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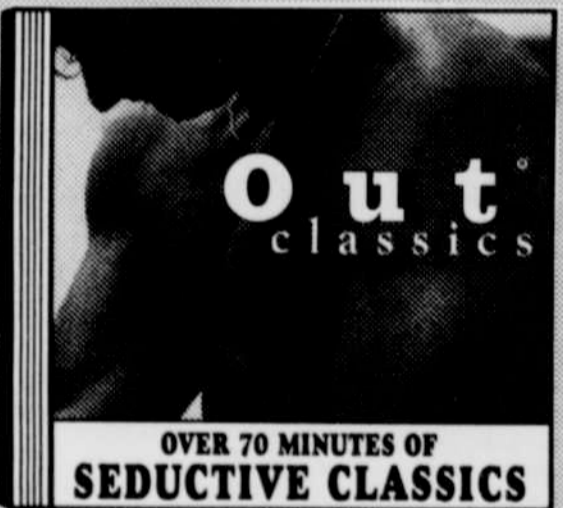


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Daisy (left) and Christy Love

## A LIBERATION THING

Filmmaker Barry Shils spreads the gospel  
according to RuPaul in *Wigstock: The Movie*

by Steve Warren

**A** Philadelphia Cub Scout was once applauded for dressing as Jackie Kennedy and taking his packmates on a verbal tour of the White House.

Decades later *Wigstock: The Movie*, a celebration of life, love and extreme hair, is opening at theaters around the world.

Coincidence? Ask Barry Shils. That little Cub Scout is now a big time filmmaker, earning merit badges for helping spread the gospel according to RuPaul.

### Cinema

Shils says he's donned the odd wig and dress in the intervening years, but he prefers, as befits a filmmaker, to bask in the reflected glamour of others—in his case, drag queens.

The chronicler of *Wigstock*, the annual Labor Day outdoor festival of New York's drag community, says the drag there is about "souped-up glamour," not camp as in *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*. He incorporates "an insightful minimum of background stuff," emphasizing the joy of performance over the psychology of what makes men put on dresses and the dark side of their private lives, to set *Wigstock* apart from *Paris is Burning*, which he says he "enjoyed and respected."

Shils first tried to bring drag to the screen by shopping a Lypsinka special to cable networks, but while they admired the talent of John Epperson's drag persona, they didn't think their viewers were ready for it. After spending some time with Jackie Beat and Alexis Arquette, "the queens of the [L.A.] scene," Shils "thought of combining performers into a group show." When he added *Wigstock* to the mix, "the light bulb went on in my head."

Years before, the late Tom Rubnitz had shown Shils the 20-minute video he made of *Wigstock* in 1985 and '86. Now Shils wanted to turn it into a feature. "If Tom were with us today we might have done it together," he says. "My original intention was to include whole performances from past festivals, but that would have been a whole nother film. That's [an] idea for a sequel, going into more of the history of *Wigstock*." Instead he uses a few of Rubnitz's clips in the opening sequence before moving on to his own footage of the 1993 and '94 festivals.

Shils says he "filmed 90 performances over a two-year period," using three or four cameras for

coverage of each number. Some were eliminated for technical reasons, others because rights to the music couldn't be cleared despite a year-long effort. A *Brady Bunch* medley, for instance, was nixed by Paramount Pictures, which was worried about the impact it could have on *The Brady Bunch Movie*.

Plan A was to shoot the entire film in 1993. "It was really a money thing," Shils says. "I ran all over Hollywood trying to get backing from independent movie and cable companies. They all said, 'It's an interesting idea, show us what you can do.'"

Eventually, the most enthusiastic response came from "a young married straight woman, Cathy Schulman, at Goldwyn. She totally fell in love with it! A number of people at Goldwyn believed in it and gave us money to get it finished."

For the better-financed 1994 shoot, Shils brought his pals Jackie and Alexis to New York. "They're clearly from the L.A. scene, not the New York scene, so they provide an outsiders' viewpoint, a little closer to what the audience might be."

Although most of the performers are gay, Shils says, "drag is certainly not a gay thing. It's a liberating thing. For that reason, he says, "I hope the film plays the shopping malls all over America and opens a lot of closet doors—freeing everybody to be themselves."

Shils takes guarded encouragement from the broader acceptance drag is finding. "There's so much opening up in the business," he says, and yet "the state of mainstream commercial television and film is that they're still looking for the tacky, campy drag queen." He tells of *Wigstock* performer Mistress Formika spending three hours dressing for an audition, only to be told he was "too beautiful" for the part of a drag queen.

At the moment, Shils is enjoying his flavor-of-the-month status and looking forward to making more movies. "My niche is going to be a little like Gus Van Sant, bringing gay material to a straight audience.... I just want to show the world as I see it. The main character doesn't have to be gay. A supporting character can be gay, or friends of the main character."

If that doesn't pan out, there's always the potential for a career in drag. Friends have offered, he says, to make him over, and Jackie Beat has given him a drag name: "Beverly Shils."

*Wigstock: The Movie* opens in Portland on Friday, July 14, at Cinema 21, Northwest 21st Avenue and Hoyt Street. Call 223-4515 for show times and prices.