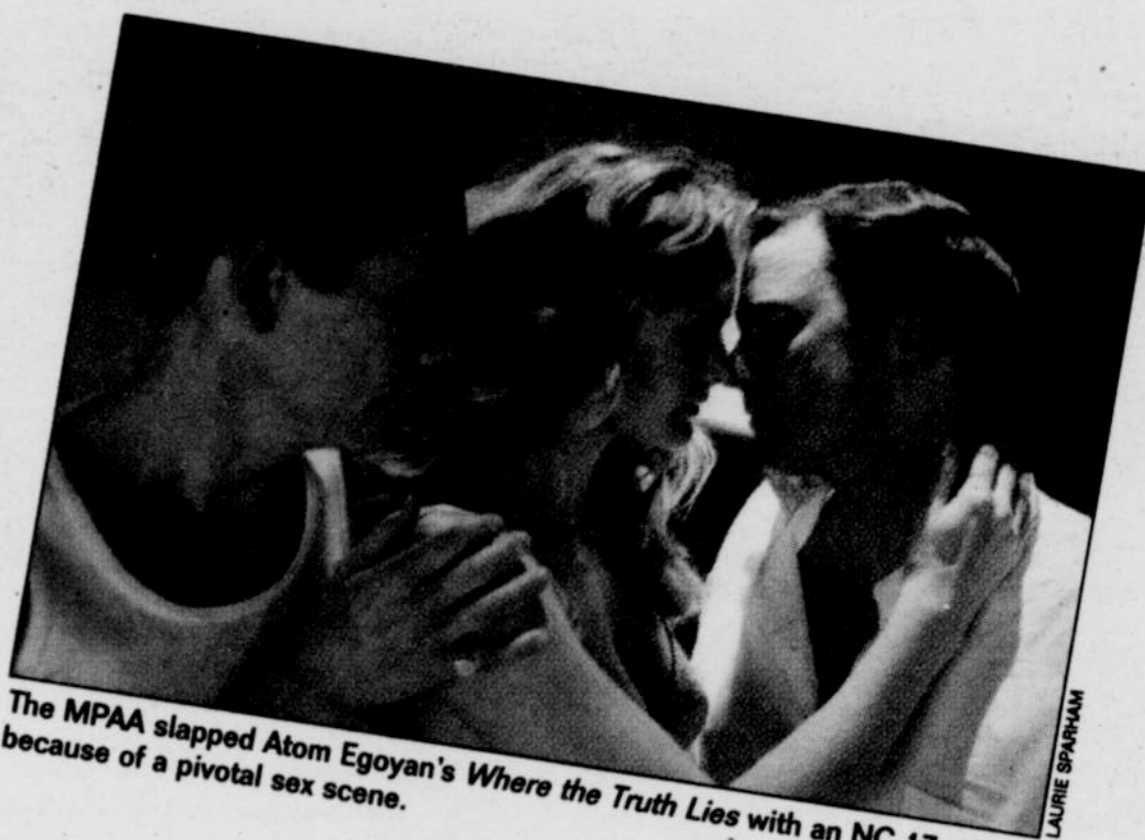
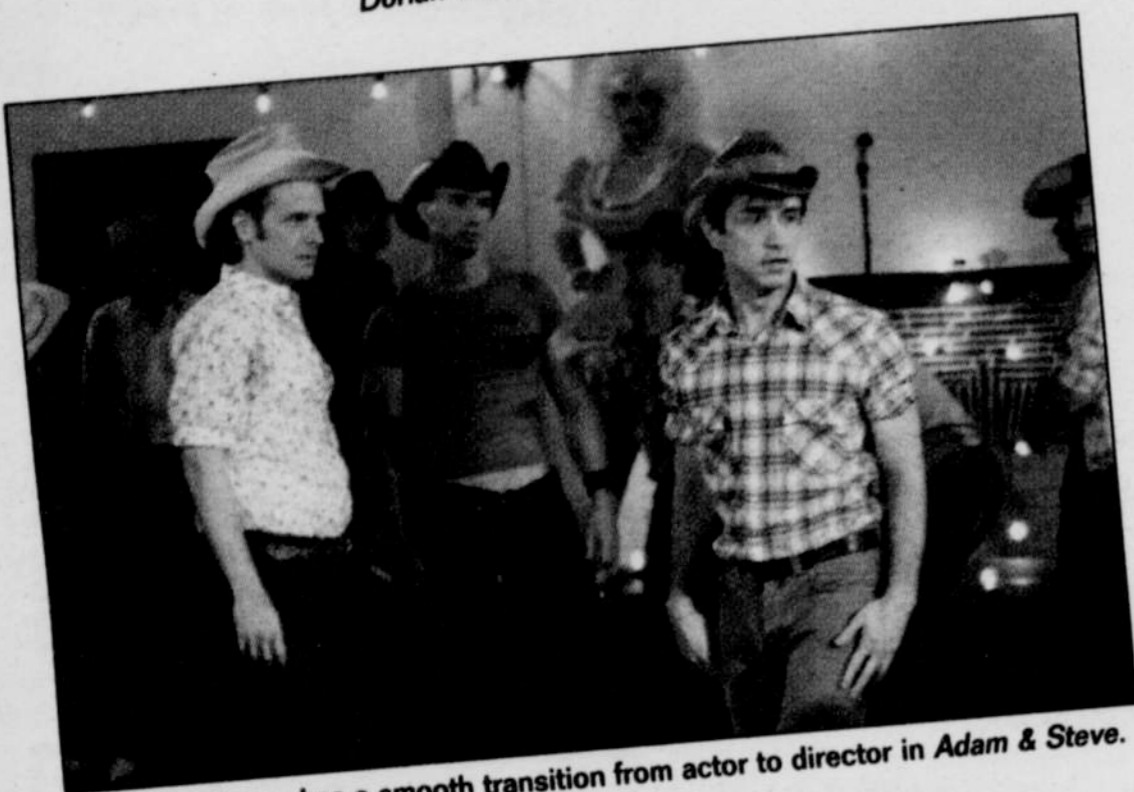


Dorian Blues adds freshness and power to a familiar coming-out story.



The MPAA slapped Atom Egoyan's *Where the Truth Lies* with an NC-17 rating because of a pivotal sex scene.

LAURIE SPARKMAN



Craig Chester makes a smooth transition from actor to director in *Adam & Steve*.

Candid Camera

Portland Lesbian & Gay Film Festival reinforces queer presence

by Gary Morris



Margaret Cho states the obvious in her fourth film, *Assassin*.

Queer film festivals, like those for other marginalized groups, have always been a crucial flash point for community. Starting in the 1970s with the now sprawling San Francisco version, these events have been essential to erasing queer invisibility, happily marketing fags and dykes to a Big Bad Mutha Culture that hasn't exactly welcomed them while supplying much-needed affirmations to the sexual minorities community. PlanetOut.com lists nearly 150 queer film festivals worldwide at last count, including such unlikely locales as Slovenia, Korea and four in that bastion of homophobia, Ohio.

It's now 2005, and queers are more than visible; we seem to be everywhere, with our own magazines, newspapers, sitcoms, billboards, indie films and mainstream movies. With all this visibility, it's tempting to dismiss queer film festivals as irrelevant. Why pay money to see big-screen homos when you can subscribe to the all-queer Logo cable channel or just watch reruns of *Six Feet Under* or *Will & Grace*?

But the fact is that these events remain important not just to reinforce our presence but also to see where we're at as a community at this moment. It's no accident that the closet continues to loom large in recent homo cinema. But it's also reassuring to see out-and-proud queers being as playful and sexual, bitchy and romantic as we please.

A sampling of the entries in the ninth Portland Lesbian & Gay Film Festival shows a wide range of characters and stories, from a quirky indie about quasi-dysfunctional urban queens to a sizzling doc profiling gorgeous New York drag dykes. As always, the quality varies, but this year the winners considerably outweigh the stinkers. Ironically, the least worthy is probably the most "feel-good" film of the fest, the sunny but saccharine sports drama *Guys and Balls*.

The terrors of coming out may seem too-familiar territory, but that cultural narrative remains a powerful one, rooted in the reality of too many people's experience. Tennyson Bardwell draws on his own youth for the

endearing indie *Dorian Blues*. This low-budgeter centers on Dorian (Michael McMillian from WB's *What I Like About You*), a cute, likable gay teen who spends the first half of the movie struggling mightily with his orientation. He follows the common trajectory—a furtive fling with a geeky classmate followed by guilty tooth-brushing, visits to psychiatrist and priest and a simpatico female lap dancer. His biggest obstacle is his homophobic father, an abusive know-it-all who rules his wife (a sad Stepford type well played by Mo'Nique) and his sons with an iron hand. Bardwell mines this vein with humor and pathos, giving scenes that might be cliché in other hands freshness and power. Dorian's blowups with Daddy particularly have the eerie feel of reality as the latter verbally annihilates his son without raising his voice. Audiences will cheer Dorian's escape to New York, but new difficulties arise there as he jumps on and off the merry-go-round of love and lust. The film is a showcase for McMillian, an utterly natural actor who strikes the right note of vulnerability and strength throughout. Lea Coco provides soothing eye candy as gorgeous jock brother Nicky. Typical of the film, Coco is not just a pretty face but an effective actor, especially in the emotional scenes with McMillian.

Sherry Hormann's *Guys and Balls* represents a different kind of coming out that might cause some viewers to wish the guy had just stayed in. Cute Ecki (Maximilian Brückner) is a baker's son and gifted soccer player in a German village with a secret penchant for other boys. Caught in *flagrante* trying to kiss one of his surprised straight pals, he's teased and tormented until he decides to head to the Big City and enlist a bunch of fellow fags to form a gay soccer team that will kick the asses of his homophobic rivals. The pickings seem surprisingly slim, if not completely incredible—a few ancient leather queens, a gigantically tall tranny, a "male lesbian" and a gaggle of other misfits. But that doesn't stop Ecki from forming his dream team. Sporting a bright palette and an equally upbeat attitude, *Guys and Balls* is a curiously retro mix of sports film and queer affirmation drama. There are innumerable subplots: Ecki's sister's attempts to find romance,