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FILM

What's up, doc?

Nonfiction films probe pandemic, politics

BY CHRISTOPHER MCQUAIN

Documentary film has never had anything approaching the currency it seems to have at the moment. Movies like *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Spellbound* and *Winged Migration* have garnered a degree of audience attention and critical acclaim that nobody would have predicted. DVD upstart Docu-Rama, taking advantage of the DVD format's potential for rescuing little-seen titles, has recently released two worthwhile docs of pertinence to queer concerns.

Rory Kennedy's *Pandemic: Facing AIDS* is an expansive, globetrotting inquiry into the impact of AIDS worldwide and the ways that different cultures and national economies have found (or not) to absorb the prejudice and expense associated with the disease.

Focusing on parts of the globe devastated by skyrocketing HIV infection and AIDS cases, Kennedy's camera, aided by Danny Glover's narration, follows AIDS educators and clinicians in hard-hit Uganda, a young woman suffering from social hypocrisy in sex-industry-heavy Thailand and married couples in India and Russia, where AIDS is not a "gay plague" at all, but a disease of, respectively, heterosexual prostitution and IV drug use.

Pandemic's most positive story is that of Alex, a 27-year-old gay man whose AIDS experience is indicative of Brazil's relatively progressive handling of AIDS. The fact that he is able, under his doctors' watchful eye, to live his life fully and go to college is a severe indictment of the rest of the world's failure to produce more stories like his; he's an emblem of what is ideally possible in the fight against AIDS.

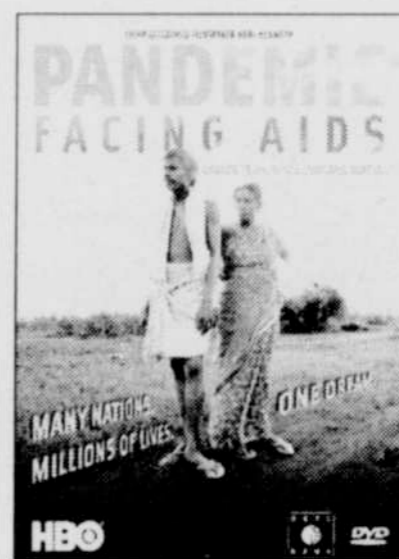
The film's main liability is its sterile, somewhat aloof quality; it has a timorous, overly genteel, philanthropic-gesture feel, giving too short shrift to the raw, urgent personal suffering AIDS can inflict. For effectively broadening the viewer's knowledge of what is still a horrifying worldwide epidemic, however, it gets top marks.

On the lighter, sligher, more entertaining side, Emily Morse's *See How They Run* is a behind-the-scenes look into San Francisco's heated 1999 mayoral race, wherein shoo-in incumbent Willie Brown got a good scare from write-in juggernaut Tom Ammiano, a flamboyant gay city supervisor and standup comedian.

Morse does well by her footage, editing for suspense. What makes *See How They Run* such great, juicy watching, though, is its *West Wing*-style insight into the headache-inducing, seat-of-the-pants unpredictability of the political process, as well as the issues of big-money contributors, race, sexuality and class that define the race in question.

Morse's regular-San Franciscan interviewees ponder which mayoral hopeful has a fairer affordable housing plan, while the two candidates debate who's more pro-gay. (Ammiano's candidacy does, however, exacerbate pockets of surprisingly virulent homophobia.) It all just goes to show that even in its most

contentious squabbles, America's most expensive, most liberal and queerest city is, particularly given the country's current rightward lean, a virtually utopian oasis. **JM**



OUT ON DVD

I LOVE YOU BABY
Strand Releasing

What initially seems like bold sexual modernism in *I Love You Baby* comes with a puzzling aftertaste. The film's love triangle consists of Marcos (Jorge Sanz), a sheltered village dweller just arrived in the big city of Madrid; Daniel (Santiago Magill), an actor with whom the curious and experimental Marcos falls madly in love; and Marisol, a beautiful Dominican woman struggling to make it in the big Spanish city. Marcos and Daniel live like soul mates until, after a hilarious slapstick accident at a karaoke bar, Marcos becomes uncertain of his orientation. When he meets Marisol, who has a crush on him that's been boiling for months, it's curtains for his relationship with Daniel—or is it?

While directors Alfonso Albacete and David Menkes (with co-screenwriter Lucia Extebarria) do have a nicely insouciant attitude toward their characters and their crazy misadventures in love and sex, the film falls pretty far short of being "in the tradition of Almodóvar," as the DVD cover boldly boasts.

To be fair, this designation was probably given by a savvy copywriter at Strand Releasing to put the film into its most flattering context, which is what copywriters do, but it doesn't even come close to achieving the screwball absurdity, sexual humor and variation or sideways tenderness you can usually count on from Pedro Almodóvar. *I Love You Baby* skims along with decent comic timing, has its share of good one-liners and is wrapped up tidily at the end with a cheesy bit of stunt casting, all of which renders it more along the lines of a particularly randy *Will & Grace* episode.

The film is funny and progressive enough—hardly a thorough disappointment—but it does feel like a bit of a cheat; it writes bigger, more interesting sexual-political checks than its final conventionalism can cash.

—CM **JM**

