

We Were Here

PLGFF 2011 leads off with *We Were Here*, a heavy yet heartwarming documentary about San Francisco's response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic as seen through the eyes of five people who lived, loved and fought through it.

We Were Here debuted at the Sundance Film Festival in January and has been screening across the country to rave reviews ever since. The film captures the fear and loss of the early years of the "gay plague" through archival footage and the memories of those who were there, still raw with emotion yet tempered by perspective after 30 years.

The four men and one woman featured in the film were involved in the fight against AIDS in different capacities, but all witnessed the death of the majority of their friends, lovers and colleagues. Still, amid the tragedy, there is cause for celebration in the victories of a once disjointed LGBT community that came together to battle the mystery disease no one else wanted to touch.

We Were Here helps carry forward the stories of a generation of LGBT ancestors that nearly disappeared entirely, and serves as a reminder of the hard-earned wisdom of the community's elders. All in all, it's well worth the tears.

Co-director David Weissman, who along with Bill Weber also created *The Cockettes*, will be in attendance at the PLGFF opening.

Directed by David Weissman, USA, 90 min., Fri., Sept. 30, 7:30 p.m., Weissman in attendance.

—ERIN ROOK

Gun Hill Road

Gun Hill Road explores a couple's struggle to come to terms with their child's gender identity within the framework of the father's incarceration. Enrique (Esai Morales) returns home after three years behind bars to find he doesn't know his cheating wife (Judy Reyes) and closeted transsexual teen (played by trans-identified newcomer Harmony Santana) as well as he thought he did.

While quietly supportive wife Angela and defiantly macho Enrique are rather two-dimensional characters, Michael/Vanessa's complexities shine in both the writing and acting. Santana portrays the adolescent's developing

sense of self and sexuality—tempered with considerable shyness—with an authenticity likely inspired by the story's similarities to Santana's real life.

Enrique struggles with his own sense of what it means to be a man by trying to shape his child into his own image, using tactics that range from the benign to the traumatic. Meanwhile, the teen balances a home life as Michael with a social life as Vanessa, navigating difficult situations without a safety net.

Even though the film features some pretty heavy moments (including rape), it ends on a hesitantly hopeful note, leaving the viewer with a sense that Vanessa will emerge a radiant and self-assured young woman.

Directed by Rasheed Ernesto Green, USA, 88 min., Thurs., Oct. 6, 7 p.m.

—ERIN ROOK

Kink Crusaders

Kink Crusaders follows the 2008 International Mr. Leather pageant from start to finish, featuring perspectives from organizers, judges, contestants, fans and passersby on both the event and the diverse community it represents.

Rather than focus on the sexy aspects of the leather scene, the film emphasizes the contest's role in building bridges, fostering leadership, fighting HIV/AIDS, advocating for the rights of kinky people and creating community.

IML founder Chuck Renslow says the pageant is inclusive, and he means it. The contest has been won by men of color, trans men and men with disabilities. It has also included straight men and a wide range of interpretations of "leather" from old school to new school.

The film provides an inside look at the competition, but goes deeper to explore issues of race and gender as well as the discrimination (losing children, jobs, etc.) faced by kinky folk. Engaging in sexual fetishes is, we are reminded, still considered a mental illness in the United States and is effectively illegal in the United Kingdom.

Kink Crusaders isn't all that artfully or sharply done, but what it lacks in production value it makes up for with candid interviews, backstage footage and historical perspective.

Directed by Mike Skiff, USA, 74 min., Sat., Oct. 1, 9:30 p.m.

—ERIN ROOK

Dr. Andy Zysman
October 1993



Above: Act Up demonstrators in a still from *We Were Here*

Right: Chris New and Tom Cullen star in *Weekend*

Weekend

The best gay film of the year, Andrew Haigh's *Weekend* lets viewers eavesdrop on the budding relationship between Russell (Tom Cullen) and Glen (Chris New). Meeting at a club one night, they spend the evening together. And then the next day, and the next night, and the next day.

Glen is an artist with a queer political bent. Russell is more subdued, an everyman who just wants to be happy. Their conversations range from sensitive—Glen explains how he was outed in school—to heated, as when Russell argues a position about gay marriage. Haigh films these men in a documentary-like fashion in Russell's apartment, or chatting idly on public transit.

Yet the filmmaker's intimate, fly-on-the-wall approach, along with the actors' strong performances, supplies the film's emotional power. *Weekend* invites viewers to bask in the pleasure of the two men sharing a bicycle ride, or sense the chemistry behind their frequent physical contact. As Glen and Russell go through the familiar rituals of dating, audiences will become invested in the relationship, perhaps to the same degree that the two men fall for each other. And the film's poignant finale is sure to jerk tears from a few viewers.



The actors are both fantastic in their roles. Handsome without being too pretty, they seem comfortable and natural together. New is charismatic, and Cullen nicely underplays his part; a scene at his goddaughter's birthday party belies his character's desires to be with Glen. Watching these men connect is simply magical.

Directed by Andrew Haigh, UK, 96 min., Sun., Oct. 2, 7 p.m.

—GARY KRAMER

August

A sexy little film about the perils and pleasures of reuniting with one's ex, *August* has Troy (Murray Bartlett) returning to L.A. from Spain. He reconnects with Jonathan (Daniel Dugan) at a café. However, while Troy is thinking of a second chance, Jonathan has

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