based Wikipedia editor, Aanel Victoria, my early plays for Granada — recorded on giant “quad” video tapes and long thought to have been wiped — were relocated just before Christmas 2009 in the BFI National Archive. Aanel was compiling the complete credits of Ian Charleson when she came across the listing for A PRIVATE MATTER in my credits file. On investigation by Kathleen Luckey at the BFI, it was discovered that The National Archive had acquired a duplicate master-tape in the early nineties, along with three other plays that I directed for Granada, but, due to a clerical error, this one had not been entered into the catalogue. The policy of The Internet Movie Database (IMDb), the authority on these matters, is to allow the inclusion only of credits that can be verified by an official source. So this meant, in effect, that the play disappeared.

The following interview was conducted for the purposes of a forthcoming biography of Ian Charleson, who came to fame following his starring role in the Oscar winning film, “Chariots of Fire”. Ian, who was gay, was diagnosed with HIV in 1986, and died at the age of 40. He requested that it be announced after his death that he had died of AIDS, in order to publicize the condition. This was the first show business death in the United Kingdom openly attributed to AIDS, and helped to promote awareness of the disease. *The Ian Charleson Award* was established in his honour in 1991, for the best classical stage performances in Britain by actors aged under 30. A PRIVATE MATTER was Ian's first major screen role.

**Synopsis:**

An historical biographer wants to write the life-story of a distinguished general. In the course of his research he spends a night with the late general's family, his widow and two sons. It soon becomes apparent that the family are divided as to whether the book should be written, for, as they put it, the General only had three interesting episodes in his life: two good battles and a successfully hushed up scandal. During the course of the play the nature of the scandal is revealed — the General had a breakdown and appeared on the parade ground bollocks naked.

**The Drama:**

At the climax of the drama the younger son, played by Ian Charleson, strips off his clothes in front of family and guest to prove that his father's misdemeanor was really of no great consequence and not something which should eclipse his life's achievement or blight the emotional life of the family for years to come. The central point was to demonstrate that a naked body was not something to be scandalized by, and so, it was agreed from the outset, both by actor and producer, that the strip would be total and shown as such. That was the way it was rehearsed, but, this was daring stuff for the times, and, at the last minute, the production company got cold feet. And it was ultimately shot and broadcast with only one brief full-length shot from the rear.



*AV: Really great! I love it. I'm sure you have your favorite memories and thoughts about it, like what you love about it (both the film and the experience), what bothered you about the production, etc.*

RT: I was very surprised to be asked by Granada to direct A PRIVATE MATTER. The only TV dramas I had done up to that time were a couple of late-night pieces which were considered quite avant-garde. It seemed strange then to be suddenly offered this rather staid chamber play. On reflection, I think this was a deliberate move. Even in 1974 this was quite an old-fashioned piece, and I think they hoped I would give it a more contemporary edge. This I set out to do with abrupt musical phrases and sound-effects, like the tinkling chandelier and striking clock, visual cut-ins, and ....

*AV: I hear you about the red background; it does very much help to offset the staid and quiet quality of the talky chamber piece. Good job with the sounds, etc. too.*

RT: The central theme of the play was something about which I had no reservations: the acceptance of the naked body, and the attack on middle-class prudery, keeping up appearances, and all the social stiffness that went with it. One could say all that was very 60s but still relevant for a mainstream TV audience. From the outset I made it clear that, if I was to do the play, the strip would be done complete and for real, because the very idea that this was nothing to get steamed up about was central to drama. This was agreed by the producer and made clear to all the actors at the casting interviews.

*AV: Did you cast the show?*

RT: I always interview all the actors for a part and normally get them to read. However, I'm sure that Ian would first have been brought to my attention by the casting director. At the time there was already a certain buzz about Ian from his theatre work.

*AV: Why did you cast Ian, and how did he come to be considered for the role?*

RT: As far as I was concerned it would be great to have a fresh face to balance the well-known actors who would be cast in the older roles. When we met, Ian appeared very self-possessed and struck me as someone who would be able to carry off the role, despite his lack of experience.

*AV: Did Ian send in a film reel with his CV, for audition purposes? Also, do you recall how many other young men auditioned for the role?*

RT: Back then there was none of the home equipment that exists today to record and edit performances, so actors were simply not able to have their own showreels to hand out. However, I have an inkling that I did have a prior screening of Ian, in a small supporting role, which would have been arranged for me by Granada in down-time. The normal procedure was that CVs and pictures were sent out by agents to casting directors. These would be sifted, checked for availability and prioritized before recommendations made to the director. I don't recall how many actors I saw for the part, but I would hazard a guess that it would not have been more than a dozen. Numbers rarely went above that unless I thought that the casting director was on the wrong track, I wanted to rethink the character, or the part called for a particular combination of qualities and skills which were difficult to fulfill.

*AV: What was your impression of Ian, both professionally (as an actor or fellow industry professional) and as a person? Was he sociable with you and the cast and crew?*

RT: Working with Ian was a very positive experience. This was not only Ian's first major screen role but also my first major drama production as a director. At that time I was still in my twenties, so Ian and I were probably closer in age and outlook than we were to both the rest of the cast and chief members of the production team. I think they all started out being quite suspicious of us both but came round as we got down to work. From the outset Ian was very self-confident and not in the slightest intimidated by the company. It was quite clear then that he saw himself as a leading actor and would rapidly become an established name.

*AV: I realize you yourself were also quite young but you had experience in directing film. Did Ian and his scenes require more takes or rehearsals than the vets'?*

RT: Not at all: all were treated as equals. Frequently it is the more experienced actors that take up most time. (Perhaps, because they feel they deserve it.)

*AV: How quickly did Ian learn his lines compared to the other three? How quickly was he word-perfect?*

RT: As I recall, Ian came with his lines already pretty well learnt. However, this may well have been a sign, not only of his determination to succeed, but also of his underlying insecurity. Experienced actors do not generally like to learn their lines until they have had a chance to hear the director's vision and discovered the basic moves.

*AV: Did you have to give much direction to Ian? His role is by far the most animated and emotionally varied, and has the most physical movement. Rachel's role gets subtler than his, in her climactic speech, but by and large the other characters' roles are somewhat routine compared to Ian's.*

RT: Yes, I agree. I am sure I would have talked through the roles in considerable detail with both Ian and Rachel, but this is normal and should not be seen as some kind of fault. Quite the reverse; one wants artistes who are open and ready to listen. The other two actors were quite brilliant, but it is true that their parts did not stretch them beyond their comfort zones.



*AV: Was the creation of his character at all a bit of a collaboration between the two of you? That is, did he offer ideas and suggestions and behaviors/feelings beyond your plans and vision?*

RT: The creation of a character is always a collaboration. Even when a director imagines a character in the finest detail, that all changes when the vision is embodied by a real living person. Often it is when the actor is behaving *precisely* as directed that the biggest surprises occur.

*AV: What was Ian like working with the older actors? Did he have any qualms at all (even in the beginning) about the strip scene?*

RT: From early on Rachel took Ian under her wing. Strip scenes are not normally rehearsed except by indication of the basic moves. However, I believe it was Rachel who advised Ian that to overcome any nervousness he should do it once beforehand for real. Ian asked my permission to do this at the Tech Run, and I was happy to go along with it, but told no-one else. When that moment came Ian started fumbling with belts, zips, and buttons while the PA stopped her stopwatch and the show came to a halt. Everyone stood, waiting patiently, as he manically flung garments around the set until, finally, he stood there stark naked. There was a beat of silence and a patter of desultory applause before the technicians turned away to their trolley of tea and cakes and Ian started scrabbling around trying to retrieve items of his clothing from the floor. I remember Rachel remarking that he had nothing to worry about because he had a beautiful body, but whether this was actually a help or a hinderance to his final performance I'm not quite sure.

*AV: Why did the stopwatch stop and why did the show come to a halt? Is this because the undressing time would be cut from the final, so that from clothed to naked would be much quicker than in real life?*

RT: Right. There are some things, like uncorking wine bottles, and undressing, that take so long in real life that they are almost always shortened on screen. The PA is continually clicking her stopwatch on and off trying to estimate the screen-time of the final programme.

*AV: Why did the Techs turn away? Because were they waiting for him to get dressed again, to carry on with the next scene? Or ...*

RT: They were just more interested in scoffing the cakes. I love the story of John Frankenheimer detonating the tea-trolley on *Grand Prix*. I think all directors have had that thought at some time.

*AV: How much rehearsal did the production have? I just found out two days ago that Granada was in Manchester, right? So a London actor would hop the train and spend — how many days for a shoot like this — in Manchester?*

RT: The Granada Television studios, where the play was shot, were situated in Manchester, but rehearsals took place at the Oval Rehearsal Rooms in London. This was occasionally done so that actors could continue to perform in West End Theatres during the evening while rehearsing during the day. I don't recall whether this was the case with Ian at that time. The rehearsals lasted for two weeks. Towards the end of the second week heads of departments traveled down from Manchester to see a "Tech Run", where the whole piece was played out with the dimensions of sets marked out with tape on the floor. They then returned to make their preparations while performances were finessed for recording the following week.

However, my insistence on having the interior sets predominantly red took up a good deal of the discussion, and met with some opposition. Early colour television technology did not cope well with this colour. By the time of *A PRIVATE MATTER* the problems had been largely overcome but the engineers were a notoriously conservative bunch and still always tried to avoid red, just as they always pushed against the use of low level lighting. The designer was not keen on the use of red either, as he thought it out of keeping with the fusty family attitudes. There may have been something in this, but I was out to create a visual impact within the very limited confines of the piece. In the end I got my red, though not of such a vivid hue as I would have liked. Against this, I decided to keep the costumes monochrome. I had the black and white dinner suits of the two older men as a given, and I asked that the wardrobe for Rachel and Ian be kept in complimentary greys. Within this restriction Ian was still able to have a costume that very much marked him as a young man of the moment. The platform-soled boots were a very new, and much mocked, innovation of the time, and the choker of beads was Ian's own addition.

*AV: What about the necklace/pendant? Was that already indicated in the script or already chosen by the wardrobe department (or you)?*

RT: That was decided between Ian and the wardrobe department.

*AV: One thing I notice, at least in my opinion, is that Ian's accent seems to veer all over the place. This seemed to be a pattern of his when he was playing an Englishman in the company of Englishmen, especially if they are speaking in a posh or RP or donnish accent. I do think by the time of his very last film, *Troubles*, he had mastered this, and his accent as Major Archer is consistent and believable. Of course, in *A PRIVATE MATTER* his character isn't stuffy and old like the other characters, he is young and free of pretensions; still, Ian can't seem to decide where to place his accent or how.*

RT: The upper class English accent is one that is notoriously difficult for actors who are not born into it, and a near impossibility for Americans. The problem is not so much in the technicalities of producing the sounds, but in the way that they are "thrown away" or not emphasized for expressive purposes. In *A PRIVATE MATTER* Rachel and Barry's accents are perfect. Stephen Murray's accent is also perfect, but of a subtly different kind. As a working academic with a rather different ethos than the two older family members he is set a rung lower on the social ladder and this is brought out in the writer's choice of name: the decidedly middle-class "Mervyn Dakyns" as opposed to the aristocratic "Anne and Christopher Black-

Matheson". Unfortunately, Ian's accent is less than perfect. It was close enough at the reading to convince me that he would be able to blend, but, when it came to the proof, the leap was just a tad too far for the boy from humble background to make at this stage of his career. I find very little trace of Scots in his accent; just a slight roll of the "r" which would only be detectable to someone listening for it. However, the occasional over-stress on vowel sounds in his upper-class English makes his delivery seem a little stiff at times.

*AV: In Part 1 he definitely is the junior player of the group, less seasoned and less comfortable on stage and in front of the camera and of course working with such veterans. Still, charm and good looks (and good intentions) carry him through. In Part 2, after he's done the strip scene, he is very comfortable, and, not having to emote so much or cause such a ruckus. Lying lazily there on the couch, he is quite fun to watch.*



RT: It is quite possible that Ian was more at ease in the second part having done the strip. Actors frequently gain in confidence once they've appeared in the buff. Tom Wilkinson made the comment that his acting reached a new level of fearlessness after he'd dropped his pants in front of three hundred women for the film "The Full Monty".

Incidentally, I now remember more clearly exactly what happened with regard to that sequence (the strip in A PRIVATE MATTER). All the executive and production offices at the Granada studios were then equipped with monitors on which you could watch current studio output. Of course, word went around the building of the scene we were about to do and secretaries on every floor were eagerly waiting. The technical supervisor was alerted to this and, being something of a kill-joy, had the studio output taken off the monitors. This proved disastrous because the Programme Controller suddenly discovered that the set in his office had gone dead and rang up to find out why. When he got the explanation he saw scandal coming, panicked, and lent on the producer so, at the last moment, the shooting was sadly compromised.

*AV: Laugh out loud at the Granada monitor black-out. Oh well.*

RT: I think that the solution I came up with, of repeat shots of Anthony rushing naked towards his mother, worked quite well in expressing the hysteria of the moment. That kind of cutting was quite unusual at the time; TV drama, for the most part, tended towards continuous scenes shot in real time.

*AV: Loved the way the opening shot, after the curls of smoke, is a close headshot of the supine Ian -- so very gorgeous.*

RT: He carried it off well.

*AV: I'd like to learn more about the camera-work.*

RT: Sections of the play were shot on the three-man-operated Mole-Richardson studio crane. This is now an almost forgotten piece of equipment: one man rode on the end of the crane arm to operate the studio camera, while another travelled on the base in order to swing the beam, and a third rode on the back to drive the rubber wheeled crane which was powered by an electric motor. (In addition a fourth man was needed to bash both video and electric cables.) With the possibility of panning through nearly three-quarters of the circle, craning from about four to eight feet, and freely tracking any steered course, forward or back, over the studio floor, very complex shots were possible. However it did mean that the camera team had to work in unison with absolute precision and, of course, trust in each other. As a trainee I had watched, veteran director, Derek Bennet, use it on the Granada series, *The Caesars*. I now had my own opportunity, working with some of the same crew. The results were noted by Frank Hatherley, at the BBC, who said that he had never seen a TV play shot like it before. Some years later I attempted to use the same techniques at Thames Studios in Teddington, but with miserable results. Although they had the equipment, they no longer had a team that could use it. The skills had gone forever.

*AV: The three-man crane -- how did actors like that? How did it make acting and filming different from normal?*

RT: Actors always like to feel that the production they're on is "something special"; for that they will endure any amount of pain.

*AV: How exactly did it work vis-a-vis the actors and filming -- that is, how did that affect the actors compared to a normal shoot?*

RT: Well, as well as the three men on the crane, the actors in front of the camera also had to be perfectly co-ordinated. The cameras were big, heavy, monsters, so it was hard work to create the kind of fluid movement that is nowadays taken for granted.

*AV: How many other cameras were used as well?*

RT: It was a five camera studio, but not all the cameras would be used simultaneously. I also, occasionally, used a camera on a low-level mount, known as a Cinderella dolly. Studio time was of the essence, so one did not want to change camera mounts more than absolutely necessary.

*AV: Were the rehearsals all done with the camera(s) and crane?*

RT: Only the final two days were done with all the cameras and studio crew. In Britain in those days we worked a system that amazed people from other countries. It was a system that had been devised by the BBC in the early days of television and later adopted, (with some modifications) by commercial TV when that arrived. The basic idea was that, in order to minimize the amount of time that expensive equipment and facilities were tied up, all the shots and final cutting would be preplanned. By the time of *A Private Matter* drama schedules had already been eased to a degree, with a regime known as *rehearse/record*, where the production was broken into a number of segments. However, production staff, and, particularly directors, still worked under extreme pressures of time. I remember, soon after, a director came over from the USA for a prestige production with Lawrence Olivier, and was totally astounded by what he was asked to do. In the end he insisted that a separate recording machine be hooked up to each camera (which put another two studios out of operation) and then took all the tapes back to America to edit there. (Needless to say, home-grown directors were not afforded such luxuries.) On a later production, at the BBC, I was observed by a delegation from, the Italian network, RAI; afterwards, they said that to do something of equal quality would have taken them three times as long.



*AV: Paint me a picture, if you can, of how the filming and camerawork went, with the actors.*

RT: As far as the cast is concerned, there is little to tell: without exception they behaved professionally without any show of temperament. All my energy was taken up with, either vacillating production executives, or the detailed logistics of the production.

There was one little incident, that seemed like a crushing blow at the time, that in retrospect raises a smile — In my pursuit of visual imagery I planned to have a moth knocking against the lamp that Rachel turns off at the end. Sadly, even with the first-rate production facilities we had in England, a reliable moth wrangler proved hard to find. Shortly before I was due to shoot the scene, I was called aside by the props master to look at the moths. When he opened the box I was staggered to see these enormous winged monsters. Apparently, it was not the right season for English moths to hatch, and so they had had larvae for these beasts flown in from South America. What was I to do? To introduce these into my refined country house set would make it appear as if it had suddenly turned into a Hammer House of Horror. Feeling tired and emotional I rang the producer to plead for more studio time on a later day, but when he discovered that my prime motivation was to shoot a moth knocking against a light he just fell about laughing. And, of course, this soon became a joke at my expense that was repeated up and down corridors. From then on, sorry to say, for years to come, to shoot a live moth in a studio became an obsession of mine; one which I finally realized in *Released* at the BBC, (and then only after I had threatened to finance the moths out of my own pocket).

*AV: How openly gay was Ian in 1974? I'm trying to think back to the early 70s; I imagine that even in the theatre many guys were still rather hush-hush about it, especially if one had, like Ian, grown up in working-class Scotland in the 1950s.*

RT: Ian did not behave in a camp manner off-screen and, at this stage of his career, did not advertise his sexuality. But then, in 1974, outside a circle of close friends, very few did. It came down to covert signs understood only by the initiated, such as handkerchiefs in hip pockets, etc. It was in this vein that Ian suggested that his character should wear the string of beads which would have been seen by some as a sign of being gay and would certainly have infuriated those of a stiff moral bent, like his own family.

*AV: Did the scriptwriter mean to imply that Anthony is gay? There seems to be some (deliberate?) ambiguity around that -- he's a loose-living artist or art dealer (red flag) who disparages his father's utilitarian but actually rather good paintings. His brother scolds him for running around with "drug addicts and perverts", although he says Anthony is apparently chasing "girls". So what's the scoop? Is it deliberate ambiguity? Is it code (for the cognoscenti) for gay? What do you think?*

RT; I think that for a through-and-through establishment character, like the older brother (played by Barry Justice), there would be very little to choose between "chasing dolly-birds in mini-skirts" and being homosexual. He would have considered both as signs of moral

decadence and "lack of backbone." That character is the keeper of the ethos of the "stiff upper-lip". Temptations of the flesh, in whatever form, would be seen as a test of character, and not something to be indulged. Similarly, the breakdown of the General on the parade ground, for him, was a disgrace and not something to be aired in public.

*AV: Funny that Ian's character asks Mervyn, "Are you a homosexual?"*

RT: For me, the scene Ian carries off with the most accomplishment is that one; where he begins by accusing Mervyn of wanting to seduce him. I think he displays just the right level of knowing awareness within the social mores of the time and situation. The most moving moment of the whole drama for me is when Anne reveals that the apparently lunatic gesture of her husband, the General, stripping naked on the parade ground, was actually, in her mind, a very personal and private rebuke to her for a lifetime of sexual rejection. However, the silent closeups of Ian, which begin and end the piece also, I think, hit the perfect note. At the opening, the suppressed defiance and impending challenge; and, at the end, the look, when he sees his mother and elder brother together on the sofa and knows that he will always be excluded, is especially eloquent.

*AV: You've noted on your website that Rachel and Vanessa were rather on the outs at the time, due to Vanessa's radicalism. I don't know if you know this, but Vanessa and Ian became very close, especially in the 1980s, and Vanessa put up a lot of the money to publish his tribute book. I'm wondering if Rachel and Ian socialized outside of the studio at all during or after having met on A Private Matter. Do you know? If so, do you think this is possibly where Vanessa met him?*

#### **From Talk Talk page**

What I remember most vividly is the rehearsals being interrupted by a furious cat-fight when the actress, Kika Markham, walked in distributing news sheets from the far left, Workers Revolutionary Party. Rachel, otherwise known as Lady Redgrave, flew at her screaming that Kika's activist chums had broken up her family and ruined her life. Both of her children, Vanessa and Corin, had been deeply involved with the group some of whose activities had come under police scrutiny. After a brief exchange Kika turned on her heel and fled in tears; and Rachel, with a feint smile of satisfaction, returned to blocking the scene.

RT: All that I can tell you is that Vanessa did not come around while we were working on either the rehearsal or production. You must remember that this was the time of *The Red Army Faction* (later known as *The Baader-Meinhof Group*) in Germany, and *The Symbionese Liberation Army* (who had recently kidnapped Patty Hearst) in the USA. In the UK the nearest we came to all that was The Workers' Revolutionary Party. Their activities blew up into a tabloid scandal the following year when another actress went to the police with the charge that she had been held against her will, "for questioning", in a remote and isolated house, known as *The Red House*, which was owned by Corin Redgrave. When the police raided the building they found empty bullet cases. So, I think that Rachel at this time was feeling quite isolated: her daughter, Lynn was, I believe, already living in America, and Corin and Vanessa were occupying this way-out space, having become figureheads for a group that was violently opposed to everything she stood for. I do not know what Ian's political views were at the time, but his demeanor was polite and considerate, and, certainly, had none of the abrasive and hectoring characteristics that one tended to associate with the far left. Vanessa, however, spent a good deal of her time proselytizing among theatre groups, so it is very possible that he had, at least, already met her. It is well known that her father, Sir Michael Redgrave, was bisexual; this is something she had grown up with, so it is also very likely that she would have given Ian support in his *coming out* during his final days. But, this is something you should really ask Vanessa about.

*AV: If A PRIVATE MATTER aired on 25 August 1974, when do you think he would have auditioned for it, and when would the shoot have occurred? Timeline is obviously important for a biography.*

RT: On the timeline I think the play would have cast in February or March of that year and rehearsed and shot April/May. In those days "The Big Four" major ITV companies (which included Granada) had a firm hold on the network and could commandeer transmission slots at a much shorter interval than later became the case.

*AV: Since I can't interview Ian, I wonder if you could attempt to speak for him? What did Ian [appear to] love about the whole experience? What did he not like, or dislike, about the whole experience?*

RT: Like any other actor, Ian luxuriated in being the centre of attention. I think he also saw it as a definite step up towards fulfilling his ambitions. What he hated was the last minute failure of nerve by the executives. A few years before the taboo against nudity in the theatre had been broken with the West End productions of *Hair* and *Oh Calcutta!*; we were hoping to do something similar for TV with *A PRIVATE MATTER*, but it was not to be.

*AV: This is really great stuff, very useful indeed!*



- **A Private Matter (1974)**

Rachel Kempson	: Lady Anne Black-Mathieson
Stephen Murray	: Mervyn Dakyns
Barry Justice	: Christopher Black-Mathieson
Ian Charleson	: Anthony Black-Mathieson

Ronald Mavor	: Writer
Peter Eckersley	: Producer
Roger Tucker	: Director

Granada	: Production Company
ITV Network	: Distributor