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Magnifique 'Woman' is Paree at its gayest

By LARRY WORTH

THE City of Light is often referred to as Gay Paree. But as "Paris Was a Woman" entertainingly points out, the French capital was at its gayest around 1920.

That's when a contingent of largely lesbian artists, writers, photographers and publishers found themselves living around the Left Bank and contributing to a creative community that's rarely been equaled.

With a mix of superb period footage, magnificent stills and entrancing interviews, director Greta Schiller recreates the ambience of Saint Germain des Pres cafes where the likes of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas once reigned.

The production is filled with interesting tidbits about the famous duo, some heard in Stein's own voice. But whether addressing their needs with Matisse and Picasso or Stein's preference in haircuts, the results fascinate.

Equal emphasis goes to lesser-knowns like painters Romaine Brooks and Marie Laurencin, author Djuna Barnes, New Yorker correspondent Janet Flanner (who wrote under the name of Genet) and booksellers Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier.

The group's comings, goings and various couplings, which ended chiefly with the city's Nazi inva-



Alice B. Toklas, Gertrude Stein and friend in "Paris Was a Woman."

PARIS WAS A WOMAN ★ ★ ★

Directed by Greta Schiller. Written by Andrea Weiss. Running time: 75 minutes. Unrated. At Cinema Village, 12th Street, between University Place and Fifth Avenue.

sion in 1939, almost take on a soap-opera quality, with spell-binding results.

Beach and Monnier prove particularly interesting, having owned bookstores on opposite sides of the street and played host to the likes of Ernest Hemingway and James Joyce. Indeed, the tale of Beach going bankrupt after publishing "Ulysses" — to then

have Joyce professionally betray her — confirms legends of his heartless ways.

Though nicely complemented by Juliet Stevenson's narration, Schiller's storytelling technique is occasionally undercut by needless jumping between the subjects at hand.

Yet, that pales beside the non-stop joys, like use of a Paris map where a "vous etes ici" arrow shows the ladies' neighboring homes. But even without the graphic, Schiller makes the "you-are-here" sensation shine with *magnifique* results.