

**“Recounts a love that approaches the transcendental!”**

— David Edelstein, *NEW YORK MAGAZINE*

**“Of all the people I came to know in Los Angeles,  
their marriage was the only one that endured.”**

— John Boorman, *director*

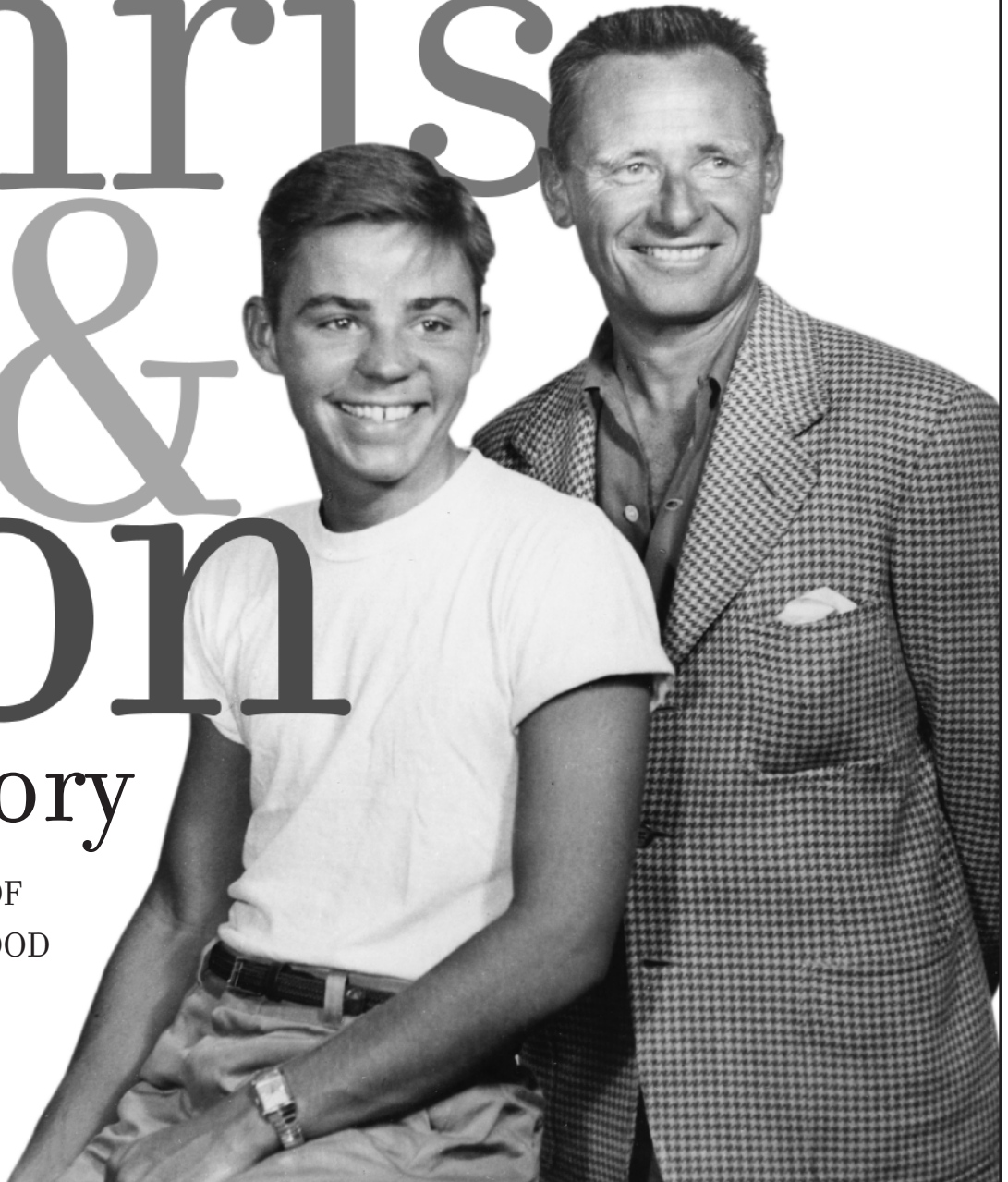
**“Extremely touching!”**

— Stephen Holden, *NEW YORK TIMES*

# Chris & Don a love story

A Film by Guido Santi  
& Tina Mascara

THE HOLLYWOOD LIFE OF  
CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD  
& DON BACHARDY



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FILMS

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# The New York Times

FRIDAY, JUNE 13, 2008

## A May-December Love for All Seasons

The three-and-a-half-decade relationship of the British writer Christopher Isherwood and the American portrait artist Don Bachardy is one of the ultimate true stories of a proto-gay-marriage succeeding in a forbidding climate.

**STEPHEN HOLDEN**

**FILM REVIEW**

Defying social conventions of the 1950s and '60s, the two men navigated Hollywood society as an openly gay couple, withstanding the slings and arrows of homophobes like the actor Joseph Cotten, who during a dinner party at David O. Selznick's house made loud, derisive remarks about "half-men."

Navigation was made all the more treacherous by the 30-year age difference between the two, who met on a Santa Monica beach and became lovers when Mr. Bachardy was 18, but looked several years younger. They spent what passed for a honeymoon in Monument Valley, where the director John Ford, who was shooting a western, and his crew assumed they were father and son.

Mr. Bachardy, now 74, recalls a traumatic experience that sealed their bond: a trip to Morocco to visit the author Paul Bowles during which Mr. Bachardy consumed hashish for the first time. He and Isherwood experienced a blind terror during which, afraid to let go, they clung to each other all night in their hotel room.

Guido Santi and Tina Mascara's tender, extremely touching documentary, "Chris & Don: A Love Story," examines the history of this complicated and passionate relationship, which ended with Mr. Isherwood's death in 1986. As Mr. Bachardy remembers, the age and class differences — Isherwood, who dropped out of Cambridge, came from an upper-crust English background and Mr. Bachardy's father worked in the aerospace industry — made for a relationship fraught with power imbalances.

Until Mr. Bachardy established himself as a gifted artist, he was dismissed or simply ignored by many of his older partner's famous friends, including Hollywood royalty and the expatriate artistic community in Southern California.

Within a year of living with Isherwood, Mr. Bachardy, who grew up in Los Angeles, had assimilated so many of his British mentor's mannerisms that he had assumed Isherwood's British accent and dry, precise vocal tone. One talking head observes that Isherwood had "succeeded in cloning himself in some weird way."

After Isherwood, an ever-attentive father figure, noticed Mr. Bachardy's talent as a



Photo: Michael Childers / Zeitgeist Films

draftsman, he sent him to art school, where he flourished. Had Mr. Bachardy not developed a successful parallel career as a portrait artist (many drawings and paintings of celebrities are shown), the relationship might not have endured.

The elegantly structured documentary weaves extensive footage of Mr. Bachardy rummaging through their house and reminiscing with readings from Isherwood's diaries by Michael York, old interviews with Isherwood, home movies of their travels and glamorous social life, and commentary by friends, including Leslie Caron and the British filmmaker John Boorman.

One especially delicious scene observes the couple with Burt Lancaster, Anna Magnani and Tennessee Williams on the Key West set of "The Rose Tattoo," in which Mr. Bachardy was an extra. The only parts of the movie that seem extraneous are brief re-enactments of scenes described by Mr. Bachardy.

Early in their relationship the two developed a special coded language to discuss themselves through notes and cartoon drawings in which Mr. Bachardy was a cat and Isherwood an old horse, and the movie develops these dialogues into short animated sequences. During a rocky period in the early 1960s when Mr. Bachardy began pursuing sexual encounters outside the relationship, they referred to his behavior as "mousing." Mr. Isherwood's anxiety, in which he imagined living without a partner, was reflected in his novel "A Single Man."

In this pre-Stonewall era Isherwood's increasingly acute political consciousness led him to make "the treatment of the homosexual a test by which every political party and government must be judged."

The last section of the film, devoted to Mr. Isherwood's slow decline from prostate cancer, is its most wrenching. Mr. Bachardy, determined to make Isherwood's death "something we were doing together," chronicled his deterioration, executing as many as 9 or 10 drawings a day, including one of his corpse.

Isherwood would have told him, "That's what an artist would do," Mr. Bachardy reflects, then adds, "And that's what an artist did do."

### Chris & Don A Love Story

*Opens on Friday in Manhattan.*

Directed and edited by Guido Santi and Tina Mascara; Christopher Isherwood's diaries narrated by Michael York; director of photography, Ralph Q. Smith; music by Miriam Cutler; production designer, Francisco Stohr; produced by Julia Scott, Ms. Mascara, Mr. Santi and James White; released by Zeitgeist Films. At the Quad Cinema, 34 West 13th Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes. This film is not rated.