

Behind "Stonewall": An interview with Greta Schiller

by Eve Sicular

Opening night of "Before Stonewall" in Portland. The third reel of the film arrives by air express just in time for the 7 o'clock show, replacing a damaged print. With that detail off her mind, the film's director, Greta Schiller, gives an introduction to the full house at Cinema 21.

As the documentary makes its journey through sixty years of gay life in America, moving with humor and pathos at 10 to 20 minutes a decade, Greta Schiller makes a trouble-shooting visit to the projection booth. Reel 3 goes on without a hitch. Then, as applause follows the credits, Schiller fields questions from the audience.

"It's very rare that I get an original question," says Schiller next morning, sipping coffee at KBOO studios. She's toured several times with the film in the U.S. and Europe. Interviewers L.C. Earnest and Eve Sicular nonetheless got some interesting replies.

So how much of this did you live through?

Well, I'm thirty years old, so I was very young in the late '60s with the birth of the gay movement. I'm a post-Stonewall person; I was politically active when I was very young, in the civil rights and the women's movement, but I was young.



How and when did you decide to identify pieces of archival material that you used?

Because we wanted this to be a film that would motivate people and make people realize that there was a lot of history... it really is an introduction, a Gay History 101.

How long was this film in the making?
About four years.

When you were making this film, did you anticipate who would be your audience?

In terms of who we thought our audience would be, it changed mid-way. Originally we had much more the idea of targeting an upscale market of people who watch public television. But in the course of making the film... we realized the film was going to have a very long life. It was going to be shown in school situations, theatrically and on television, over and over again. So at that time, we said, 'We want to make a film that is a viable historical record of a subculture... that anyone with an open enough mind, gay or straight, can learn from and enjoy.'

Did you have a political mission to accomplish in this?

Yeah, I think I wear my politics on my sleeve. When you see the film, it's pretty obvious that I see a relationship between different historical forces and gay people... and between the development of the current gay visibility and the movements that came before it, the gay communities that existed before the whole "out" thing. Also, I believe that history is basically progressive.

One thing that the film's been criticized for from a 'liberal' standpoint, both from gay liberals and from other liberals, which I always get a kick out of, is that the film doesn't tell you what to think. It's a very open film... as opposed to other documentary films where there's this voice of god, either in the narration or in the narrative thread of the film, that says, "To like the film or agree with it, you have to think a certain way when you leave the theater." It was very important to me to not do that.

Did you have any problems in the making of the film between the men and the women?

Yes, we had a lot on the inclusion and representation of lesbianism. Because of the amount of visual documentation of men and gay males is much greater, it's much easier to find that material, both from the dominant culture's portrayal of homosexuals and the subculture's representation of itself. It would have been much easier to make a film that was 90% about men, and 90% about white people. This was a very conscious effort on the part of myself and the research director, who's a woman, to counteract that effect.

How did making the film change your views? Has this changed your concept of yourself?

I think it has, but it's more on a subliminal level, it's not like I went through this radical self-realization, because when I started out to make the film, I had already read a lot on the subject, I had been a Women's Studies major in college, and I was very interested in the lost history. I also knew that I was a lesbian as far back as I can remember, and I had this attraction for gay people forever.

How do you hope "Before Stonewall" might affect younger gay audiences?

I'd like to believe that it gives them great hope for the future to see that... I can relate to individuals in this film, and people survived times like the '50s... in times when they had to be in the closet. So at least if they have to pass in the public eye, or in a job or in a social situation, they know who they are... and that it's OK to be gay...

Colored Girls at PSU

A pair of Portland performing and directing talents, actress-director Victoria Parker and dancer-choreographer Benny Bell, will combine forces to present Ntozake Shange's choreopoem, *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/When the Rainbow Is Enuf*, the fall Portland State University theater arts production, Nov. 8-23 in Lincoln Hall Auditorium.

Parker and Bell first discussed staging Ntozake Shange's collection of narrative pieces some time ago and began planning the production last spring. They are listed as co-directors, with Bell choreographing the stage movement for the six black actresses who make up the cast.

For Colored Girls... evolved from early presentations of poetry and dance in Berkeley by Shange and a group of collaborators. It was first produced in New York by Joseph Papp, opening on Broadway in the fall of 1976. The work is described by Shange as, "The words of a young black girl's growing up, her triumphs and errors, our struggle to become all that is forbidden by our environment, all that is forfeited by our gender, all that we have forgotten."

It is a unique prose poem combining drama, music and movement. The cast includes Brenda Phillips, Carmelita Emerson, Denise Williams, Lakshmi Pratury, Clarice Bailey, and Sheila Dale.

Set and lighting design is by Stephen M. Zapytsowski with costumes by Sarah Andrews-Collier. All performances are on the main stage of Lincoln Hall Auditorium (1620 S.W. Park). Thursday performances are at 7 p.m. and Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. Tickets, at \$5 general and \$3.50 students and senior citizens, are available from the PSU Box Office, 229-4440.



Brenda Phillips (left), Sheila Dale, Denise Williams in *for colored girls*...

An Early Frost

by Jay Brown

Michael is a young lawyer living in Chicago with his lover, Peter. Michael learns that he has a rare form of pneumonia, pneumocystis carinii. Michael has a good life; he has loving relationships with his parents and sister; but Michael has never told his parents that he is gay.

In Boston, Katherine (Gena Rowlands) and Nick (Ben Gazzara) are celebrating their 30th wedding anniversary with her mother Beatrice (Sylvia Sydney), their daughter Susan (Sydney Walsh), and her husband Bob (Bill Paxton) when they are surprised by a visit from their son Michael (Aidan Quinn). The family notices that Michael looks thin and appears exhausted, but he attributes this to hard work.

Troubled by a persistent cough and night sweats, Michael goes to the doctor and learns his glands are swollen. Later, a coughing spasm at the office leads to hospitalization.

At home, Peter tries to be supportive, but he admits that he is scared and upset. After two friends cancel out on a dinner party and he and Peter argue, Michael goes to Boston. He tells his parents that he has AIDS. He also tells them, for the first time, that he is gay. The whole family is forced to deal with their attitudes toward homosexuality and their fears of AIDS.

In one of the crucial scenes in the film, a doctor tells Michael: "It's not a gay disease and it never was. A virus doesn't know or care what your sexual preference is... So until we find a cure or a vaccine, everyone has reason to be concerned." AIDS is not just a problem for one segment of the society. It is a problem which the whole community must confront.

The family in "An Early Frost" learns to deal with the crisis with sensitivity and compassion. I do not mean that they accept the double shock of Michael's predicament im-