

# 'He changed my life': Tom Hiddleston, Rachel Weisz and more on Terence Davies

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'He was sort of quivering, all the time' ... Tom Hiddleston as an RAF pilot and Rachel Weisz as a judge's wife in *The Deep Blue Sea*. Photograph: Film4/Allstar

## 'He grew in passion and tears welled in his eyes'

Tom Hiddleston, [The Deep Blue Sea](#), 2011

I have never met or worked with anyone like Terence. His mind was like a poet's. He saw poetry everywhere: in the composition or movement of a shot; in a line reading; in the [Shipping Forecast](#). He would often do his own rendition, in his unmistakably sonorous voice, with a twinkle in his eye: "Fair Isle / Cromarty / Forties ... south-west veering west, five to seven ... showers, moderate or good ... *with some fog banks.*" Everyone laughed. Everyone loved it.

I remember once on set, while directing a scene between Rachel Weisz and

I, between takes he suddenly started quoting a long passage from Little Gidding, the fourth of TS Eliot's [Four Quartets](#). As he recited the poem, completely by heart, he grew in passion and tears started to well in his eyes. It was almost as if Eliot's poem was for him a key – or a chord – within which he wanted us to play the scene. The poem and his depth of feeling were our cue for the right territory and temperature. He created an atmosphere and our performances were to follow. He was a man of great passion and sensitivity.

Tom Hiddleston in The Deep Blue Sea. Photograph: Film4/Allstar

I'll never forget the first time I saw Distant Voices, Still Lives. I never lived in the past he evoked or recreated, but I knew instinctively that it was totally authentic. It knocked me for six. Women and men singing – unaccompanied, often to accompany themselves, in joy or in pain – alone or in the pub, simply for the pleasure of singing. He was such a close, honest observer of his own childhood, and his past.

He wasn't trying to be anyone else. He was just him. A rare, deep artist. We will miss him.

**'He would turn bright red, his face near exploding'**

*Peter Mullan, [Sunset Song](#), 2015*

Two things I remember most about Terence. First, how incredibly funny he was. He had a wonderfully sharp, barbed sense of humour that almost always involved stories of some pompous prick getting their comeuppance. And second, how the depth of his humanity was founded in the painful, lonely fury of a childhood. When he would talk of tyrants – be they in the home, the classroom, the workplace or the military – he would genuinely turn bright red, his face near exploding and his voice booming like some old ham actor in rep circa 1937.

Peter Mullan in *Sunset Song*. Photograph: Photo 12/Alamy

But his anger was so utterly, heartbreakingly real you immediately understood why he loved actors so much. They could bring his gentleness to the set. They could line up the dancers, the singers the comics that ran around inside him like a never-ending Saturday night. They could take on the bullies and win or die trying. And he'd film it. With tenderness. With them.

**'On one day of shooting, it wasn't sunny. He was devastated'**

*Jennifer Ehle, [A Quiet Passion](#), 2016*

I wanted so badly to work with Terence when I auditioned for [A Quiet Passion](#). He had such a specific, deeply personal vision of the stories he

wanted to create. To work with him wasn't a collaboration: it was to be a paint on his palette. To be used as one of his materials seemed like it would be a privileged experience. It was.

He was very open about how autobiographical *A Quiet Passion* was, so much so that it was hard to draw a line between Terence and its subject, the US poet [Emily Dickinson](#). What moved him most about her was the pain that being unrecognised in her lifetime must have caused such an extraordinary artist.

Terence himself was so cherished, by so many people, that I hope he didn't really identify with that. Yet he was also isolated from the world and must have felt lonely within the industry, because he was such an eccentric. His manager, John, had been his physiotherapist. That was his only representation.

Cynthia Nixon, left, as Emily Dickinson, and Jennifer Ehle in *A Quiet Passion*. Photograph: Courtesy Everett Collection/Hurricane Films/Allstar

He lived very quietly. He had a Friday-night ritual of watching an old film with a cocktail. He'd have very good tonic water delivered and would spend the week choosing the movie. When we were shooting, he'd always have one glass of wine with lunch. He listened to Radio 2, which informed a lot of the musical choices in his films.

His scripts were full of weird, jagged edges and little detours and eddies, perhaps because he insisted on doing three drafts and never revising them. He would sort of spew out the story and then just shoot what was there, without smoothing out the idiosyncrasies. Every moment of the film he had visualised in advance, and he would be distressed if achieving that vision seemed in doubt. We only had about three days shooting in Dickinson's actual home and on one of those it wasn't sunny. He was devastated. It meant so much to him that it was almost impossible for him to shoot that day because that might mean capturing something different to what he'd imagined.

Yet I never felt pressured as an actor to live up to what he'd hoped. Rather, he was very generous. If he liked a take, he was so effusive it was as if you'd performed an aria. In some ways he was a very open man – for instance talking about his celibacy – but he also protected himself with humour. I remember shooting one scene involving the Dickinsons' mother. After it, Terence was weeping inconsolably and had to take half an hour out. The wounds of his connection with his own mother were both very deep and very accessible. Making the films helped him, I think. If somebody has such a strong desire to tell stories, it's almost part of a life support system.

Working with him was like going on a journey through someone else's psyche. How wonderful to be such an individual in an industry which seems to be trying to hammer everybody into creators of content, whose image must be curated and whose brand managed. Terence was an auteur who made unique films that were so personal it's hard to see how they'd ever have become part of popular culture. Yet for people who love cinema, they are a deeper cut.

## **'He had the thinnest skin of any director I've met'**

*Simon Russell Beale, [The Deep Blue Sea](#), 2011, and [Benediction](#), 2021*

I first met Terence in 2010 at a sound studio in Soho, London. The first thing

he said to me was: "I believe you like Bruckner." I'd just done a programme about the history of the symphony and I think he thought I was an expert. He was a great fan of the composer, which later made more sense to me, because Anton Bruckner is the great exponent of a massive and overbearing God.

Then Terence asked me to read a very odd Shakespeare sonnet comparing being in love with chasing a chicken (at least, I think that's what it was about). We didn't talk about my part in *The Deep Blue Sea*, or the play by Terence Rattigan it's based on. And once we were on set, we mostly spoke about music or poetry. I never ate with him or saw him at his home. It was all in the work, yet nonetheless it was quite an emotional relationship.

Russell Beale as the judge in *The Deep Blue Sea*. Photograph: Film4/Allstar

Terence had trained as an actor, so he knew what he wanted from actors, which was minimalism. As a director, he thought like a painter: movements were planned to the last millimetre, scenes were often absolutely symmetrical. The image was entirely in his head and you trusted in that.

A decade later, I worked with him again on *Benediction*, about the first world war poet [Siegfried Sassoon](#). I remember Jack Lowden, who played the poet in his younger days, telling me about Terence giving him precise instructions: "Turn your head a little to the left then this way. And, Jack, if there's a

possibility of a tear at the end?" His notes were technical and accurate. He'd never say: "Oh, you must feel this." I once asked if I could change the tense of a word, which took some courage – for, while Terence might have been insecure when he started out, when I worked with him, he had absolute assurance.

Yet for him, it was never about power – it was about beauty. He would often cry or laugh watching a take from behind the camera, sometimes so audibly the assistant director would have to ask him to keep it down. After a particularly emotional scene, he would go for a walk to gather his thoughts.

Such thin skin was more evident in Terence than any other director I've met. There was an almost preternatural sensitivity to his emotional response: he was sort of quivering, all the time. That didn't make me anxious working with him, but it did make me feel protective. People working with him acknowledged and admired his delicacy.

Jeremy Irvine and Jack Lowden in *Benediction*. Photograph: Roadside Attractions/Laurence Cendrowicz/Allstar

Both *The Deep Blue Sea* and *Benediction* clearly inhabit similar narrative territory. They're about loss and regret, suppressed desire and the failure of love. Terence was a romantic, and all romantics are going to be disappointed in the end.

He was also an extraordinarily complicated man with his own acute

aesthetic. He had quite a byzantine sense of humour, as well as a very particular way of speaking; almost no hint of a Liverpudlian accent. His background felt remote, yet it must have been with him still, all the time.

I remember hearing a story about how [Pete Postlethwaite](#) said he didn't think his character in the autobiographical *Distant Voices, Still Lives* would break a stick over somebody's back. Terence handed him the phone and said: "Call my sister."

Making films might have been cathartic for him. But I also wonder if it was the opposite. Terence was quite pitiless when he looked back, particularly when it came to religion. Yet he also had a deep love for his childhood. He wanted to explore disappointment while celebrating beauty. Perhaps art is not there to find an answer.

## **'I had to wrest my character away from him'**

*Rachel Weisz, [The Deep Blue Sea](#), 2011*

Weisz in *The Deep Blue Sea*. Photograph: Film4/Allstar

He was exacting in his search for a perfect frame. He went hunting for it with his nose and could not rest till he found it. And at the same time he would sob freely when he was moved by a scene. We both knew that *he* was



Hester, my character, and that I had to wrest it away from him and make it mine too, till she was of both of us.

It was a collaboration like no other I have experienced. Working with Terence changed my life. Our film is a record of that transformation. I glory in having known him and grieve losing him.

## **'After I'd finished my scene, he said: "May I legally adopt you?"'**

*Peter Capaldi, [Benediction](#), 2021*

We live in an age of celebrity hype where brilliance is proclaimed all too easily. Terence was the real thing: an artist. He was not a historian, but he chronicled, with rigorous detail and profound depth, a type of life rarely depicted in British cinema in all its lyrical beauty: ordinary working-class people. When I first saw *Distant Voices, Still Lives* (the first of many viewings), I recognised immediately the grit and the melancholy that I sensed in the adults around me as I was growing up, as well as the sheer unbridled joy in an impromptu singsong. I'd wanted to work with Terence my whole career and said yes before I'd barely downloaded the script.

Terence's films create the illusion of naturalism, but they are, in reality, highly stylised and demand a certain rigorous kind of "no acting" acting. When I worked with him, he had thought through every frame, every camera move, and the positioning of all the actors, down to pauses, looks, beats. You still had to be present in the moment, but there was no hiding place. Some actors don't like this kind of directing but I loved it simply because it was Terence. One time we did a passable take. He quietly approached me, whispered "More elegiac", which I thought was a perfect [Terence Davies](#) note.

"How should I be here?" I'd ask. "Very austere," he says. Then, when I'm done, he says: "May I legally adopt you?"

Another: I fluffed a line about the hours "from prime to compline" [names of daily prayer services] and said [Complan](#). "No," said Terence, highly amused, "that's a treatment." This was 2020. Between lockdowns. He was wearing a full-face visor like 1980s riot gear, his pink face looking like a sympathetic policeman accidentally drafted into the miners' strike.

Davies on the set of *Benediction*, filming under virus protection measures. Photograph: Laurence Cendrowicz/Courtesy of Vertigo Releasing

That's what I remember most about him: how unexpectedly impish he could be. The twinkle. All of which could vanish in a heartbeat when it came to the

work, which he treated with utmost seriousness, no prisoners taken. And then, just as quickly, the return of the fun. He was fastidious, even steely, about what he wanted and needed from every department, but I don't want to give the impression that these interactions were easy – I think there was a cost to him because he was essentially a very kind and sensitive man. But his sense of duty and respect for everyone who worked for him, and for the art, was too great for him not to say what had to be said and with an eye like his, who would argue?

For years it was inexplicable to me that he had to struggle so hard for finance. He always seemed to be cutting corners, cobbling things together. Every funding body in the UK should have just given him the money, no questions asked. "How much do you need Terence?", not "Will this turn a profit?" He was one of our greatest film-makers, evident out the gate, and I'm just grateful that he was around long enough to know how truly revered he was.

One last interaction, which amused him greatly. I was trying to get into the zone, to generate the later-life sadness that I thought Sassoon needed. I deliberately let my spirits dip. Terence seemed happy with the takes, then whispered sweetly to me: "Are you all right today? You seem a little down." "Yes, I'm down," I said. "I'm acting in a Terence Davies film."