

the village VOICE FREE

NOVEMBER
6-12, 1996

Gertrude and Friends

Greta Schiller remembers the numerous rejections she and partner Andrea Weiss received in response to their funding requests for a documentary about the female artists of early-20th-century Paris: "You girls are biting off more than you can chew"; "Group biography does not work in cinema"; "You can't take bits and pieces and tell a story about people's lives." Her normally calm, purring voice barely masking her contempt for the money people, Schiller says, "That just made me more determined to do it."

The result is *Paris Was a Woman*, a delectably shimmering, finely crafted film, based on Weiss's like-titled book, which tells the stories of nearly a dozen women who congregated in the Left Bank at the outset of this century, including Americans like Gertrude Stein, *New Yorker* columnist Janet Flanner, and novelist Djuna Barnes, and Parisians like Colette, publisher Adrienne Monnier, and photographer Gisele Freund.

"This film is really about a community and a unique period of time," says Schiller. "Since then, there hasn't been a time or place where so much culture is concentrated in a two-mile-square part of a city." Schiller and Weiss focused on oft-frequented locales and created visual chapters to introduce the woman or

Locating the Left Bank's Legendary Women

BY MARK HUISMAN

couple most associated with those spots. Stein and Toklas's living-room salon, Natalie Barney's garden, and Janet Flanner's hotel suite are but a few of the places featured in the film's dense melange of photographs, radio recordings, TV clips, and first-person accounts. The film goes a long way toward exploding the myth that the creative action in Paris centered around men like Picasso and Matisse, Hemingway and Joyce.

Paris Was a Woman doesn't shun the scandal and innuendo of the time, either. "Gertrude and Alice sort of brought 'street' to the salon," says Schiller. "They loved to have GIs and street performers around. These were boisterous gatherings. . . . The neighbors were probably shocked." Clad in a toga, Natalie Barney threw Sapphic garden parties, Flanner wrote slyly of Toklas's flirtatious nature, Barnes battled promiscuity and alcoholism.

Schiller and Weiss met in the late '70s, while the two worked at Women Make Movies in its feminist film-collective heyday. Their first collaboration was

Before Stonewall, a historical account of the gay and lesbian civil rights movement, which won two Emmys. Weiss went on to get her Ph.D. in history, and then returned to filmmaking, codirecting and coproducing two award-winning short subjects about female jazz artists: *International Sweethearts of Rhythm* and *Tiny & Ruby: Hell-Divin' Women*. The duo formed a production company, named Jezebel, and have been partners inside and outside the cutting room for 17 years, often collaborating, sometimes flying solo, not unlike their *Paris Was a Woman* counterparts.

Schiller says she and Weiss may be part of a similar community, but it's one so spread out as to be almost unidentifiable. "Today there's fax machines and e-mail . . . you're not *there*, hearing and listening to each other. You realize how much history is letters and correspondence. I e-mail half my friends! What's history going to look like with all this?" Weiss remarks on another social change: "In terms of the way these women were paired—Stein and Toklas, Flanner and [artist Solita] Solano—you can really see that one woman made tremendous personal, creative sacrifices for the other. One gives up her career. We're just not willing to do that." ❖

Paris Was a Woman

Greta Schiller's jam-packed documentary about the women writers, artists, and critics who flocked to Paris in the '20s and formed a wildly creative, mostly lesbian, community is graced with wonderful photographs and rare home movies. 75 (Taubin)
Quad