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From outsider to insider

Festival recognizes documentaries in the queer community

by Marie Fleischmann

Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin, a documentary by Nancy Kates and Bennett Singer, is what all documentaries aspire to be. This culmination of early civil rights film clips, oral recordings of Rustin's papers, excerpts from assorted FBI files and a stunning array of commentary on Rustin's character and commitment from activists and politicians across the globe builds such momentum that you are left gawking that you never knew how much you never knew.

Rustin is best remembered as the organizer and executive director of the 1963 March on Washington, one of the largest nonviolent protests ever held in the United States. Film footage follows him from city to city, march to protest, boycott to sit-in.

But Rustin had one arrest on his record that would forever be used to keep him down and out of the speaker's spotlight. He had been discovered with two men in the back of a car and arrested on a sexual perversion charge. Despite years of fighting the good fight, Rustin had become a weak link in the eyes of his own civil rights community and an easy target for the outwardly homophobic political conservatives.

Fearing he threatened to discredit the entire movement, they demanded that he be taken from the limelight—and, much to his dismay, Martin Luther King Jr. did not protest.

Gabriel Mendoza, artistic director of the seventh annual Portland Lesbian & Gay Film Festival, says he chose *Brother Outsider* because "it brings to light a great man that has been overlooked historically. Bayard Rustin was integral to the civil rights movement in this country. He worked with Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, and associated with Malcolm X and many social movements...and was King's right-hand man for several years. However, he was also openly gay and as such was kept from the forefront."

The festival's executive director, John Campos, points to the increasing role of documentaries in queer cinema.

"Documentaries have always been engrossing introspections into humanity. With the ready access to digital video, people who before could not mount the means necessary to pull together a documentary can begin to tell their stories," says Campos. "We will continue to see



Brother Outsider recalls Bayard Rustin, a remarkable figure among the civil rights movement who was kept in the background because of his sexuality

more of the multiplicity of stories that make up the LGBTQ communities. It is my hope that the public's fascination with reality television will translate over to interest in the more substantial insight and compelling reflections of our lives that documentaries present."

A record eight documentaries will be screened at this year's festival, including four famous lesbian comics in *Laughing Matters*, Third World realities for queers in *Dangerous Living*, everyday moms turned activists in *Ruthie and Connie*, three teen-age girls with cameras in *Don't Worry, It'll Probably Pass*, the resonant history of women's music in *Radical Harmonies*, drag kings worldwide in *Venus Boyz* and controversial HIV-chasers in *The Gift* (see review on following page).

Mendoza explains: "Each year we try to find the best and most diverse programming. We look for films that most people will enjoy, but then we also look for films that people might not have another chance to see or that might be more challenging...the more people that tell

their stories, the better idea we'll have of the scope and diversity of the LGBT community. Also, we start to see the universality of the human condition. We start to see what makes us the same, not what makes us different."

For many queer Portland filmmakers, the path to documentarian is fairly routine. They earn their living in jobs that provide a steady paycheck, ongoing training and unlimited access to resources that allow them to master in their spare time what they all truly love: independent film.

For example, Storybarn Media owner Valerie Garrison has been working in television and filming documentaries

since 1989. Though contracted by a county agency as a senior producer, she still is able to do what sparked her initial interest: documenting family history and queer heritage, establishing a sense of ancestry and venturing into social anthropology projects. An upcoming project involves a female, cross-dressing coal miner in Roslyn, Wash., who was discovered after getting drunk and wandering into the wrong bathroom.

Garrison's years as a filmmaker have given her access to police stations, crime scenes and many training rooms. Her camera has opened doors and given a voice to many people who are not always asked the most valuable questions, such as "What can your documentarian do for you?"

Her perspective fits right in with this year's festival. She says, "Media should be put in the hands of minority communities as an empowerment tool." ■

Editorial Assistant MARIE FLEISCHMANN can be reached at marie@justout.com.

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