

# Selected reviews of the seventh annual Portland Lesbian & Gay Film Festival

## The Gift

His haunting examination of, shall we say, rather challenging mindsets leads us from barebacking sex houses to intimate personal portraits where the idea of being HIV-positive is romanticized by those attempting to contract the virus and those more than happy to give it (known in the subculture as "bug-chasers" and "gift-givers").

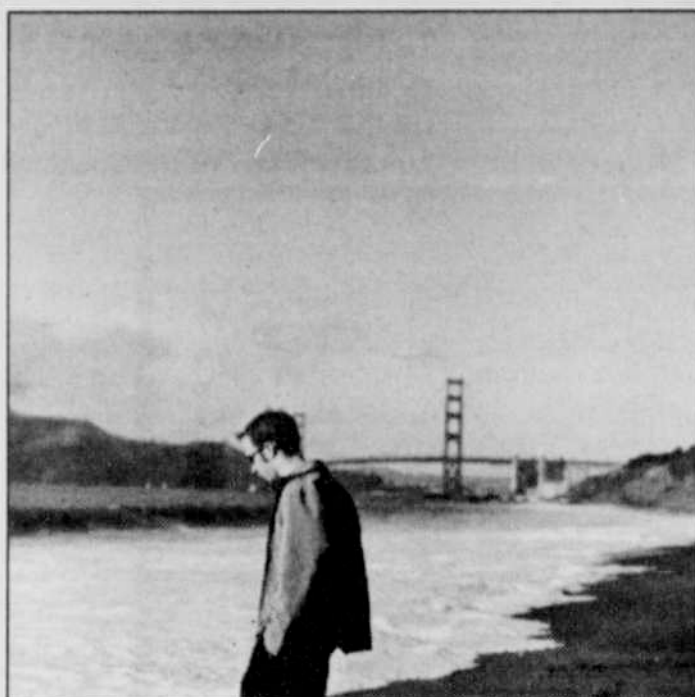
Within one hour, Academy Award winner Louise Hogarth's survey of this controversial subject scans the community map.

HIV-negative Dr. Walt Odets, who lost his poz partner to the virus and authored a book about his experience, shares his story of grief and loss. Doug, a Midwesterner turned San Francisco party boy at age 19, contracted the disease as a bug-chaser and found that it didn't quite meet his expectations. KenBoy maintains a Web site that caters to those looking to infect or be infected via "conversion parties." *The Gift* also hears from a support group, drag queen barflies, gay rodeo attendees and the random pedestrian passersby.

Intermingled with diary cams and visits to sex dungeons are harrowing statistics. For example, half of San Francisco's HIV-positive population will be resistant to their current meds by 2005, one in three gay African American men is positive, and 50 to 60 bug-chasers are online actively seeking what has become KenBoy's "relief" and Doug's "terrible mistake."

The exacting insight into this hardly imaginable world shows us a range of belief systems. One says: "I had the wrong idea about AIDS. All the posters for meds show guys who are buff and gorgeous. The ads are not accurate at depicting HIV-positive people or lifestyles." Another says, "Who wants to talk about AIDS meds at a sex party?" Even tattoos range from biohazard symbols denoting already positive to the minus sign that many hope one day will become a plus.

While it is difficult to imagine that there would be individuals who not only beckon but directly market a virus that has the world reeling in its hostile takeover, Hogarth is successful in her attempt to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth in regard to the HIV-buyer's market. The glamorization and successful marketing campaigns of AIDS drugs is discussed, as is the split between the positive and negative



Academy Award-winning director Louise Hogarth directs *The Gift*, a timely and provocative look at men who eroticize deliberate HIV infection

contingents within the gay community.

Many questions are posed by Hogarth's interviewees. Should we stop worrying about offending HIV-positive people in order to accurately depict the virus and the meds? Is there a healthy, gay 45-plus-year-old who will step forward and be the new poster boy for how great

being negative is? Can you put yourself in these boys' shoes and imagine feeling sexually liberated by being diagnosed positive?

Hogarth's camera work and technique, though elementary at times, do offer a captivating glimpse into the roulette that these bug-chasers play, as well as intriguing commentary from those who couldn't wait, wish they hadn't or wouldn't in a million years.

—Marie Fleischmann

## You'll Get Over It

Now more than ever, we've gotta give major props to the French. Politics notwithstanding, could a nonjudgmental, sexually explicit film about a gay high schooler even get made in the increasingly prude post-9/11 United States?

So much skin is on display in *You'll Get Over It*, I initially found myself wondering whether director Fabrice Cazeneuve crossed



Life changes for Vincent, a high school hero who befriends another boy, in *You'll Get Over It*

that fine line separating the Todd Hayneses from the Larry Clarks. But when you consider that Tom Cruise and Lea Thompson were baring all 20 years ago in *All the Right Moves*, it's about time we had some equal exposure.

Julien Baumgartner—sporting big, expressive eyes reminiscent of *Donnie Darko* hottie Jake Gyllenhaal—plays Vincent, a swimming champ whose life is ruined when he is outed to the entire student body after being spotted with new boy in town Benjamin. Making matters worse, his despicable brother spills the beans to their parents.

Benjamin is played with intriguing confidence by Jérémie Elkaim, who starred in *Sensory Perceptions* 2001 fave *Come Undone*, another entry in the emerging subgenre of queer cinema about young men in love and lust. (For lack of a better name, let's call them "cumming-of-age films.")

What elevates this above similar stories are the well-rounded, complex characters affected by Vincent's sudden revelation: the girlfriend, who is somewhat self-absorbed but rightfully

heartbroken; the best friend, who is hurt that Vincent didn't think he would approve; the closeted teacher, who begrudgingly offers a helping hand; the coach, who gives a stern but supportive pep talk; and the father, who struggles with acceptance but admits that he was raised to believe men must hide their feelings.

The end result is marvelous—brutally realistic and devastating but ultimately triumphant.

The dialogue sometimes veers into after-school special territory ("When you're living a lie, you're trapped," Vincent sighs), but so what? I wish I had a film like *You'll Get Over It* when I was growing up; instead, my generation had to make do with *The Blue Lagoon*.

—Jim Radosta

## Girls Will Be Girls

Drag comedies can be as much of a drag as the tired queens who usually populate them. But this stone-funny drag sendup of *Valley of the Dolls* and *All About Eve* outstrips the competition thanks to a snappy, imaginative script, pop-art playhouse sets and commanding performances by the three principals.

Evie (Jack Plotnick) is the archetypal Evil

Queen, a self-consuming, hatchet-faced hag who presides over a collapsed acting career and a candy-colored apartment the size of a football field. Evie's in a perpetual drug/sex dreamworld, from which she emerges to skewer her earnest lawyer son (a hunk with a micropenis) or her beleaguered roommate Coco Peru (Clinton Leupp). Into this dysfunctional little world comes Varla (Jeffrey Roberson, aka Varla Jean Merman), a younger roommate who's also the daughter of Evie's late rival, an equally cheesy actress named Marla.

The film's fearless, vehemently un-PC script makes mincemeat of every target. When Evie sets up a phony accident for her son to litigate, she romances the guy who hit her: "You rammed me today and I want seconds!" When she gets the guy in bed, he sticks a porn magazine over her face and starts kissing it while he's screwing her. Peeved at his lack of interest, she inquires, "What's wrong, did my glass eye roll back?" (Kudos to what must have been a shoestring special effects budget for convincing us that Plotnick

has a glass eye.)

Equally strong is Coco, as rendered by Clinton Leupp, who turned *Trick* into something watchable as the "acid queen" in the celebrated bathroom scene. Here she's a hopeless romantic who falls in love with her abortion doctor, then continues to get

pregnant in order to have more abortions so she can date him. Coco is the main target of Evie, who does everything but set her on fire. When Coco tearfully inquires whether Evie has ever had an abortion, Evie replies, "I've had more children pulled out of me than a burning orphanage."

Varla is a camped-up Eve Harrington to Evie's Margo Channing. She comes to Hollywood to "make it" and ends up literally doing so when a sleazy pimp puts her on the street. But Varla finds success in infomercials hawking a space-age toxic frozen dinner. Her appearance at La Casa de Evie is not coincidental, but we won't spoil that for you here.

While some of the momentum fades during the middle, *Girls* picks up speed and moves in a surprisingly poignant direction by the end. Yes, in this world there's hope even for the most evil of queens. It's a tribute to director Richard Day's imagination and his seemingly endless gift for aphorism (Coco: "Happy people always make such a racket") that this brittle comedy also has satisfying moments of pathos.

—Gary Morris



Three actors play actresses in *Girls Will Be Girls*, a quirky, campy, over-the-top romp through Hollywood



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