

DMITRI KASTERINE'S UNCONVENTIONAL PORTRAITS

One of the hardest tasks when photographing the great and the good is to capture the real person behind the famous façade. **Joe Staines** investigates how one photographer approached the problem

When Dmitri Kasterine first showed Dirk Bogarde the photograph he'd taken of him, the film actor witheringly described it as 'the carapace of an aging turtle – sub Avedon'. It's typical of Kasterine's generosity that he wasn't offended by Bogarde's response, regarding it as proof that he'd managed to get behind the performer's façade. As with many of the 22 photographs recently acquired by the National Portrait Gallery, and currently on display in Room 33, the photographer initiated the sitting after being disappointed with pictures he'd taken of the actor in France for the *Radio Times*. Turning up for the new shoot at London's Connaught Hotel, Kasterine had to find a way to cut through the charm, as Bogarde – at the time an equally successful writer – beguiled him with a succession of entertaining stories. 'I was racking my brains as to how to stop him doing this,' he told me, 'I fiddled with a tripod and turned away, when suddenly he just forgot for a moment.' The result reveals the vulnerability of a man who made his reputation as a handsome matinee idol, while being in life a very private and very closeted homosexual.

In nearly all the portraits of artists, writers and performers that make up this exhibition, the sitter looks similarly uncomfortable or isolated, sometimes bored, even on occasions hostile. Samuel Beckett, his large hands tightly

clasped, sits awkwardly on a stackable chair, apparently lost in his own melancholy thoughts. But although the psychological edginess of many of these portraits seems to invite such an interpretation, it doesn't necessarily tell the whole story or even the right one. As Kasterine states on his website: 'I took this picture of Samuel Beckett ... at a rehearsal for a BBC production of *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett observed acutely, never taking his eyes off the actors or director, but said very little. When they broke for lunch we went to a local pub where Beckett drank Guinness and played bar billiards. He beat everybody.'

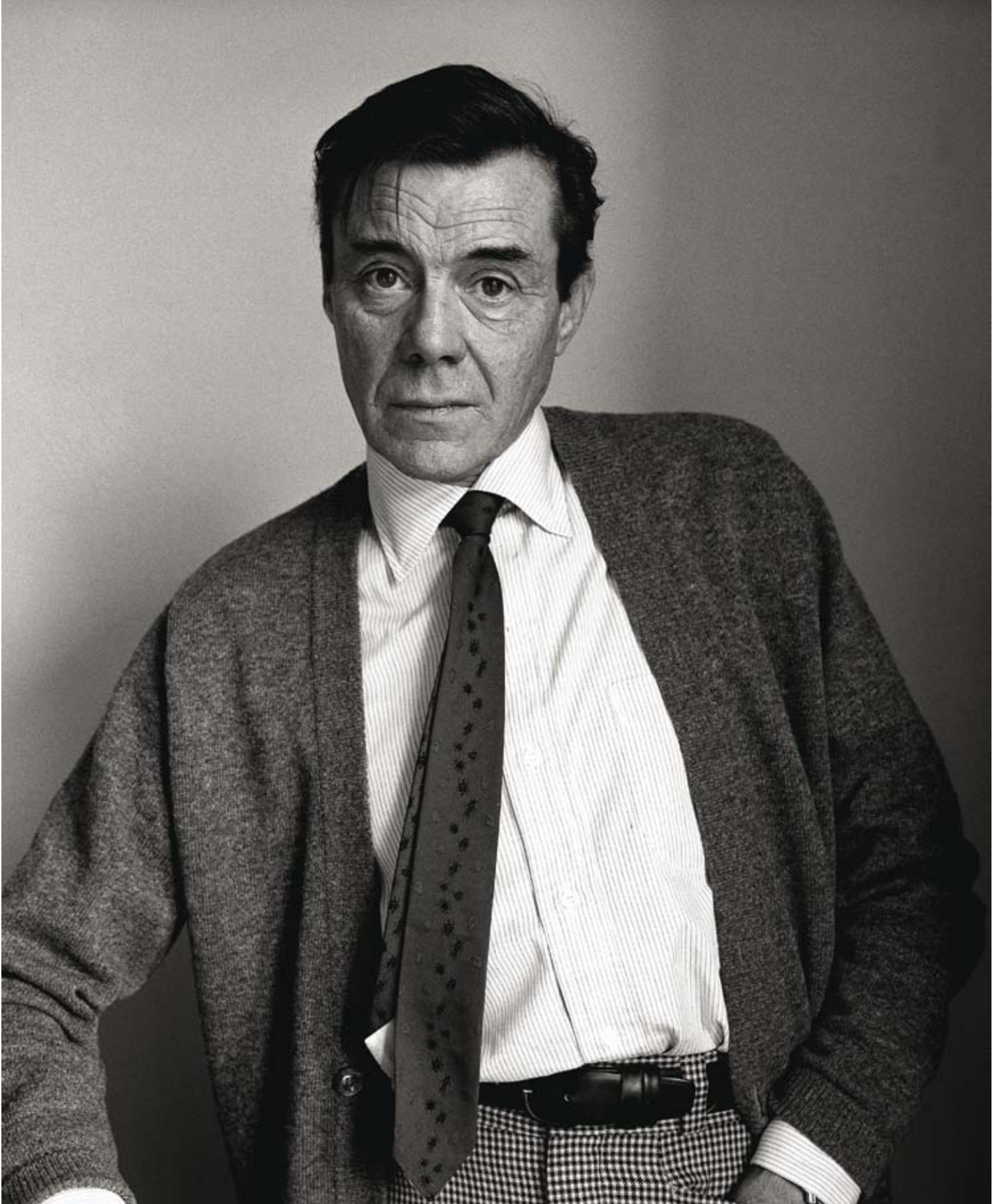
In the case of another writer, the novelist, Muriel Spark, Kasterine employed the Bogarde gambit of seeming to ignore her while adjusting the settings on his Rolleiflex. 'I had to find a way of distracting her from looking at me with her pretty smile. Then something must have entered her mind and she looked down.'

When I asked Dmitri Kasterine to what extent capturing his sitters off guard was a deliberate strategy, he explained that his main aim was to 'avoid the conventional' and prevent the subject from 'putting on the polite face'. This is as difficult as it sounds. Apart from the fact that, as he puts it, 'one is inclined to be fascinated' when photographing the great and the good, there may be an army of minders and assistants to negotiate, or simply a shortage of time. Luck or serendipity may be crucial. When he went

to photograph William Empson, the renowned literary critic answered the door wearing his dressing gown, prompting Kasterine to say, 'Please come into the garden, stay as you are, I love what you are wearing.' Empson's slightly forbidding, patrician presence is softened by his loosely tied gown, while his apparently missing left hand adds the kind of small surreal detail that is a typical Kasterine touch. Hands also feature strongly in the wonderful double portrait of the novelists Kingsley and Martin Amis. Both men seem to stare out with a degree of territorial disdain, Kingsley unembarrassed by the slight absurdity of his limp hand seeming to protrude from his stomach; Martin awkwardly shifting, intimidated more than intimidating. Kasterine discerned 'a certain tension in the relationship' while describing Kingsley as 'one of the funniest men I've ever met'.

Early days

Though he had taken photographs since boyhood, Dmitri Kasterine only turned professional in his late twenties, after varied careers as a wine merchant, a Lloyd's broker, a racing car driver and a pilot flying cargo planes to Australia. It was then the start of the 1960s, the era of Swinging London and the celebration of all things youthful. Kasterine got work with advertising agencies as well as magazines, such as the seriously hip *Queen* and the rather less ▶



Sir Dirk Bogarde 1981,



◀ Samuel Beckett 1965



Muriel Spark 1978

hip *Radio Times*. It was during a magazine shoot on the set of *Dr Strangelove* in 1964 that director Stanley Kubrick asked Kasterine if he would like to work for him – simply on the basis that the photographer seemed ‘to stand in the right place’. It was the start of a long association, and Kasterine cites Kubrick as a major influence, not least for his patience in setting up a shot. ‘He was not afraid to be patient: to look from here, from there, from underneath. As a young man

I was much more nervous than I am now, I worried that I was going to make a false move.’

Throughout the 1970s and 80s, Kasterine continued to take pictures for a range of publications, including the *Daily Telegraph Magazine*, *Harpers & Queen*, *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*. Then in 1986 he headed off to the USA where he has remained ever since. His portraiture work continued and several of his photographs of American notables can be

seen in the Smithsonian Institute’s National Portrait Gallery in Washington. But he also turned his attention to the uncelebrated, visually chronicling the lives of ordinary people on the run down streets of the city of Newburgh in New York state. This portrait of a city is soon to be published but can also be viewed on the photographer’s engagingly candid website.

More recently Kasterine’s work seems to have undergone a change of direction, becoming ▶



◀ Sir William Empson 1980



Martin and Kingsley Amis 1975

much more spontaneous, although the focus is still on people. From his home in the country the photographer heads into Brooklyn, a kind of roving eye, inspired by the thrill of just coming across a variety of people, not knowing 'what the hell is going to happen'. Notable for their directness and avoidance of deep shadows, these latest pictures appear almost artless, but

on closer examination they are all of a piece with Kasterine's probing visual curiosity. Or as he eloquently puts it: 'My wanting to take a photograph appears as fast as a bolt and without warning when I spot the subject. I enjoy exploring, looking for things that stop me, or frighten me. To fear to take a picture usually means you want to take it.'

Twentieth Century Portraits: Photographs by Dmitri Kasterine is on show until 3 April 2011 in Room 33 of the National Portrait Gallery, St Martin's Place, London, WC2H 0HE; 020 7306 0055. Admission is free.

Dmitri Kasterine's website and blog can be found at kasterine.com ▶



◀ Stanley Kubrick, London, 1969

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