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AMERICA'S
BEST-
SELLING
GAY AND
LESBIAN
MAGAZINE

UNLITE

DEC/JAN 1997

FILM



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Expatriate Games

Greta Schiller and Andrea Weiss revisit the lesbian-friendly Left Bank.

FOR DIRECTOR GRETA SCHILLER and writer Andrea Weiss, lesbian history looks like one big detective story waiting to be decoded. After their work 11 years ago on the classic documentary *Before Stonewall*, they teamed up on two historical documentaries on women in the music scene. All along, "we were fascinated by the Parisian lesbian scene of the '30s," says Schiller. The result of that fascination is their new film *Paris Was a Woman* (*Zcitgeist*), which proves that savvy, relentless research can have a spectacular payoff.

From the Alice B. Toklas audiotapes in the Berkeley files, to 1930s home movies of Toklas and Gertrude Stein found at Yale, to the Library of Congress' uncataloged works of *The New Yorker* Paris correspondent Janet Flanner, the filmmakers tracked down amazing, forgotten materials. They also approached living treasures like Berthe Cleyrergue, housekeeper to lesbian poet Natalie Barney—and yes, she talked. Some former Left Bankers had to be coaxed, Schiller reports, such as German Jewish photographer Gisele Freund: "She was really in love all her life with [avant-garde bookseller] Adrienne Monnier. It was only when she discovered I'd already read everything about Adrienne in the original French that she decided to trust us and talk."

Paris Was a Woman has its share of political bombshells. It relates how Sylvia Beach published *Ulysses* and fought James Joyce's legal battles for more than a decade, convinced of his genius, and how, when the case was won, he ditched her for a big-name publisher, leaving her bankrupt. And it takes on writer and translator Renee Vivien's and Natalie Barney's fascist sympathies. But Weiss disagrees with charges that Gertrude Stein was pro-fascist: "I heard so many stories about her Resistance activity that I'd find it hard to believe."

With half a decade invested in this project, Schiller and Weiss have stories to spare—and have put them to good use. Weiss' book *Paris Was a Woman* is out from Harper San Francisco, while Schiller wants to direct a feature film based on the legendary women of Paris *avant la guerre*. Now in London, the partners are living their version of the expatriate life they've been studying for so long.—B. RUBY RICH

B. Ruby Rich's film commentary can be heard on *The World on Public Radio International* and the BBC.