

WG and Ralph Bates

On 27 March 1991, ten weeks and one day after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, actor Ralph Bates died at the age of 51 in the arms of his second wife Virginia. Born in 1940 in Bristol to a Cornish father and French mother, both psychiatrists, Ralph William Pasteur Bates was the great-great-nephew of Louis Pasteur. Following studies at Trinity College, Dublin, where he read French, and Yale Drama School, Bates made his stage debut in Shaw's *You Never Can Tell* at the Gate Theatre, Dublin in 1963. The young actor then gained experience in repertory productions ranging from *Hedda Gabler* to raucous comedies.¹

After a number of small parts in TV productions such as *Mrs Thursday*, *Play of the Week*, *The Wednesday Play* and *Coronation Street* (in which he appeared in one episode in 1967), Bates came to prominence as Caligula in *The Caesars* (Granada, 1968), then, through the early seventies, distinguished himself in a run of cult Hammer horror classics such as *Taste the Blood of Dracula*, *The Horror of Frankenstein*, *Lust for a Vampire* and *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde*. "Monica" writes:

*Along with Shane Briant and Ingrid Pitt, Ralph Bates was one of Hammer's brilliant newcomers. He brought a refreshingly new and striking presence to the screen ... His darkly handsome yet satanic good looks, his long and stubbornly straight raven-black hair, his contemptuous confidence and sarcastic wit and his ability to reflect vulnerability and deep suffering all made Ralph Bates a truly unique and powerful screen presence.*²

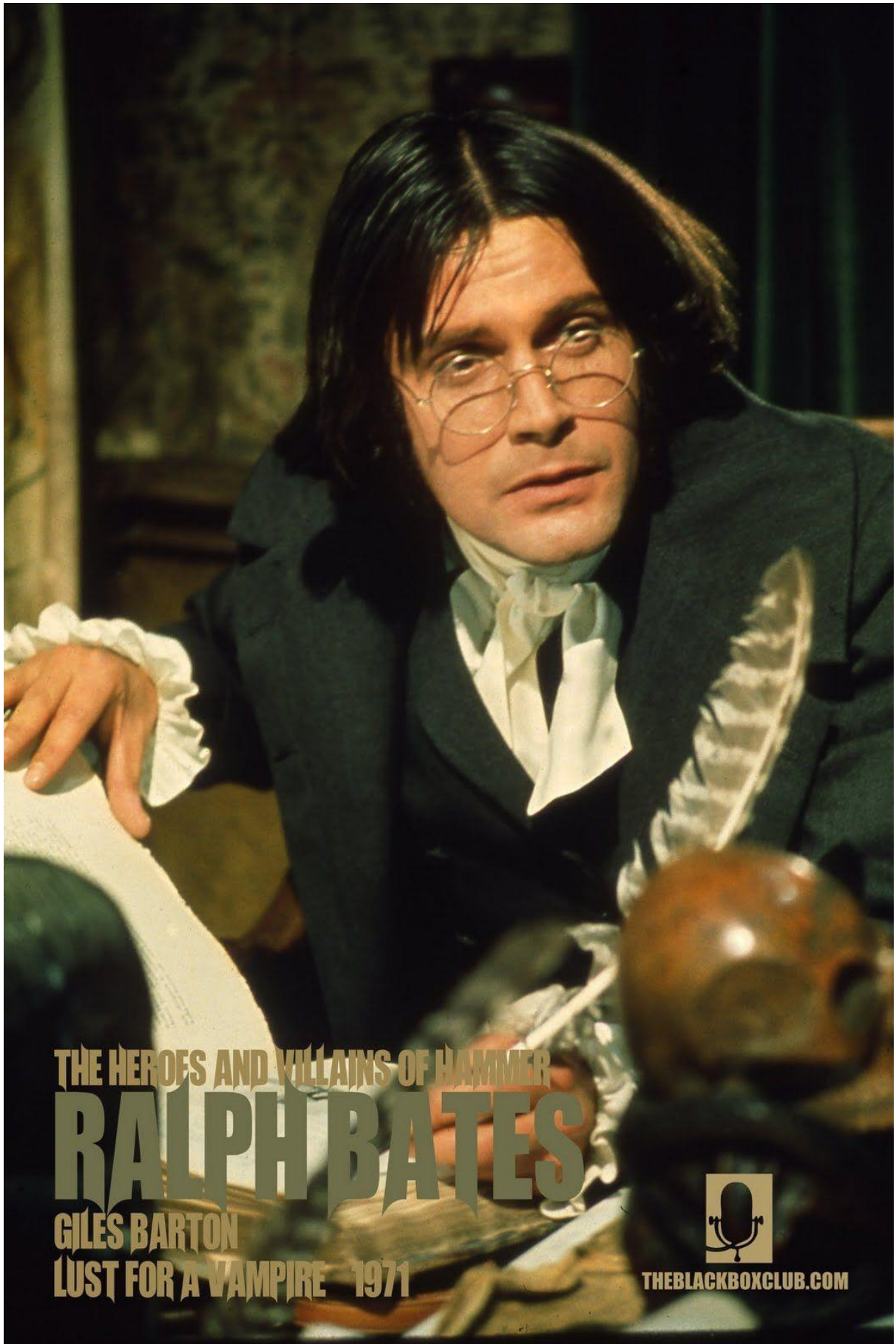
But, though intermittently busy at Hammer, TV work continued to come along too, resulting in appearances in *The Six Wives of Henry VIII*, *Jason King*, *The Persuaders*, *Moonbase 3*, *Softly Softly*, *Z Cars*, *Crown Court* and more. In 1975-7 he memorably portrayed the villainous George Warleggan in *Poldark* and in 1979 played communist Paul Vercors in the final season of drama series *Secret Army*. Because of his Gallic ancestry and dark looks, Bates was often chosen to play either a Frenchman, as for instance in a 1980 episode of ITV comedy drama *Turtle's Progress* or in the 1985 TV movie *Minder on the Orient Express*, or reprobate.



Ralph Bates (left) in *The Caesars* (Granada, 1968)



Dear John (BBC, 1986-7)



THE HEROES AND VILLAINS OF HAMMER
RALPH BATES

GILES BARTON
LUST FOR A VAMPIRE 1971



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But just when it started to look as though he might remain typecast in such roles, writer John Sullivan offered Bates a more sympathetic part in *Dear John*, in which the actor played a divorcée attending a singles club. The production's two successful series (1986-7) showcased his droll comedic talent to the full.

Fellow Hammer star Shane Briant said of Bates:

*He was the nicest person I have ever met ... He was such a gloriously happy man, and a real and true friend who would do anything for you. Everyone loved Ralphie and I still miss him. Every week I think of him and see his smiling face at the Christmas parties he and Virginia Wetherell, his wife, and their kids, would have in Chiswick. Invited were his friends, and anyone he knew would otherwise be lonely. I wish I were half the man he was.*³

Poldark source-author Winston Graham was another admirer, describing Bates in his *Memoirs* as "one of the most charming of men"⁴ and his "progression from room to room ... as (Aunt Agatha's) venom sinks in" as "one of the finest pieces of acting of the series".⁵ WG also acknowledged that Bates's on-screen performance was sufficiently potent to influence his character's development in the books:

*George Warleggan ... was played by Ralph Bates, who wasn't my idea of Warleggan at all. He's far too gentlemanly a character, but as I watched him and as I wrote about him, the two characters came slightly more together and I think in the later books, George Warleggan's become rather more of a gentlemanly character than he would have done without Ralph Bates's influence.*⁶

Following Bates's premature death in 1991, his widow Virginia Wetherell launched the Ralph Bates Pancreatic Cancer Research Fund, which remains (as of 2019) an active registered charity to this day. Among other early fundraising efforts were two Gala variety performances staged in London theatres on 14 February 1993 and 13 February 1994. One of those making an on-stage appearance at the latter event was Winston Graham.





Ralph Bates and wife Virginia Wetherell

WG with Wetherell (left) and Angharad Rees, who, in 2012, at the age of 68, also died of pancreatic cancer



WG and Bates on location in 1977 during the filming of Series Two of *Poldark*

THE SHAFTESBURY THEATRE
Sunday February 13th 1994

Virginia Wetherell and the Trustees of



by arrangement with The Theatre of Comedy Company Ltd
and Cameron Mackintosh

present

Dear Ralph



A Valentine Gala
in association with BBC video

Directed by: IAN TALBOT
Co-ordinators: CHRISTOPHER BIGGINS, TIMOTHY GOODE
Production Manager: ANGELA GRAHAM-JONES
Musical Director: JASON WRIGHT
Production Team: ANDY HOLTON, GRAEME HAMPTON, CERIS JONES
AND
ELLI BREMNER

Page 5: (1) *Dr. Jekyll and Sister Hyde*, with Martine Beswick (Hammer, 1971) (2) with Jill Townsend in *Poldark* (BBC One, 1975-7). Page 7: 1994 Gala souvenir programme.

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Dear Ralph – a Valentine Gala variety performance staged on Sunday 13 February 1994 at the Shaftesbury Theatre, Shaftesbury Avenue, London in aid of the Ralph Bates Pancreatic Cancer Research Fund.

PROGRAMME

PART ONE

- (1) The Will Bates Band featuring Quentin Collins (piano), Will Bates (sax), Matt Lane (guitar), Luke Cox (bass) and Seb Chew (drums) with Eliza Mishcon
- (2) Master of Ceremonies, Christopher Biggins
- (3) "The Young Set" directed by Babette Langford
- (4) "Dear John" featuring Rachel Bell, Peter Blake, Belinda Lang, Peter Denyer, Jean Challis and Lucinda Curtis
- (5) Janie Dee and Clive Carter
- (6) John Gould
- (7) Joanna Riding
- (8) Jim Diamond and Zoot Money
- (9) Peter Gordeno and his Dancers, featuring Peter Gordeno, Sam Dean and Jodie Star
- (10) Patti Boulaye

PART TWO

- (11) *Invade My Privacy*: a musical celebration of the works of Fran Landesman from the Kings Head Theatre, Islington, with Belinda Cryer, Lucy Dixon, Michelle Fine, Tina Jones and Howard Samuels. Musicians: Roy Hilton (piano) and Geoff Driscoll (sax). Devised and compiled by Howard Samuels and directed by Linda Marlowe.
- (12) Steve Hackett and Will Bates (sax)

(13) *Taking the Mikado*, written by David Wood and John Gould, featuring George Layton accompanied by John Gould

(14) Louise Gold

(15) *A Hole in the Ground* – Bernard Cribbins

(16) Raffle, drawn by Winston Graham. Prizes include: a tour of ITN and News at Ten and dinner; £100 perfume or aftershave of your choice; two opening night tickets for *Cats* in Glasgow, staying at the Hilton; a two-day break at Hoar Cross Hall, Burton-upon Trent; a luxury weekend stay for two at the White House Hotel, Regent's Park; a romantic dinner for two at Chesterton's, London; two air tickets for a weekend trip to Paris and more.

(17) Sandy Toksvig

(18) Kim Goody accompanied by Francis Haines

(19) The Hollies: Allan Clarke, Alan Coates, Tony Hicks and Francis Haines

FINALE

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Previous page: WG with Virginia Wetherell (blonde hair, centre) and Robin Ellis at a Poldark Appreciation Society gathering in London, October 1993. The lady in the green jacket with her back to the camera is WG's daughter Rosamund.

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NOTES AND SOURCES

¹ Biographical data from Wikipedia, IMDb, ralphbatespcr.org.uk, Corriepedia and the *Dear Ralph* 1994 Gala programme

² Online resource: Ralph Bates Shrine

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⁴ WG's *Memoirs of a Private Man*, Macmillan, 2003, Book 2, Chapter 6

⁵ *Memoirs*, 2.5

⁶ *Bookshelf*, BBC Radio 4, 26 February 1987

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