

# MOVIES

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## ENTERTAINMENT

### Horror stories from the days in the closet

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**B**EFORE STONEWALL is one film that people were not clamoring to star in. The reasons should become clearer when it is screened tomorrow at Toronto's Festival of Festivals and carried next spring on public broadcasting stations. Through a collage of raw interviews and biting archival clips, it depicts the codes, masks and lifestyles evolved by the homosexual community prior to the gay liberation movement. Before Stonewall emerges as a riveting and often surprisingly funny unravelling of tightly bound territory, in large part due to the humor and spirits of the subjects who agreed to be interviewed.

Greta Schiller, the film's 29-year-old New York director, is fervent in her explanation of the problems she faced in rounding up her "cast." "It had to be a special kind of person. Most of the people were much older, and shedding 50 years of closeted behavior is difficult to do. It had to be taken into consideration whether or not they had families, jobs or lovers that could be hurt or lost by their appearance."

Might that inhibit the variety of people represented in the film? "Absolutely. In one instance, we agreed to silhouette the woman who was thrown out of the military in the fifties and is now a school teacher. During the McCarthy era, there was a big purge of gay people, and she was found

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guilty by association. She was called into a commanding office and asked to reveal the identity of other lesbians in the military. They guaranteed that, if she finked, she would be given an honorable discharge. They applied all sorts of intimidation tactics — waking her up at night, having her tailed — and after a couple of months, she finally broke down and confessed with some names, including the name of her lover.

"She was neither honorably, nor dishonorably, discharged. She was given an "undesirable" discharge, reserved at the time only for sexual perversion. It's like being marked for life — she couldn't use her skills developed in the military for other jobs without having her history uncovered. In addition, they took her lover off the base, told her family, and the woman never heard from her again. Her relationship was destroyed and her life was devastated."

After toiling over the film for 2½ years, Schiller still discovers moments that resonate anew for her. "When I'm riding around on my bike, phrases from the film will come to me that knock me out. A white middle-aged man described his experience in the fifties of discovering the Mattachine Society, which was the first formal gay organization in America. He said that it was the first time in his life that he realized we weren't bad people, that we are good people. That's an incredible thing, to walk about thinking that you are a bad person, that your kind is bad."

Response to the film in small fund-raising screenings has been hugely enthusiastic, with the exception of the few who have reservations about what is included and excluded. "Because it's the first gay historical film, a lot of people might feel that if they get their story or perspective in, it won't be heard again. History is a completely subjective thing, it's not a factual record. It can't meet everybody's needs, and if filmmakers purport to do that, then they are lying."

