

STAGE AND SCREEN

London Film Festival

In June 1969 social unrest in the States was at its height. The police were cracking down. But when they raided the Stonewall - a low-life gay bar in Greenwich Village, which didn't have police or Mafia protection - the customers said enough is enough. Three days of rioting ensued and the Gay Liberation Movement was born.

BEFORE STONEWALL charts the social trends which affected the expression of gayness up until that time. As the film cuts from archive footage to interviews, we go from black/gay bars in Harlem in the 20s, to a 93% lesbian army unit during WWII, to the McCarthy hearings, to the early days of gay organizations as we know them today.

Director Greta Schiller uses period home movies (a lesbian wedding), clips from Hollywood films (a gay cowboy!) and an extract from a unique film of gays in Germany in the 30s. This was made by the pioneer researcher into homosexuality, Magnus Hirschfeld. All prints were thought to have been destroyed by the Nazis, but a copy turned up in the Ukraine.

I can't praise STONEWALL too highly. It's a fascinating document of our all-to-often censored history. It's worth seeing over and over again. It opens at the METRO in London at the end of January.

DESERT HEARTS is an hilarious weepie. Beautifully shot in the Nevada desert, it is peopled by strong women full of wisdom about

the joy and pain of love. Vivien, at 35 a respected literary professor, leaves her husband in order to disentangle their lives. In Reno for a rest and a quick divorce, she meets Cay, casino cash-girl, artist and maniac driver, who is looking for someone that matters...

Backed by classic country and western, blues and rock'n'roll songs, the film grabs you by the throat and makes you feel every emotion played out on the screen. It's the most positive gay love story I've ever seen.

KISS OF THE SPIDERWOMAN brings together Luis Molina, a gay man imprisoned for eight years for "corrupting a minor", and Valentin, a radical journalist being tortured for information.

William Hurt gives a wonderfully observed rendition of a "queen" retreating into melodrama, as he passes the time by recounting a tragic love story - unconcerned that it is from a Nazi propaganda film. In contrast Raul Julia as Valentin is hard and unyielding, initially unable to accept that softness and emotion can be part of manliness too. Both learn a lot from each other as their daily lives and concerns become more and more interwoven. Highly recommended.

Also watch out for: COLONEL REDL, MY BEAUTIFUL LAUNDRETTE, SHADEY, FORGET VENICE, THE ANGELIC CONVERSATION, and LETTER TO BREZHNEV. (DAVID SMITH)

KISS OF THE SPIDERWOMAN opens in January and DESERT HEARTS in April.