

film

The Trees in the Forest

Oregon films premiere at Sundance Film Festival

by John Esther

Widely considered the most queer-friendly non-gay film festival in the country, the Sundance Film Festival—held from Jan. 19 to 29 in Park City, Utah—once again included several queer films from around the world.

Among the queer entries were two Beaver State films, *Clear Cut: The Story of Philomath, Oregon* and *Old Joy*.

Directed by Peter Richardson, *Clear Cut* examines a microcosm of the United States' red vs. blue battle over the values of a community.

Located 90 miles south of Portland, Philomath High School was a place where college-bound students did not have to worry about tuition if they attended Oregon State University. Thanks to the generosity of local lumber baron Rex Clemens, every graduate was guaranteed tuition. While only a minority took advantage of this offer—and even a smaller minority used it all four years—it was something that made the citizens proud of their town.

But as more and more people learned of the timber industry's ecological destruction and deception, it was no longer held in such high esteem—though the tuition guarantee was.

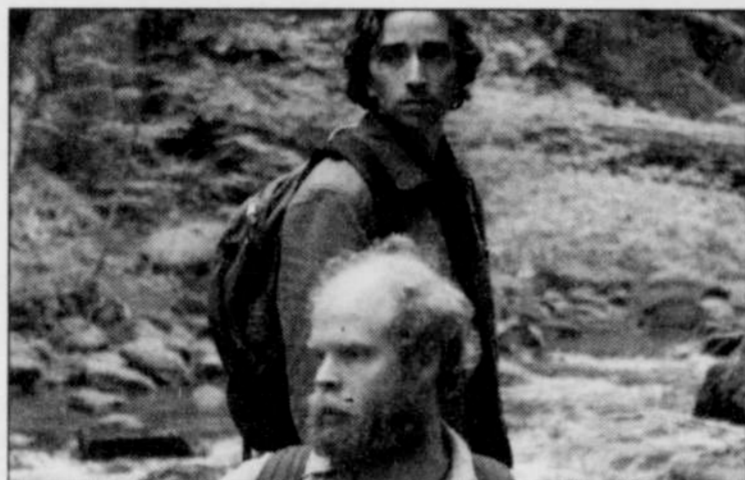
This awareness was blamed on Philomath's "political correctness run amok," fueled by Superintendent Terry Kneisler, an "urban immigrant" from Chicago. Leading the accusations against Kneisler was Clemens Foundation spokesperson Steven Lowther, a grammatically challenged, history-ignorant neo-fascist who believes in corporal punishment and strict dress codes and equates the school's Gay Straight Alliance with Nazis.

When the GSA organized a "Day of Silence" for gay kids who were still in the closet, approximately 25 students participated, according to club adviser Patti Micheo. Then the Clemens Foundation got a hold of the flier about the demonstration and, with additional comments, sent a copy to "everybody in Philomath," said one of the gay students whose name was given out in the mass mailing.

"It cost us a pretty penny to do it," smirked Lowther, threatening to pull the tuition guarantee from the students.

Including interviews from Philomath's citizens, mayor, school board members, educators and historian as well as Clemens' supporters and detractors, *Clear Cut* clearly illustrates how those in power will use "the war on cultural values" to ensure their further reign.

Blurring the lines between camaraderie, male bonding and homoeroticism, Kelly Reichardt's *Old Joy* addresses notions of masculinity, fatherhood and domesticity under the weight of latter-day capitalism. It was co-produced by Portland's Todd Haynes, whose film *Poison* caused waves at Sundance back in 1990.



Two lifelong friends reunite for a weekend camping trip in the homoerotic *Old Joy*.

A slow-moving film with its own rewards, *Old Joy* is the story of two lifelong friends, Kurt (Will Oldham) and Mark (Daniel London), who reunite for a weekend camping trip in the Cascade Mountain Range east of Portland.


For Mark, the trip might be his last chance to be alone before his child is born. For Kurt, it is a chance to bond with another human—beyond the homeless guy who asks for change. As the hours progress, the two move through a range of restrained emotions.

When the two arrive at their final destination, a hot spring in an old-growth forest, the reality of how much they have come apart through the years grips them as much as nature's gentle caresses, à la the hot water swirling under the quiet air, releases them.

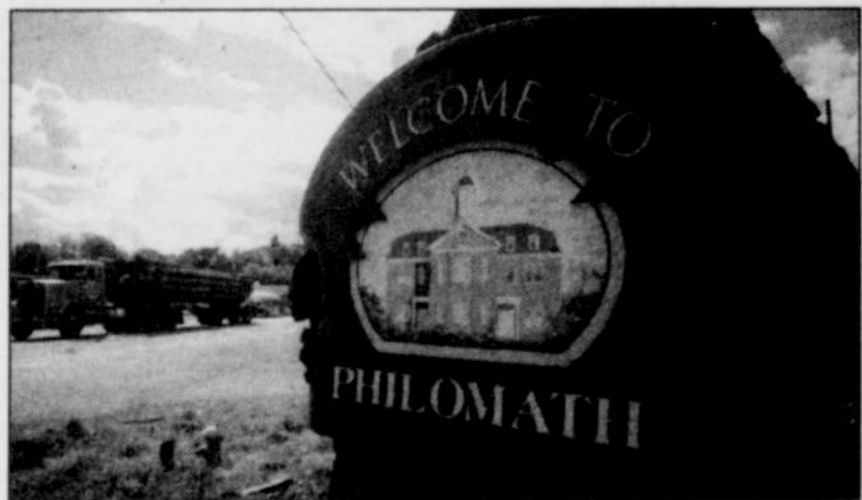
In one crucial scene, Kurt gives Mark a massage. Mark tenses up at first but then slowly allows his wedding-ringed hand to calmly drop in the water before the film cuts to sexual imagery and the peacefulness of nature.

Whether the two are gay or once were lovers "is up to the viewer's imagination," says London. "The film's subtlety allows you to choose."

Neither film got picked up at Sundance. *Old Joy* is screening at the Rotterdam Film Festival in the Netherlands, while *Clear Cut* plays 3 p.m. Feb. 11 and 5 p.m. Feb. 12 at Guild Theatre as part of the Portland International Film Festival.

In addition to these local entries, Portland writer/director Gus Van Sant (*Drugstore Cowboy*, *Elephant*) was at Sundance to talk about his films. 

JOHN ESTHER is a Los Angeles free-lance film critic whose work has appeared in *Cineaste*, *Curve*, *Lesbian News* and *The Harvard Gay & Lesbian Review*.



A Gay Straight Alliance divides the small town of Philomath in the documentary *Clear Cut*.

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