

film

Short Supply

DVD collections free filmmakers from the constraints of full-length features

by Christopher McQuain

The short film is to the feature-length film what the short story is to the novel, a truism borne out by two recent omnibus DVD collections of short films with queer subject matter, *Boys Life 5* and *The Ultimate Lesbian Short Film Festival*. The absence of the narrative constraints that most full-length films face, along with the narrowing of focus demanded by the form, has given these shorts the freedom to be, at their best, elliptical, experimental and thought-provoking in a way most features cannot.

That being said, the best entries on *Boys Life 5* actually stretch the time limits of "short," becoming something more like cinematic novellas. In the 45-minute *Time Off*, an Israeli production from 1990 by Eytan Fox (future director of 2002's *Yossi & Jagger*), a young gay Israeli soldier's speculations about his attractive commander's sexual orientation are, in a bittersweet revelation, proved unmistakably accurate. The film's length allows an unusually broad scope for a short: Along with the queer content, it also encompasses the diverse personalities, beliefs and politics of the entire platoon. In the beautifully yet deceptively

bucolic *Fishbelly White* by Michael Burke (future director of 2003's *The Mudge Boy*), a sensitive preadolescent rural boy befriends and flirts with a hunky teen from the farm down the road. But when his crush's macho friends corner him, he commits a grotesque act of violence that is both a parody and an indictment of masculinist gender role enforcement.

The other two *Boys Life 5* shorts are less interesting. Adam Salky's *Dare* centers on an unpopular high school outsider who almost gets it on with the hottie playing Stanley in the school production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*; in David Ottenhouse's *Late Summer*, a successful photographer recalls the vaguely erotic childhood summer he spent with his

gorgeous older cousin. Both of these are "calling card" shorts—résumé builders meant to get their makers hired for other films. They're watchable, technically very proficient, conventionally sentimental and ultimately unmemorable.

For sheer quantity, there is more to be had for one's money on *The Ultimate Lesbian Short Film Festival*, which offers 10 efforts by lesbian filmmakers.

There's a higher ratio of quality, too: Only the pretentious Goth-kid-isms of Abigail Severance's *Saint Henry* and the underdone *Ordinary People* psychologizing of Michelle Ehlen's *Half Laughing* are entirely skippable. Otherwise, Chris J. Russo's *A Woman Reported*, which features Moira Kelly as the victim of a senseless hate crime, is taut and wrenching, while intermingled themes of queerness and class are tackled by Silas Howard's *Frozen Smile*—shit-kicking, rocking lesbian with a mullet defies her staid mother and venerates her outlandish, trailer-dwelling grandmother as the three remember the family's late patriarch—and, especially, by Barbara Green and Michelle Boyaner's *Tina Paulina: Living on Hope Street*, a 10-minute interview with a middle-aged, homeless Hollywood lesbian who, in her guilelessness and eagerness to please, is as utterly endearing as her circumstances are troubling. The even more troubling issue of same-sex partner abuse is ably (if somewhat Lifetime-esquely) broached by Roberta Marie Munroe's *Dani & Alice*, which co-stars lesbian indie film stalwart Guinevere Turner (*Go Fish*, *American Psycho*) as the concerned friend of the victim.

Two of the shorts in particular are a cut above. A mysterious fairy tale, Meredyth Wilson's *The*

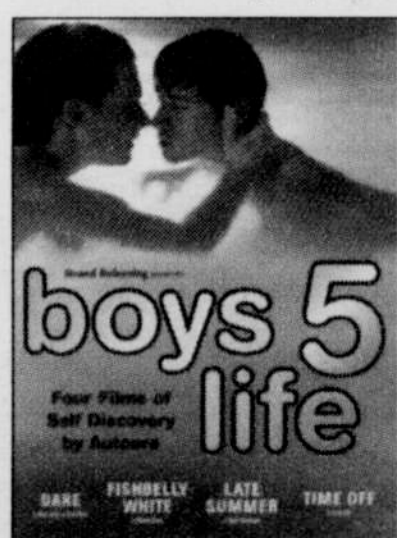


Black Plum follows the exploits of a tomboyish young girl for whom a tantalizing black plum is a metaphor for freedom from restrictive

gender roles. The ghosts of a lesbian couple mentor the child as she comes to terms with her uniqueness. Elizabeth McCarthy's *Everything Good*—in which Lila, an apparently married but unsatisfied American, telephone orders a female escort to her Amsterdam hotel room—has its flaws, but Lea Tolub's performance as Lila, which bravely captures the awkwardness and emotion of overcoming sexual inhibition, is excellent.

Though it's worth questioning the gender segregation implied (or reflected) by having separate "boys" and "girls" compilations, each of these collections highlights the diversity of stories and viewpoints that constitute our rich and complex queer community. Because no two films on either of them come from exactly the same point of view or deal with repetitively similar experiences or milieus, either of these cornucopias of queer creativity is likely to offer something for everyone. **10**

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