Tribute—Nigel Finch

The lost language of one of Britain's most offbeat filmmakers

November 1, 1997 By Joe Lovett

A devilishly handsome man with a brilliant sense of humor, English director Nigel Finch delighted in finding the absurd in life and laughing at it. He'd register his delight with a braying laugh so loud that he soundly totally mad, but once you were used to it, it became infectious. Nigel's friends and colleagues adored him, and would do almost anything to help him succeed. My partner Jim Cottrell, and I loved being his friends.

When Nigel came to New York City in the summer of 1994 to scout locations for *Stonewall*, his lover, Ruppert Hazeldon, had already died and Nigel's health had begun to fail. He'd had one bout of PCP, eye infections bothered him on and off, and he was beginning to lose weight. Nevertheless, he seemed totally indefatigable.

When we'd all gather at the beach for the weekend, the artist Barton Lidice Benes would shake his head in wonder as Nigel would literally run four miles down the beach to see a friend, and then run back in time for dinner.

Despite mounting HIV-related problems, Nigel felt comfortable in New York City, his home away from home. Dr. Michael Giordano of New York Hospital agreed to monitor his health, making Nigel feel safer—although he was aghast at the cost of America's health system—as the frightening symptoms of PML set in.

Nigel loved the odd, the offbeat, the irreverent—and that's how he chose the subjects of his films: The Chelsea Hotel, Robert Mapplethorpe, William Burroughs and Louise Bourgeois, to name a few. His films unfolded the pleas in his characters' psyches as his off-camera voice pressed deep into their being. *Stonewall* was his last film, but he might be best remembered in the United States for his production of David Leavitt's *The Lost Language of Cranes*.

Nigel's work was everything to him, and he ignored or fought against anything that stood in his way, including AIDS. When feeling ill during pre-production of *Stonewall*, rather than put off a day, he'd cast his actors from his bed—enjoying the "bad boy" aspect to the hilt. Deep into *Stonewall*, he was already planning his next: Benjamin Britten's *Dido and Aeneas*, with Maria Ewing. When the Stonewall Riot was filmed on a run of cold and rainy November nights, Nigel, feverish and exhausted, would sit on his director's stool wrapped in a parka and blanket as his devoted crew

moved the action along.

As much as Nigel loved to shock, and as much of a rebel and scallywag as he appeared, he still had the same insecurities about his sexuality and about having AIDS that so many people do. He kept much of his personal life from his family and business associates and rationalized his lack of candor.

But in the last years of his life that all began to change, and New York City, he said, had a lot to do with it. He had never seen gay people so open about their lives as those he saw there. And when he saw friends sharing their lives with their families and at work, he wanted the same ease for himself. By the time he died, he'd achieved a more honest relationship with his family than he'd ever imagined.

Nigel died, fittingly, on Valentine's Day 1995, as he neared completion of the editing of *Stonewall*. His funeral in London was a Nigel Finch production—with film clips and eulogies from different aspects of his varied life. It was just like Nigel: Warm and funny, ironic yet comforting. It was without pain, really—until the end, when Maria Ewing stood to sing. Nigel had chosen the last aria from *Dido and Aeneas*, the production he never lived to complete. "Remember me," she sang plaintively. "Remember me…remember me…but forget my fate."

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