

History in the making

The 5th New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival offers queer filmmaking from the bizarre to the brilliant

The 5th New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival

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Reviewed by Leslie Koesoff

It's fall again, time for the annual New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival. Five years of sometimes bizarre, sometimes brilliant filmmaking have made this festival one of the most important annual cultural events in queer New York and beyond. It has always featured groundbreaking political work: last year's festival introduced such films as *Tongues Untied*, which later created quite a controversy when aired on public television, and *Paris is Burning* which is now showing across the street from New York's Lincoln Center and around the country. The festival is about history in the making; the history of a generation struggling for control of our lives and deaths in what is fast becoming a more dangerous world to live in.

The film that best exemplifies this is *Voices from the Front* by the Testing the Limits Collective. *Voices* is an exciting and inspiring documentary on the growth of ACT UP and the empowering effect the organization has had on the gay community. It is filled with ACT-UP luminaries and footage of civil disobedience actions that changed the course of HIV research and health policy across the nation. The film provides proof of the results to be gained by committed political action combined with intelligence and wit that always guarantees media coverage and ensures the impact of the message. Interviews with key figures in the movement are charged with emotions, and range from humorous to hair-raising to purely angry. The energy and passion of Vito Russo and all the others makes calling people with AIDS "victims" an absurd notion.

Personalizing the AIDS crisis is P.J. Castellana's *Together Alone*, which tells the story of a one-night stand that evolves into an examination of two men's deepest thoughts and emotions, an examination prompted by the fact that they have just engaged in unsafe sex. The conversation is all inclusive, as the lovers provoke, challenge, coax and tease each other physically and mentally. They wrestle with questions of passive and aggressive roles, bisexuality, heterosexuality, marriage and who is responsible for mentioning condoms first. Ultimately the film is about getting past the question of blame to the importance of communication. Castellana's message is: talk and learn.

The film itself is technically good; the cinematography, though somewhat unimaginative, is solid. The writing is what needs some work. Although the characters are very different people, their speaking patterns are too similar. They seem at times sound more like lawyers in court than post-coital lovers. That aside, I still feel good about the film. I was glad to see men really talking to each other on screen and being gentle with each to her. These are important images to see.

Also looking at commitment and communication is the new film by Su Friedrich, *First Comes Love*, an examination of the rituals of marriage. The film looks at four couples on the big day, following them step by step. Arrivals in white limos, sweeping wedding gowns, men in tuxedos and flowers galore all signal that a grand party is about to take place. The camera work is wonderful. A particularly good moment comes when one newly married couple pose with the ring boy and flower girl in their own tiny tuxedo and gown. The kids, chomping on gum, look more in control and somehow older and wiser than their marrying counterparts. Many of the grooms in this film don't smile too much, the looks on their faces range from frightened to confused to at times downright blank.

Friedrich's eye captures the pomp and absurdity of the marriage ritual as well as the grace and beauty. A collection of evocative pop and soul songs is woven with great craft into the images. A work of nuance and irony, the film elicits emotional peaks and valleys, gently yet forcefully asking you to deal with questions of commitment and love and the public announcement of them.

For all of *First Comes Love's* polish, it also communicates the raw experience of rights denied. In the middle of the film we are told that of all the countries in the world only Denmark has acknowledged same-sex

marriages. The film challenges us on several different subjects. With so many in the gay community wanting to marry without emulating a society that so soundly rejects us, what's a queer to do? This film may not offer the answer, but through its moment-by-moment examination of the marriage ritual, it paints broad strokes across a growing canvas of gay political and romantic issues. For the "married" among us, there may be a need to have society and our own family members take our relationships as seriously as we take theirs.

Then again, some families are to be avoided. Witness *Coalminer's Granddaughter* by Cecilia Dougherty, a true original. The improvised acting, unique camera work and musical score pull together to create the story of a young lesbian's journey through her dysfunctional family and into her own new world. The film's pacing creates a kind of hyper-reality, difficult at first, but ultimately seductive and rewarding. "Jane the lesbian," played by Leslie Singer, is a woman on the path of self-discovery. She is surrounded by her hippie sister, disgusting, emotionally undeveloped father, gay brother and jello-like Mom. The acting is brilliant. Conversations between the actors all have a dissonant ring that perfectly parodies real life. Scenes at the dinner table with Mom's terrific soup are timeless.

We follow "Jane" to college and her first lesbian experience. In those scenes, she becomes a sort of Lesbian Everywoman. Most of us can relate to first sexual experiences and disappointments, and to the separateness of Jane's sexual life from her family life. The jump from Mom's dinner table to Jane's S&M sex is somehow not startling. Dougherty has done a most difficult and necessary thing: she has taken the ordinary and made it extraordinary.

Short subjects

The festival, as always, offers a varied selection of shorts. *Two Marches* by Jim Hubbard (one of the festival's curators) compares two Pride marches, 1979 and 1987. The opening footage of a younger Hubbard with his lover Roger Jacoby (whom the festival was inspired by) is filled with energy and joy. The excitement of the march is clearly evident in the way Hubbard leaps into the frame, hugging and kissing Jacoby. All of this innocence soon evaporates with the introduction of the 1987 footage. It's a transition from a youthful exuberance to the descent of AIDS on the community.

Scenes of the massive NAMES Project AIDS Memorial Quilt are moving, and seeing Roger Jacoby's name on it is sobering. The physical look of the film is interesting, with the early footage heavily manipulated by special development techniques and most of the newer footage processed normally. The difference creates a visual bridge over the generation gap that AIDS has created. This very personal work is an important contribution to the archives of gay film history, where much of Jim Hubbard's work belongs.

As usual, some of the shortest and simplest films at the festival are among the most satisfying. *Rove* by Mary Paterno is a visual poem of light and shadow, roving the landscape of her lover's body and capturing the joys of the flesh. The original musical score is quite good.

Negative Man by Cathy Joritz is a little ditty of mischievous fun, a three-minute scratch animation performed on a talking head that is simply hilarious. Joritz is like the class clown who targets a substitute teacher and has her way with him. A hapless fellow is subjected to rapidly growing hair, flying arrows and a host of other tiny humiliations. This piece is a jewel and a true belly laugh.

Contrasting sharply with the above is *Star Spangled Basher* by Carl Michael George, which is not funny. This one is a smack upside the head of Whitney Houston. Using footage of her Super Bowl performance of the national anthem, the filmmaker addresses the issues of hypocrisy and self-hating. This is an angry work that sends a strong message to the politically weak among our famous queers: Watch out, Carl Michael George is watching and he's pissed.

Another fascinating short is *East River Park* by Zoe Lender. The film is a mini soap opera about the life of a guy named Victor Gonzalez. The story is played out in graffiti on the park's walls and benches. The camera moves across words that tell of Victor's being HIV-positive and describe in detail the actions or non-actions he takes. Reading all the information makes the viewer feel like a

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voyeur. I found it disquieting, an act of desperation somehow witnessed in the life of a total stranger.

Speaking of voyeurism, *Nice Girls Don't Do It* by K. Daymond is an 11-minute film on female ejaculation that can best be described as everything you wanted to know about the phenomenon and more. This is a complex film with two voice tracks that bombard the viewer; the camera comes in closer, forcing a sense of intimacy. As they are in man of the films in this year's festival, women are taking control of their sexual lives.

For the first time, this year's festival contains more films by women than men, with many of the women's films dealing with sex. This in itself is groundbreaking and historical—no less than the political activities and AIDS awareness that has been such a powerful theme for the festival since its inception. □