

QDOC

Portland
Queer
Documentary
Film Festival
May 29 - June 1, 2008

ten hilarious in describing their new lives as what were once known as "lipstick lesbians." (6:30 p.m. May 31. Chisholm will attend. Screens with Fulfilling Fantasy, filmmaker Katherine Linton's documentary about lesbian sexuality.)

If the women of *Female to Femme* use their bodies as canvases for genderplay, Keith Haring used the world and everything in it for his more expansive images of gyrating pictographs and dancing penises. At the beginning of *The Universe of Keith Haring*, directed by Christina Clausen, the late artist's mother says, "He was born face up instead of face down, which the doctor called 'sunnyside up.'" The Haring seen here was indeed a sunny, soulful personality who put his celebratory stamp on everything from paintings and murals to an autograph seeker's shoes or an art dealer's car. This multifaceted portrait features lively footage of Haring and his friends at work and play (including Grace Jones and Madonna) and corrals a wide range of commentators (including fellow artist Kenny Scharf, Yoko Ono, family members and friends). Haring's story takes place against the backdrop of New York City's 1980s sexual and artistic revolutions. He's shown at the center of both, eagerly participating in the raging bathhouse scene while adding his tireless DIY approach to the queer club scene and breaking down the barriers between the fine-art elitism of the museums and galleries and the exhilarating impromptu street art of graffiti artists. Haring's iconic image created for ACT UP ("Silence = Death") came in the wake of his own HIV diagnosis, but his lament for his abbreviated existence was more about his art than his life: "I still have so much to do." Wisely, the film celebrates his life, not his death. It also avoids overanalyzing this most generous of populist art, instead letting Haring speak for himself in extensive excerpts from audio interviews. (8:30 p.m. May 31.)

Haring celebrated openness, liberation and, more specifically, queerness. But others have done the same thing in a much different way. In the 1996 documentary *It's Elementary*, director Deborah Chasnoff filmed grade school classrooms in which anti-gay prejudice was discussed. Her important follow-up film, *It's Still Elementary*, examines the backlash against its predecessor, interviews some of the children more than a decade later and shows the considerable gains that have been made since. One of the striking aspects

of the first film, reprised in the new one, was the sophistication of some of the children. Right-wing and religious propaganda notwithstanding, they were

comfortable discussing queerness and bigotry and were often insightful in reading them. As a little girl, Samira Abdul-Karim was smart enough to know something about queerness that many adults still won't admit: "You can't really change it." Samira is shown as a mature young woman, equally engaged, and like the other interviewees, she remembers the *It's Elementary* experience as a vital moment in her life. Happily, *It's Still Elementary* shows that much of the promise of the film has been realized, and it deserves credit for its pioneering efforts in helping improve life for gay kids. For example, whereas there were only two Gay Straight Alliances in the country in 1996, there were 3,000 in 2007. That's progress. (1 p.m. June 1. A panel discussion on the status of safe schools in Oregon, featuring Symons and representatives from Basic Rights Oregon and Oregon Safe Schools and Communities Coalition, will follow the screening.)

Children are also an important element in *Darling! The Pieter-Dirk Uys Story*, directed by Julian Shaw. They're one of the big audiences for the famous South African drag queen, political satirist and AIDS educator. Uys, whose stage name is Evita Se Perron, has been acknowledged as a major force in overcoming apartheid, brazenly ridiculing the country's reactionary leaders like P.W. Botha in brutally funny sketches under the cover of his female persona, or conversing with a puppet version of a clueless leader like Thabo Mbeki, whom he outright accuses of genocide in ignoring the AIDS crisis.

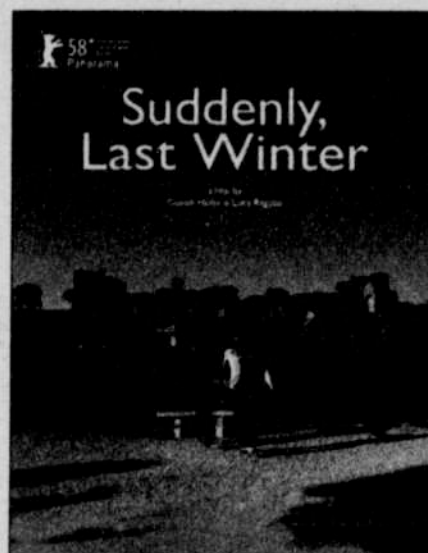
Uys is a charismatic presence, a verbal magician who comes off as a sort of activist version of Dame Edna. "The most famous woman in South Africa," as he sarcastically dubs himself, spends much of his time advising young people on the importance of condom use—a particular necessity in a country whose present leadership barely acknowledges AIDS. As in *It's Still Elementary*, the children welcome his message and understand it, not least because the messenger makes it so entertaining. He has no patience with backward politicians: "Take a pension and fuck off!" he says. He's also handy with the aphorisms: "Hypocrisy is the Vaseline of political intercourse." Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu are among those on hand giving unsparing praise to an amazing man whose spirit shines through this film. (3 p.m. June 1. Screens with 7 Years, Dutch filmmaker Bram Vergeer's documentary about queers in Kenya, where homosexuality is punishable with seven years of imprisonment.)

Spirit also informs *She's a Boy I Knew*, a bittersweet record of the transition of filmmaker Gwen Haworth from Steven, a straight male, to Gwen, a gay female. Haworth adroitly mixes comical cartoon images, old magazine ads riffing on gender roles and homemade special effects with frank interviews with the family and friends affected by the decision. His wife, Malgosia, was shocked but supportive. His father laments the "death" of his son and struggles to come around. One particularly evocative sequence shows footage from one of Steven's student films, in

which he's walking down a path and gradually disappearing, an apt metaphor for his transition. The film is refreshingly respectful in its treatment of the people in Gwen's circle, encouraging them to be candid even when it shows the filmmaker in a bad light. Malgosia, who makes a superhuman effort to stay with Gwen despite the personal toll it takes on her, is especially articulate in this respect: "I didn't want to love what you didn't want to be." Dour moments of focusing on the complex system of losses and gains that surround transitioning are balanced by the warmth and openness of friends and by Gwen's sardonic humor. Her hormone treatments, she says, made her feel like she was "cramming a lifetime's worth of PMS into a few months." The film's tagline is "A highly subjective documentary about love, family and transsexuality." Just as accurately, it could be called a moving tale of love, loss and personal transformation—themes that filigree this festival and make it a must-attend for anyone interested in the present state of queer representation. (5:30 p.m. June 1.)

Clinton Street Theater presents the second annual QDOC: PORTLAND QUEER DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL from May 29 to June 1 at 2522 S.E. Clinton St. For a complete schedule visit www.queerdocfest.org.

GARY MORRIS edits and publishes Bright Lights Film Journal, located online at www.brightlightsfilm.com.



An Italian couple boldly confront ordinary people on the street, trying to get homophobes to explain their reasoning, in *Suddenly, Last Winter*.

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