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television

Doc Holiday

Sundance Channel celebrates Gay Pride Month with several new queer documentaries

by Gary Morris

Sundance Channel has been one of queer media's best friends for several years now, diligently sponsoring gay film fests and showcasing features like *L.I.E.* and *The Brandon Teena Story*, along with breakthrough series like *TransGeneration*, which put a nice tranny twist on the dreary reality TV genre.

The network has been proactive, too, in highlighting queer-themed documentaries. Sundance is celebrating Gay Pride Month with the premiere of several hot docs and an encore presentation of *TransGeneration*, which the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation honored with a 2006 Media Award for Outstanding Documentary.

Drag kings emerged during the heady 1990s as the female mirror image of the much higher-profile drag queen. Not that there weren't always examples of the "female masculinity" that drives the drag king; think of cross-dressing Billy Tipton, the legendary jazz musician born female who donned suits and ties and married five different women, none of whom knew "he" was a "she" until death ended the ruse. But the drag king scene really came together in New York and San Francisco in the '90s when, serendipitously, a number of DKs got together, forming clubs, making films and art, teaching gender theory and, best of all, acting out via performance art what it means to be a "man" in contemporary culture.

Gabriel Baur's *Venus Boyz* made the film festival rounds in 2001 and then faded from sight. That's unfortunate, because this is surely the most intimate, incisive peek ever into DK culture. The film (premiering 9 p.m. June 5) is foremost a gallery of memorable characters, seen in their daily lives and performing onstage at New York's Club Casanova. There's gorgeous, Haitian-born Mildred Gerestant, who adopts the persona of "Dréd," a hilariously over-the-top ghetto pimp ladies man. Diane Torr teaches masculinity workshops and becomes Danny King, "a composite of a number of ghastly men I've known!" Del LaGrace Volcano is a biological female who dizzies the viewer when she becomes a drag king and then dons female drag. Bridge Markland mines decadent Berlin in the 1930s for her sendups of maleness.

These women are attracted to gender play for a variety of reasons. Some are activists critiquing male privilege; others fetishize and get off on the accoutrements of masculinity. If this sounds a little double-domed, it's in fact anything but. Above all, these are charismatic, bold women taking on the patriarchy with wit and style. Highlights include Torr's litany of "how to be a man" ("Rule No. 2: Stop smiling!"); Markland's creation of a "sex bomb named Angela," whom she "deconstructs"; and Gerestant's giddy assault on stereotypes of black male masculinity.



Orthodox Jewish lesbians let viewers into their super-secret world in *Keep Not Silent*.

If the "boyz" of *Venus Boyz* have positioned themselves to challenge gender boundaries with gusto, the women of *Keep Not Silent* are in a grim struggle for their basic identities as lesbians and human beings. Ilil Alexander's 50-minute Israeli documentary (premiering 9 p.m. June 12) features Orthodox Jewish wives and mothers who belong to a super-secret lesbian group called Ortho-Dykes. They're speaking out here for the first time, letting viewers into a rare world even their families and friends might not know about.

The director takes an unusual but necessary visual strategy in filming her subjects. She shoots them at meetings, on video monitors, at their homes—all in silhouette, through obscuring latticework, in darkened rooms or with their faces fuzzed out. These are strikingly literal images of the closeted, "invisible lesbian." Their world is harshly limited by the homophobia that courses through fundamentalist Judaism. Such women have everything to lose, personally and socially.

Miriam-Esther believes her children will be reviled, perhaps taken from her, and her family will ostracize her. "I was in deep fear," she says, and "fear takes a lot of energy." In one wrenching scene, a young woman named Yehudit tries hopelessly to argue with a bigoted rabbi who insists she must either change or "live alone."

Yet there are glimmers of connection and compromise here that give the women—and the viewer—hope. Ruth's husband, Boaz, doesn't object when she insists on spending two nights a week with the woman she loves more than him. But Ruth's daughter, shamed and disgusted, runs away from home when she learns who her mother really is.

The film makes heartbreakingly clear what is at



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