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FILM

Best of the fest

Portland's queer film festival reflects evolving societal attitudes

BY GARY MORRIS

Culture hasn't always been kind to queers, and why should we expect it to be? Books, movies, television, etc. only reflect societal attitudes. Homophobia has a gluttonous appetite, and movies, particularly, fed it for decades with appalling images of killer dykes, suicidal transies, arch sissies and, the perennial favorite, the "sad young man" à la Dorian Gray.

By the early 1990s, with the advent of the New Queer Cinema (think Todd Haynes' *Swoon* or Rose Troche's *Go Fish*), all that changed. Now, 10 years hence, the shift is mostly complete, so much so that queers can now comfortably inhabit every imaginable kind of role and genre, from maniacs in gay slasher films to sexy revolutionaries to drag queen boxers from Thailand. Even old politically incorrect stereotypes like the sissy are no longer so threatening, and can now be re-invented and played with. And just about every aspect of queer life is covered in the spate of documentaries that arrive every season.

While these changes can be attributed in part to a society that's finally growing up, some praise should go to the queer film festivals, which since the mid-1970s have bravely presented a wealth of alternative images to audiences starved for them. The eighth annual Portland Lesbian & Gay Film Festival, put on by Sensory Perceptions, isn't the biggest or most daring of its kind (that honor belongs to San Francisco), but it's an important venue that offers an encouraging snapshot of where the queer community is at this point in its history. This piece surveys some of the most worthy in a generally strong playlist.

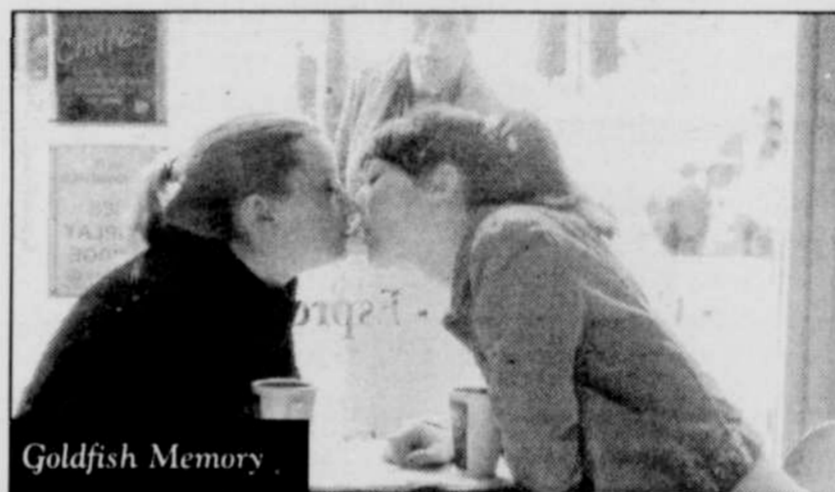
Controversy is inevitably a part of these festivals, and one of their lures, and Portland's fest is no exception. This year's edgiest film is surely *Harry and Max*. This quietly subversive feature presents a taboo subject without a hint of sensationalism. Harry is 23, straight and a drifter on the downslope of success as a member of a fading boy band. His brother Max is 16, gay and a rising teen idol. The film opens with the two of them embarking on a road trip for some brotherly bonding that turns out to be quite literal: They find in each other what they



Harry and Max

fail to get from family, friends and lovers. What reads like an episode of *The Jerry Springer Show* becomes a probing look at the far fringes of love, distinguished by an almost-documentary shooting style and nuanced acting. The film's only weakness is an occasional drift toward psychobabble as the two lead characters attempt to talk their way to enlightenment, but this is minor carping given what director Christopher Münch, also responsible for the New Queer Cinema classic *The Hours and Times*, has achieved.

More evidence of how far we've come since the days of "sad young men" can be found in Bruce La Bruce's *The Raspberry Reich*. His prior films like *Hustler White* and *Super 8-1/2* mixed crude social satire



Goldfish Memory

with hardcore sex. With *Raspberry* he polishes the crude and, if anything, ratchets up the hardcore, to hilarious effect. The director finds his métier in this parody of radical chic inspired by Germany's notorious Bader-Meinhof gang. This "Reich," unlike Hitler's, is run by dominatrix/fag hag Gudrun, who considers heterosexuality a social construct and a tool of the oppressor. She forces her band of sexy "straight" minions to "go gay" for the revolution, which they do without so much as a peep. It's certainly easier than being revolutionaries. (In one memorable scene, a kidnapper accidentally handcuffs himself to his victim, at which point both climb wistfully into the trunk of a car.) The film's barrage of onscreen text from famous Communists, post-dubbed dialogue that makes all the characters sound like idiots and the boys' inability to remember their radical politics when confronted by a naked boy make it a fest must-see.

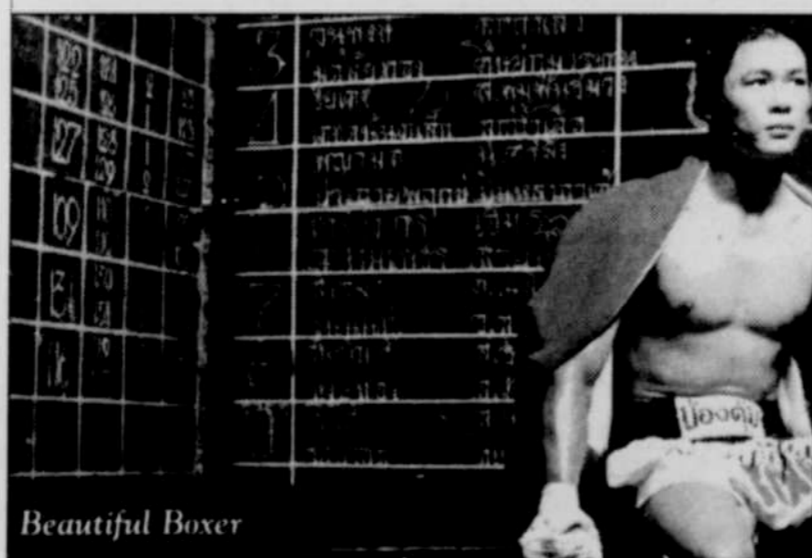
La Bruce also provided the source material for John Palmer's Canadian indie feature *Sugar*, though the grim reality of the film is far from the camp histrionics of *The Raspberry Reich*. Set in Toronto, *Sugar* is a

strong cinéma vérité look at a kind of love affair between naive 18-year-old Cliff (Andre Noble) and sexy, drug-addled rent boy Butch (Brendan Fehr). Shot in a jumpy, jittery style, the film pitilessly records the ups and downs (mostly the latter) of what appears to be a doomed relationship. There are startling scenes throughout, including an under-the-table mutual masturbation sequence while the boys are eating their Corn Flakes, and an array of creepy tableaux of the boys' role-playing with their tricks. Fehr, familiar from

the television show *Roswell*, brings a James Deanish quality to his over-the-top role. In a weird life-imitates-art touch, Noble died last June after eating a poison plant.

Of course, it's not all doom and gloom this year. Plenty of films present the more "normal" queers that modern viewers expect. One of the most successful is Inés París and Daniela Fejerman's intergenerational dyke comedy/drama *My Mother Likes Women*. This expertly acted film has been compared to fellow Spaniard Pedro Almodóvar's work, and no wonder—the "mother" of the title is the fabulous Rosa María Sardà from *All About My Mother*. But that's not the only similarity. The film begins as a frothy farce, with Sofia's three daughters scheming to separate their mother from the beautiful, much younger Czech woman she's taken up with. But the farce turns increasingly grim as the girls' plots backfire. The directors' modulation of emotions and the actors' ability to be funny and sad almost at the same time make this a good choice.

The fest's international reach continues with what sounds like a curio, Ekachai Uekrongtham's *Beautiful Boxer*. This lushly photographed biopic is based on the true story of Thailand's famous drag queen kickboxer, Nong Toom. The director cast a straight guy in the lead role, and it proved a wise choice. Asanee Suwan is simply wonderful, managing the almost impossible task of etching this unusual character without veering into camp caricaturing. The film is epic, framed by an interview of



Beautiful Boxer



The Nomi Song