

Peter Schlesinger & Eric Boman

BY CHRISTOPHER BOLLEN

All romances have improbable origin stories, but few begin with such a glamorous set of incidents as the ones that brought together artists Peter Schlesinger and Eric Boman. Schlesinger, born in 1948 in over-sunny Los Angeles to an insurance agent and a social worker, had always aimed for a life in the arts. It was while studying painting at UCLA at 18 that he met his future boyfriend David Hockney, and after graduation Schlesinger moved with the Pop icon to London to attend art school at the Slade. Meanwhile, Boman, no less a born bohemian (although his Swedish paternal line traces back through 350 years of Lutheran ministers), made his way to London in 1966 to study graphic design at the Royal College of Art. Both exceptionally handsome and talented young men were up to their necks in a sophisticated milieu of *bons vivants* and rough-and-tumble creative gypsies that came to define the early 1970s London scene. The two had never met until the evening of March 16, 1971—Boman remembers the date. “Attention: a long, name-droppy story,” he warns with his signature sly wit.

According to Boman, Paloma Picasso and Fred Hughes (the business mastermind behind Andy Warhol) happened to be in town for the premiere of Luchino Visconti’s *Death in Venice*. They decided to invite friends to dinner at Mr. Chow in Knightsbridge after the screening. “Paloma asked Manolo Blahnik and me, and Fred asked David Hockney and Peter Schlesinger,” Boman recalls. “David was not interested, so this adorable boy turned up at our table in a camel hair Ossie Clark coat. Fred had not realized the movie was so long, and we got a good start (and many screwdrivers) before they arrived.” Schlesinger remembers it as love at first sight, and they’ve been together ever since—which is now 51 years.

In those London days Schlesinger lived in Notting Hill and Boman in Battersea. “It was a very long commute between us,” Schlesinger says, “by buses or bicycle.” His primary medium then was painting, but he did carry around a Pentax camera, shooting friends and familiars. Many of Schlesinger’s candid, painterly snapshots have come to define the stylish, carefree spirit of that era: Warhol and Rex Reed in the back of a taxi in Monaco, 1974; Amanda Lear tossing her hair through the air on the photographer’s London terrace in 1973; Robert Mapplethorpe or Peter Berlin cruising the daylights out of 1970s Paris. There are also plenty of photos of a boyish, towheaded Swede hanging out on beaches and in parks—Schlesinger’s love for his subject is palpable in these shots, [CONTINUED ON PAGE 137]



Peter Schlesinger in his ceramics studio in New York.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC BOMAN

• AND DRINKS AT TRADER VIC’S (MUNICH!) • “FAX IT OVER”



• “WRITE WHATEVER YOU WANT” • GET BEHIND THE



THE QUEEN

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 90] at injustice as long as Rita's been angry at injustice, and not be distorted by that," Kushner says. "She retains so much beauty and generosity of spirit, and how she's done that I don't know. It's miraculous."

Moreno, it turns out, was Kushner's key to unlocking the complications of reimagining one of the most beloved and acclaimed films of all time, an intimidating task even for Tony Kushner and Steven Spielberg. Kushner couldn't figure out how to get started with the screenplay, or even if he should take on the project, when his husband, the journalist Mark Harris, asked him, "What are you going to do about Doc?"—the Friar Laurence to Tony and Maria's Romeo and Juliet. Harris had an idea: turn him into a Puerto Rican woman and cast Moreno in the role. With that, the pieces fell into place. A small, sentimental part in the original became Valentina, Doc's widow, the soul of the remake.

Moreno hesitated when Spielberg approached her, convinced he wanted her for a minor walk-on. "I thought, Okay, be nice, Rita. You be polite. I said, 'I don't want to tell you how to make your movies, but I just don't do cameos,'" she says. She was floored when the director reassured her, "Tony wrote this for you." Kushner got permission from Stephen Sondheim, who wrote the musical's lyrics, and from the estates of composer Leonard Bernstein and book writer Arthur Laurents, to give her something else.

In the screenplay the stage directions are simple: "Valentina retrieves a bottle of rum and a shot glass." She's at Doc's Drugstore, now her own, and has just learned that Tony is on the lam after shooting Bernardo. Trembling, she pours herself a drink and looks up at an old picture of her younger self and her late husband. "'Somewhere' begins." In the original, this canonical song is performed by Tony and Maria with all the teenage angst of an episode of *Euphoria*. Moreno transforms the ballad into a gut punch, giving voice to the soundtrack of yearning and anger and sorrow that accompanies the immigrant experience, her own included.

"There is a place for us, right? Don't tell

me there isn't," she tells me. "When I read the script for the first time and I saw the song and I read the lyrics, I started to cry. I burst into tears." When I saw the movie with my parents, I did too.

"The genius of a song like that and the genius of the way Rita does it is that it gives you the feeling that both despair and hope are possibilities," Kushner says. "There's something in the ache of the melody and in the fact that it's Rita Moreno, who was in a movie where this was sung 60 years ago, and she's singing it today, after everything we've gone through. The wall. Families being separated from their children at the border. George Floyd's murder. January 6. We're in so much trouble still. We have not yet been saved. The power of the song is that it makes you hopeful until we are. But also, because we are human, the wait is very costly. That's what she really shows you, the cost."

Moreno saves that emotional transparency for the screen. The aches of an aging dancer's body? Flashbacks to episodes of industry and personal disappointment? No whining here. Ancient history only serves as raw material for the work. In conversation she's coquettish, a flirt who relishes playing the "grammy with a potty mouth" card, I suspect to ward off the embalming effect of the whole living legend thing. We chat less than a week after one of her contemporaries, Sidney Poitier, died at 94 (McNally, 81, and Sondheim, 91, have also left us recently), but Moreno shows more interest in gushing about her morkie Sarita, who has been doing laps around her feet. Moreno may be one of the last links to the golden age of moviemaking, but she is an archive who doesn't grant visits to the past, not often, unless it's to share an anecdote with a punchline. She said once that Anita taught her self-respect, so I ask her now what she learned from Valentina. She pauses for a moment.

"I don't think she taught me anything that I don't know. She didn't teach me anything I don't know, because I know a lot," she says, pleased. "If anything, Valentina would take lessons from me, because I am more sophisticated, and I've been around more than she, and I could dance circles around her."

The real gift of Valentina is that her story may continue. Before production on *West Side Story* began, Kushner wrote a 30-page dossier about the character that was so rich, he and Moreno joked it could be the basis for a 10-part miniseries. He's now determined to make the project a reality, with different actresses playing the role over the years. The grand finale would belong to Moreno. T&C



ROBERT PALMER

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 101] is one fantastic dresser of old, perhaps the least flamboyant but most self-assured, who does not get the credit he deserves as an influencer today, and that is Robert Palmer.

Why is this? Chances are you know him best from 1980s MTV, but long before that Palmer (1949–2003) wore a suit as naturally as any 1930s movie star (look at the cover of the 1975 album *Pressure Drop*) while singing hits like "Every Kinda People," "Sneakin' Sally Through the Alley," and his original iteration (in every way superior to 1984's Z-100 Rod Stewart version) of "Some Guys Have All the Luck."

Perhaps, as the child of a military intelligence officer stationed in Malta, he had an early exposure to crisp tailoring—or an example of the maintenance of male form in any environment, however tropical and sweaty. Perhaps it was just his generation mimicking what they saw when they went to the movies (Palmer would have been 11 when *Purple Noon*, with Alain Delon's version of Tom Ripley, came out, in 1960).

Perhaps it was just an awareness of being in the world at the same moment as Miles Davis. What we do know is that the suits, in Palmer's case, were not a costume. They didn't wear him, if you see my meaning; he wore them, and this is the real definition of well dressed. It's still you.

A *Rolling Stone* readers poll voted Palmer the best-dressed rock star of 1990, but that was an undershoot. I'm voting him here one of the best-dressed musicians of all time. The rumor, which would be nice if it were true, is that after leaving us way too soon at age 54 (Palmer didn't misbehave much in rock star fashion, but he did smoke three packs a day), the girl "band" from his "Addicted to Love" video reprised their roles as pallbearers at his funeral.

Another way to honor him might be to dress better ourselves. And also not to forget—when we see Harry Styles shredding it onstage in peaked lapels and palazzo pants—who did it first, an O.G. who's kind of on the QT. T&C



SCHLESINGER & BOMAN

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 98] as the lens lingers on Boman's beauty and mysterious gaze.

As it turned out, Boman too would end up a celebrated photographer. In 1972, on a lark, he borrowed Schlesinger's camera to take his first photographs for *Harpers & Queen* after being assigned an illustration commission by the magazine (an editor there named Anna Wintour took a shine to him). Soon afterward Boman was off to India—"I was cheap, had never heard of assistants"—for his first *Vogue* shoot, which featured a then-unknown model, Grace Coddington. Boman would make a bold career out of fashion editorials that pulsed with the excitement of an electric current throughout the 1970s and '80s; some of his most memorable shots graced album covers, specifically for Roxy Music and Bryan Ferry.

While Schlesinger's and Boman's lives merged, their styles and creative approaches remained distinctive. "We admired the same photographers but used it differently," Boman says. As Schlesinger puts it, "We're both artists and have that bond in common, but our careers weren't competitive because we didn't do the same thing. In terms of photography, Eric is very methodical and likes setups. I just snap pictures, and he doesn't understand that!"

In 1978 the couple moved to New York, driven out of London partly by its skyrocketing expense, and a year later they settled in the area where the Flatiron District meets Chelsea, in a 10th-floor loft that had once been a girdle factory, with windows facing north and south. At that time the neighborhood wasn't even residentially zoned, much less dotted with stores, and both men recall friends shaking their heads at the terra incognita of West 20th Street. But the expanse of raw space allowed them to build separate studios. As Schlesinger says, it was before the days of the professional photography studio, and Boman, like many photographers, would do shoots out of the house. Schlesinger's painting studio was originally accessible only through their bedroom, "which," he admits, "made it a little bizarre when someone would come for a studio visit."

More than 40 years later the couple still occupy the loft, with their 11-year-old wire-haired fox terrier Oscar. It's furnished with "midcentury international flea market finds," as Boman puts it, including pieces by Edward Wormley, Piero Fornasetti, and Gio Ponti, along with a few paintings by Schlesinger. In 1982 the couple purchased a mid-19th-century Greek Revival house near the beaches of Bellport, on Long Island, and in late spring they make their annual migration out east for the summer. Schlesinger has become an expert gardener, and Boman often uses homegrown ingredients for his own spin on Scandinavian-inflected dishes. For a while he was even pondering authoring a cookbook with his own still lifes. He's currently at work on a book of his black-and-white still lifes from the late '80s forward, which he calls "portraits of objects."

By the mid-1980s Schlesinger had grown disenchanted with painting. "I never really enjoyed the process of painting," he says. "I wanted to find something I did enjoy." In 1987 that urge led him to visit a potter friend's studio, where the erstwhile painter instantly became enraptured with the elemental tactility of clay. So began the artist's third chapter as a master ceramist. Schlesinger converted his studios in both the city and the country, and in the latter, thanks to a grant, installed a gas-fire kiln that allowed him to work on a larger scale and with a more varied palette of glazes. For the past 35 years his ceramic works have included vessels, figures (a series of vignettes of male nudes and of allegorical scenes), and organic forms, like agave leaves. "It's the oldest art form," he says, "and you can make so many different sculptures by going in different directions."

In January Schlesinger opened a solo exhibition at the David Lewis Gallery in New York. While it isn't his first public showing, it represented his debut, at age 73, as a ceramist at a leading contemporary gallery. The exhibition mixed a few of Schlesinger's early pieces with recent works: a behemoth hourglass vessel patterned in a harlequin checkerboard, an urn tattooed with playful swirls, a vase striped with a hypnotic free-flowing line of blue and black. Each piece seemed to be a wild personality gathered in a room for a party, with thrilling conversations floating between them.

In any period there are those who make the scene and those who record it. Every so often, through art, there are those who do both, like Schlesinger and Boman, for five decades and counting. **T&C**

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