

String of pearls

A flaw here and there only adds to the overall luster of the Oregon Gay and Lesbian Film Festival

by Kelly M. Bryan

Just as the post-Pride Day doldrums begin to be acutely felt, the Oregon Gay and Lesbian Film Festival comes on the scene with a welcome dose of queer culture. Now in its sixth year at Portland's Cinema 21, the festival offers 25 films leniently spread out over four weekends. It is co-sponsored by Advocates for Gay and Lesbian Equality, a group that promotes cooperation and collaboration among all individuals who support equal rights for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals in Oregon.

Opening night, Friday, June 23 the festival

Cinema

sports two guaranteed crowd pleasers. At 7 pm it's *The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls In Love*, a story of the life-changing first love that comes to two high school seniors, one black and one white. Directed by Maria Maggenti, the comedy conveys the "weird, nervous, thrilling feeling of being 17 and in love." It promises to be funny,

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touching and—a sight for sore eyes—well made. At 9:30 pm curl up with *Wigstock: The Movie*, which shamelessly displays the annual New York drag extravaganza in all its glory. Studded with such stars as RuPaul, Lypsinka, The Lady Bunny (founder of the fest

and longtime mistress of ceremonies), Crystal Waters and Joey Arias, and venturing to show the laborious preparations for the frolic, *Wigstock* is not to be missed. Admission to either opening night film is \$10 in advance, \$12 at the door; a portion of the proceeds will benefit AGLE.

The full festival roster contains many attractive titles, including *Sister My Sister* by Nancy Meckler, with Julie Waters, Jodhi May and Joely Richardson, based on the same true story that inspired Jean Genet's *The Maids*. Can this version top Susannah York and Glenda Jackson's? Also alluring are *Ballot Measure 9* the movie, by Heather MacDonald, with a cast of thousands featuring local heroes (and villains); André Téchine's *Wild Reeds*, set in France at the end of the Algerian War, which views the turbulence of the era through the coming of age of four teenagers; and *Midnight Dancers*, by Mel Chionglo, a dramatic look at the lives of the men who work in the sex industry of Manila, Philippines, and the first Filipino film to seriously tackle the subject of AIDS.

A number of festival offerings were available for preview, they are listed by play date:

Sunday, June 25, 2:30 and 4:30 pm

Only the Brave, directed by newcomer Ana Kokkinos, gets under your skin with its bleak, believable depiction of a group of working-class Greek Australian teenagers. Similar in many ways to the issue pictures of the '60s that showed boys beaten by neglect and poverty into snarling juvenile delinquents, Kokkinos' film gives us a twist: these rebels are girls. Perhaps a smidge over stylish and predictable, *Only the Brave* nonetheless succeeds at conveying the degree to which adults have—either on purpose or because they just don't get it—abandoned kids to their fate in a world growing ever harsher and more venomous.

Elena Mandalis and Dora Kaskanis are awe-inspiring in the realism and sensitivity they bring to their roles. A hunt through schools and community and youth groups yielded almost a thousand



Ken McDougal in *The Last Supper*

girls, from whom the two were chosen. They deftly maneuver a range of challenging moods, from maniacal destructiveness to sullen defiance to tentative, uncertain affection. Mandalis in particular, as the resourceful Alex, overcomes the sometimes shabby trappings of the script, elevating it into a manifesto of young survival and independence.

Sunday, June 25, 7 pm

The Last Supper is a chilling and exalting twist on cinema vérité. While fictional, the premise is also fact: an artist dying of AIDS creates, in his death, his final work of art. The truth behind the film is that Ken McDougal, a theater director and actor, was dying; the film was shot in a Toronto AIDS hospice, and McDougal died mere days after filming ended. The work had been performed previously as a stage play in Toronto.

Its audacity in employing a man near death to play a man near death will make this film a difficult sell. It will likely never be seen in a multiplex from the vantage point of an economy-size box of popcorn. I felt ghoulish at times, when the multiple

layers of what I was watching would dawn on me. But it is one of the legacies of this disease, and the young people it has taken from us, that we all have become much better acquainted with death. We know without wonder that people live until the moment that they cease to breathe—that they love, remain unique and mysterious, and go on being themselves until that moment.

The Last Supper captures starkly, beautifully, the joy of creating life.

Friday, June 30, 7 pm

With a 1950's lesbian pulp novel filling, encased in a trendy '90s puff pastry, the recipe for *Devotion*, a film by Mindy Kaplan, sparks interest.

An out Canadian lesbian comedian is about to get a big career break—a role in a TV sitcom—but with it comes the re-entry into her life of a painfully unrequited love interest that she hasn't seen for 15 years. The reappearance of this enigmatic woman sends shock waves through the comic's professional and personal life, endangering her five-year relationship with her lover, an artist and gallery

owner, and threatening to unbalance her hard-won equilibrium.

Sadly, despite some fine ingredients, the pastry is difficult to swallow.

Jan Derbyshire, as the comedian, handsomely exudes the off-handed panache and charisma needed to make her role as the wounded ladies' woman believable. Kate Twa, as the artist, is spunky and charming, although too ready to accommodate her lover's total inability to speak her mind or heart.

In the end *Devotion* is an object lesson in frustration, an achievement in itself; it makes you want to grab the characters—or more fruitfully the director/writer—and demand that they just come out and say what they have to say.

Sunday, July 2, 2:30 and 4:30 pm

I, the Worst of All is a must-see if you have a thing about lesbian nun movies—and who doesn't? It's an engrossing look at a real-life figure: Juana Inés de la Cruz (1651-1695), a Mexican nun and illustrious poet. Based on a novel by Octavio Paz, the film depicts Sister Juana's passionate attachment to a nobleman's wife—for whom she wrote reams of adoring verse—and her fall from grace in the eyes of the church. At first, favored by a nobility whom she honored and entertained through her poetry and plays, and protected by a sympathetic Mother Superior, Sister Juana is able to write, receive guests, wear jewelry, and own and use an array of books and neat scientific equipment. It all makes life in a convent look pretty good—especially since it would have been well nigh unheard of for a woman in any other sphere to have had such freedoms.

But then, of course, comes the crackdown.

Assumpta Serna is splendid as Sister Juana; Dominique Sanda is shimmering, aloof, and everything an object of worship should be. *I, the Worst of All* was directed by Maria Louisa Bemberg, an Argentine woman whom feminism inspired to direct her first film when she was in her 50s. Bemberg made films for just 10 years; she died in May.

Friday, July 7, 7 pm

Black Is...Black Ain't is a progression of the unique meshing of performance and interview, art and realism, social celebration and criticism, that characterized the work of filmmaker Marlon Riggs, who died in April 1994 from complications of AIDS. Emerging from the metaphor of Riggs' grandmother's gumbo—a harmonic blend of a multiplicity of ingredients—the film illustrates the wide range of modes of blackness, ways of being that often spur conflict within African American culture. The lines can be drawn along class, speech style, complexion, gender and sexuality.

Angela Davis, Cornel West and bell hooks are among the sages who share their views; poet Essex Hemphill and dancer/choreographer Bill T. Jones contribute a lyric undertone to the mix.

Once again Riggs demonstrates for all viewers that self-acceptance is the crucial first step: that we must acknowledge to ourselves all the facets that we contain, in order to perceive and truly value the complexity and diversity of others.

The film is shown as a double feature with *The Darker Side of Black* (which was not available for preview), a documentary by Isaac Julien that jets from London to New York City to Kingston, Jamaica, in its investigation of sexism, homophobia and gun worship in rap music.



Elena Mandalis (left) and Dora Kaskanis in *Only the Brave*

The Oregon Gay and Lesbian Film Festival runs from June 23 to July 9 at Cinema 21, Northwest 21st and Hoyt Street in Portland, 223-4515.

Tickets for regular shows are \$5. Tickets for opening night can be purchased in advance for \$10, at Twenty-Third Avenue Books, The Jelly Bean and It's My Pleasure; or \$12 at the door.