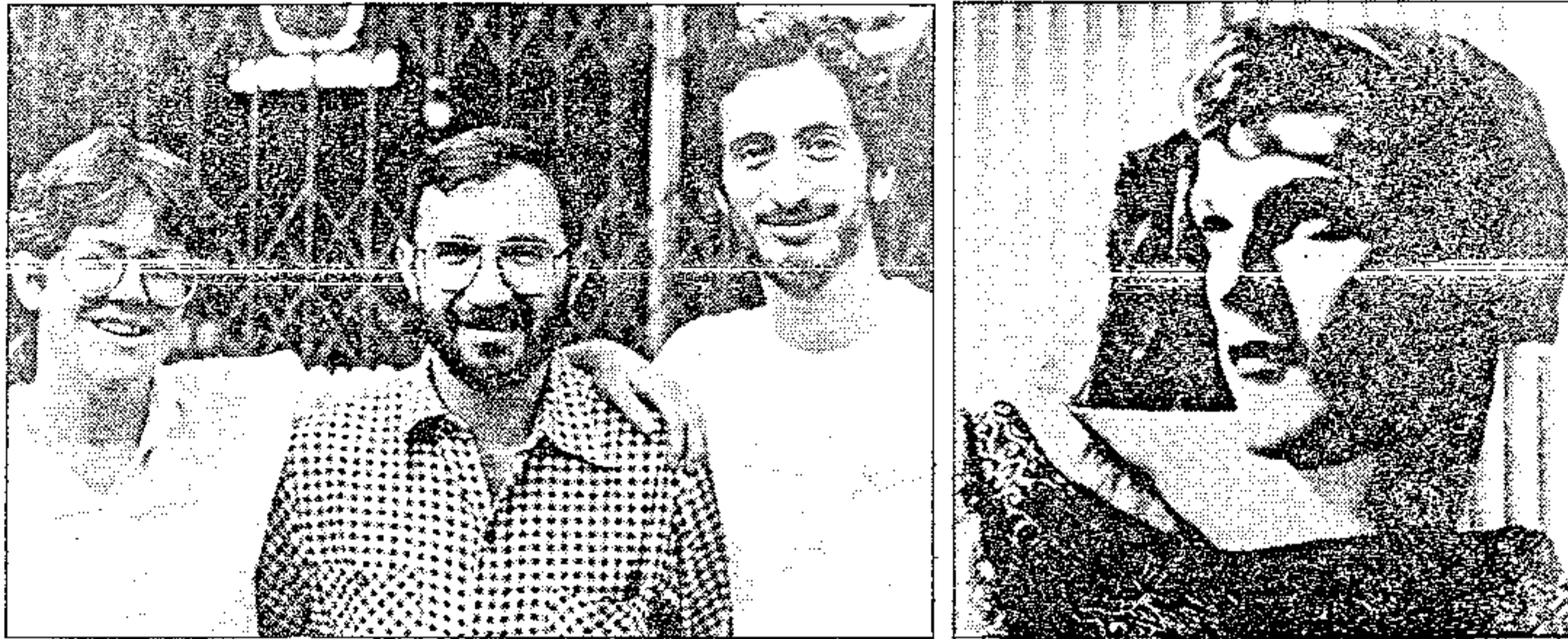


Interview

BEFORE STONEWALL



BEFORE STONEWALL IS AN AWARD-WINNING NEW DOCUMENTARY ABOUT THE LIVES OF AMERICAN LESBIANS AND GAY MEN BEFORE 1970. IT'S FUNNY, THRILLING AND MOVING ALL AT ONCE—THIS YEAR'S ANSWER TO *THE TIMES OF HARVEY MILK*. MARK FINCH TALKS TO THE DIRECTOR GRETA SCHILLER.

"I've always been a history fan," confesses Schiller, arriving for our interview laden with shopping. She had only three days in England, and had just discovered Marks & Spencer. "At school I was fascinated by the forbidden aspects of history, the histories of subcultures and minority communities." I confess too: if my history lessons had been as lively and as fascinating as *Before Stonewall* I would never have given them up for biology. Schiller's film brings together an amazing variety of material. There's home movie footage of a reunion for patrons of 'The Black Cat', a bohemian bar in San Francisco; tearful men embrace each other and join together in a proud chorus of 'God Bless Our Nelly Queen'. A Woman's Army Corps officer remembers a meeting with General Eisenhower, who threatened to exclude lesbians from military service; 'in that case sir,' she replied, 'the ranks will be severely depleted, and I'll also be forc-

ed to leave'. There's even an excerpt from an extraordinary Hollywood film called *This Is The Army*, in which Ronald Reagan plays director to a touring wartime drag show. Again and again, *Before Stonewall* surprises with the memories it finds locked behind the closet door of official history.

The key people responsible for this skillful compilation, besides Schiller, are producer John Scagliotti and co-director Robert Rosenberg. The film is narrated by author Rita Mae Brown (most famous for *Ruby Fruit Jungle*), and much of the painstaking research was performed by Andrea Weiss who lives with Schiller in New York.

Schiller herself was born in Detroit, and moved to New York for film school. She graduated with a film called *Greta's Girl* ("about two lesbians having a chat on a park bench," she says) which won an award for the year's best student film. After working in the Audio Visual Unit of

New York's Department for the Ageing, Schiller went on to co-produce a short film about the 1981 Gay Rights March in Washington. *Greetings From Washington DC* was recently shown by Channel Four.

"When Robbie Rosenberg approached me about doing *Before Stonewall*, it clicked with my interest in the undiscovered history of subcultures," explains Schiller. "We realised that we weren't dealing with the history of a few people who were involved in the *political* gay movement, but with the history of a larger group, of how lesbians and gay men emerged from being fragmented and isolated and were turned into a very tenacious, visible, organised community.

"We began at the turn of the century for a number of reasons. First, that's when the idea of a gay identity arises. Before then, people could only commit



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▷ homosexual acts—they weren't known as 'homosexuals'. And second, there's no visual record before then, of course. We didn't want this film to be a talking head movie, with lots of historians engaged in speculation. We wanted archive footage."

PERHAPS THE FILM IS WINNING SO MANY ADMIRERS BECAUSE IT SHOWS GAYS AS SURVIVORS

It took four years to make *Before Stonewall*, largely because of the amount of research required. When Andrea Weiss visited the National Archives in Washington they said they couldn't help with material. "Well, it's true they didn't have a section headed Homosexuality. Instead, Andrea had to look through all the other files." The films she finally found include an early Western adventure, featuring Stan Laurel as the first gay cowboy, and documentary scenes of army training suffused with a distinct erotic feeling. "These images speak so strongly for themselves. We decided mostly to not identify where the footage came from. *Before Stonewall* is made to keep its audience asking questions about our place in society."

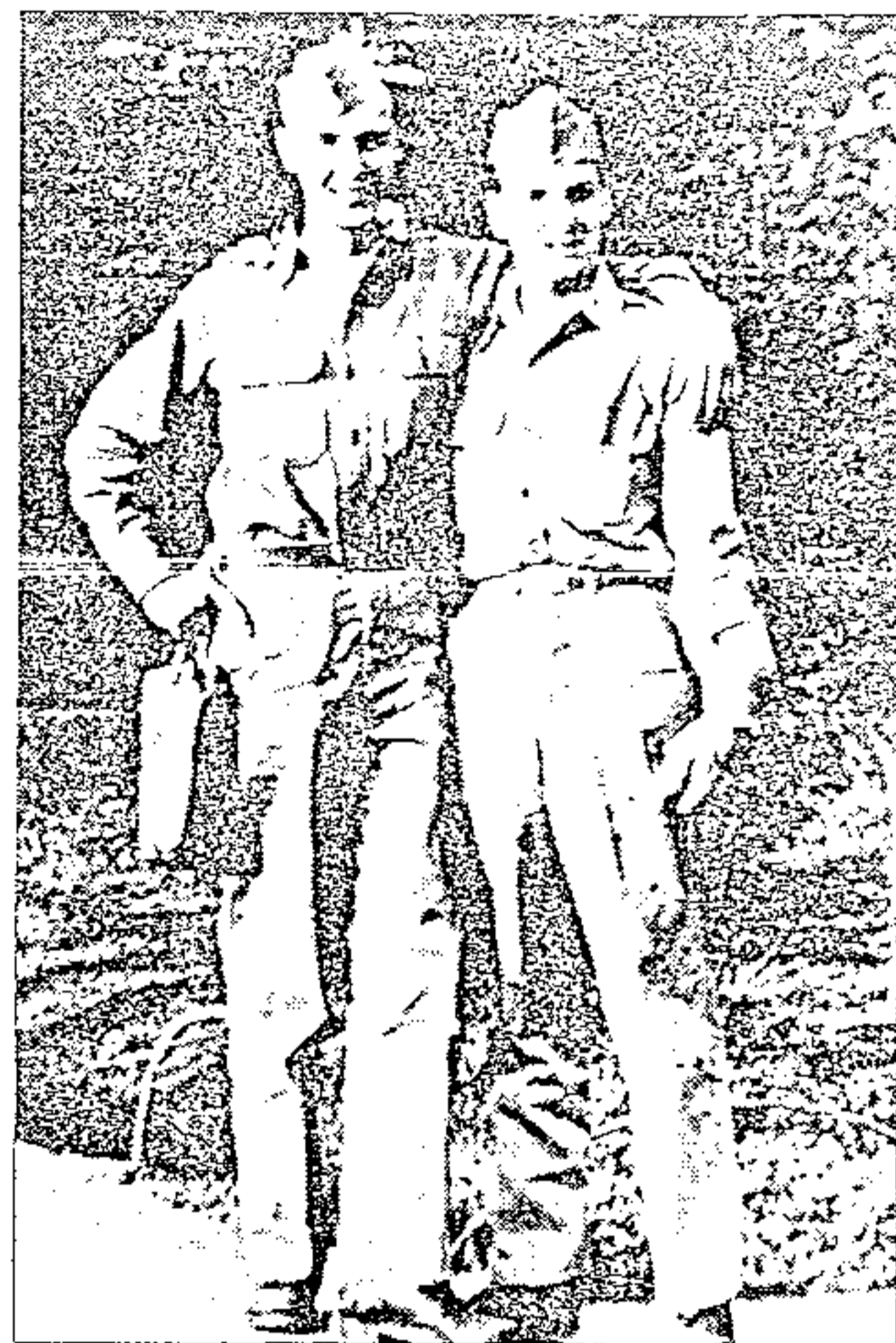
Another difficulty was in finding people to appear in the film. "We didn't want interviewees who were still involved in gay politics today, so we had to track down friends of friends of friends." About eighty potential participants were found. "Understandably, they were very suspicious of this chaotic group of young people who wanted to hear about their past experiences. We had to be very careful not to judge them by the standards of the modern gay community. For instance, we can't be critical of a lesbian who married in 1932 in order to be seen as straight. I'm also a pacifist, I don't support the US military, but we wanted to show the importance of the military for bringing gay people together." *Before Stonewall* reveals that male soldiers and

lesbian WACs weren't the only ones who had their first same-sex encounters during war-time. Wives left behind at home found intimate relief with their work colleagues in the factories. "Memories of this sort had been buried for so long that a lot of people wanted to paint a rosier picture for us. They took a lot of coaxing before they would trust us to share the complexity of their memories."

Like *The Times of Harvey Milk*, Schiller's film is aimed at gay and straight audiences. We all have a lot to learn. In fact, *Stonewall* was commissioned for American public television, PBS, who also funded *Harvey Milk*. "Right after Reagan announced that public broadcasting was going to suffer severe funding cuts, that's when both films received their grants. Now my theory is that there were people at PBS who thought this would be their very last chance to give money to gay films, so they said yes to both of us." Nevertheless, Schiller had nothing like the budget she really wanted. During post-production the team would take a break from work in their Times Square offices and go next door to see a Hollywood movie. "Seeing how they wasted their huge budgets would depress us all," she remembers.

Still, the film is re-paying its investment many times over. From Toronto to Los Angeles to Berlin, *Stonewall* has picked up prizes and praise at festivals and then gone on to bring full houses for local cinemas. And that's amazing at a time when we might otherwise have thought that any documentary shown in a cinema had to be about polar bears, wind-surfing, or off-shore oil. Remember those boring B-feature travelogues?

Meanwhile, if television documentaries ever decide to take on a gay issue, nowadays it's always Aids. Perhaps *Before Stonewall* is winning over so many admirers because it shows gays as survivors? In the face of Aids, it's important to remind ourselves of our history, and to gossip and have a giggle at the same time. "A woman on an American talkshow asked me why *Before Stonewall* didn't deal with Aids," Schiller recounts angrily. "'Because it only goes up to 1970' I replied. And a man at another network said they would like to deal with my film, but that they thought Aids was more important. 'Well why don't you discuss both?' I asked. I shouldn't have been so polite, of course. I should have sworn at them." Now that's a lesson for us all. □



• World War II created the first awareness of how many gays and lesbians there are.



• A young man, circa early 1950's.