KINOKINO

SEBASTIANE (1976)

Directed by Derek Jarman

WEDNESDAY July 15th 7PM

SATURDAY July 18th 2PM / 7PM



Derek Jarman's **Sebastiane** (1976) is set in a Roman military outpost where exiled soldiers have nothing to do but exercise, argue, and desire one another. The plot, insofar as there is one, concerns the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian; the Roman soldier who refused to recant his Christian faith and was ordered shot through with arrows by Diocletian. But Jarman isn't interested in the hagiography. He's interested in the body. Specifically, in what happens when imperial authority encounters a body it can discipline but cannot make compliant.

Shot in Sardinia on a budget that wouldn't cover catering on Nolan's The Odyssey, Jarman's first feature was made a full twelve years before The Last Temptation of Christ would scandalize mainstream audiences with a far milder provocation. The film premiered at the 1976 London Film Festival and was picketed. It is one of the most important British films of its decade, and one of the least screened. Luckily for you, we happen to have an astonishingly beautiful print.

The film is performed entirely in Latin by largely untrained actors. Not church Latin, not the ceremonial Latin of inscriptions and mottos, but a reconstructed vernacular; dog latin, soldiers' Latin, profane and quotidian. The effect is total estrangement. You can't settle into the dialogue as information delivery. You hear rhythm, tone, breath, and command. Language becomes another kind of physical act. The score, by Brian Eno, treats the landscape as an instrument.

Sebastian has been a queer icon for six centuries, and the art historians knew it before anyone else did. Mantegna's Sebastian is an exercise in idealized male beauty that uses the arrows as an alibi. Reni's versions — he painted the subject at least six times — are frankly ecstatic. Il Sodoma's fresco in the Palazzo Pubblico gave the game away in the name alone. What Jarman did was strip the devotional frame and make the erotic substrate visible without apology. The arrows aren't metaphors. The body isn't allegorical. The desire is the content, and the empire is the thing that punishes it.