

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Seattle Film Festival

Before Stonewall: Sensitive and comprehensive survey of gay history

by Stephen Ahlbom

Unlike *The Word Is Out*, its predecessor, the film *Before Stonewall* is not only a celebration of gay emancipation but also a sensitive and comprehensive survey of the history of gay culture up to the late 60's.

From a wealth of personal memorabilia and a mass of media coverage, director Greta Schiller has crafted a moving collage of gay America from the 1920's to the establishment of the gay liberation movement. The film was produced by John Scagliotti, Greta Schiller and Robert Rosenberg in association with the Center for Filmed Study, from material collected by Andrea Weiss. The most moving thing for me was the interviews with the gay men and women who lived this history.

I had the opportunity to speak with the director, Greta Schiller. We sat in the empty Egyptian balcony to the left of the white screen.

SGN: Last night you mentioned the eventual PBS broadcast of *Before Stonewall*. What exactly is the situation?

Schiller: We received a large part of our production money from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. They have what is called an unsolicited category, and about 20 films are partially funded through this program every year. To be funded through this program means the PBS national programmer must like the film, and then they will offer it over the entire system. They liked *Before Stonewall* enough to let us edit it into a 90 minute length instead of only 60. Once we finished the film, we thought 'Hey! We have a really good film here!' that should be shown in movie theaters. So we requested that they allow us to do a theatrical run. This serves two purposes: one is the publicity

that a theater venue will offer, instead of a single broadcast, and (two) the box office receipts will pay some of the debts we've incurred. So PBS agreed to hold off until the Fall of 1986 to give us some time to recoup our losses.

SGN: And you would have enough material to do a series?

Schiller: Probably, yes. Once we started collecting material it would snowball. I would like to do that if I could get the funding. But as a survey there were some things we just didn't have room for that I would like to have included.

SGN: Did you end up with a lot of extra footage and material?

Schiller: Yes, we did end up with a lot of archival material which consists of snapshots, letters, drawings, home movies, and about 85 hours of principal interviews which is all transcribed and logged and on deposit in the Lesbian History Archive in New York or the Gay Archive in L.A.

SGN: I was curious about the early lesbian and gay publications.

Schiller: A lot of that was borrowed from the International Gay Archives in New York. They have an extensive collection of journals and things like that. But other, more obscure things people would mail in to us.

SGN: Is there any plan for a follow-up program of discussion after the PBS broadcast of the film in 1986?

Schiller: If the local PBS sponsors want to produce that sort of thing then we will work with them on it. We aren't initiating it ourselves, but I think it would be a good idea.

SGN: One positive thing about the film was the insight into an older generation of gay people and their experiences. Today it seems there is little contact between patrons of different bars let alone



persons of different generations. Did you have a personal favorite among the people you interviewed?

Schiller: With any group of people you will develop a rapport with some more than others. I would say that I am still in contact with the man who made the concluding statement in the film, Ted Rolfs. He sends me clippings when he sees them in the paper, and he is so supportive and helpful. One of the rewarding aspects of filming was the close contact with the people whose lives laid the groundwork for our existence in a lot of very fundamental ways, and I feel very akin to them. But I still correspond with Ted and with Liza Ben, the folk singer. There is also a person from Seattle, Teddy Boutte, the Southern Belle, who is a very warm and special

person.

After the interview, we talked about which promotional photo to use for the article, the ones in my press packet being both high drag snapshots and possibly too camp to be representational of the film. I stopped back at the festival office and they gave me a print of the first gay rights demonstration in Philadelphia in 1965.

Before Stonewall played as part of the 10th Seattle International Film Festival on May 13th. Another Seattle engagement has been negotiated but not confirmed at this writing. A date is expected to be announced soon. The Film Festival runs through June 10th at the Egyptian and the Market theaters. Several gay-oriented films are featured. For more information call 323-4978.