

REEL NEWS

Local events on the movie scene

★★★ "PARIS WAS A WOMAN": No rating.

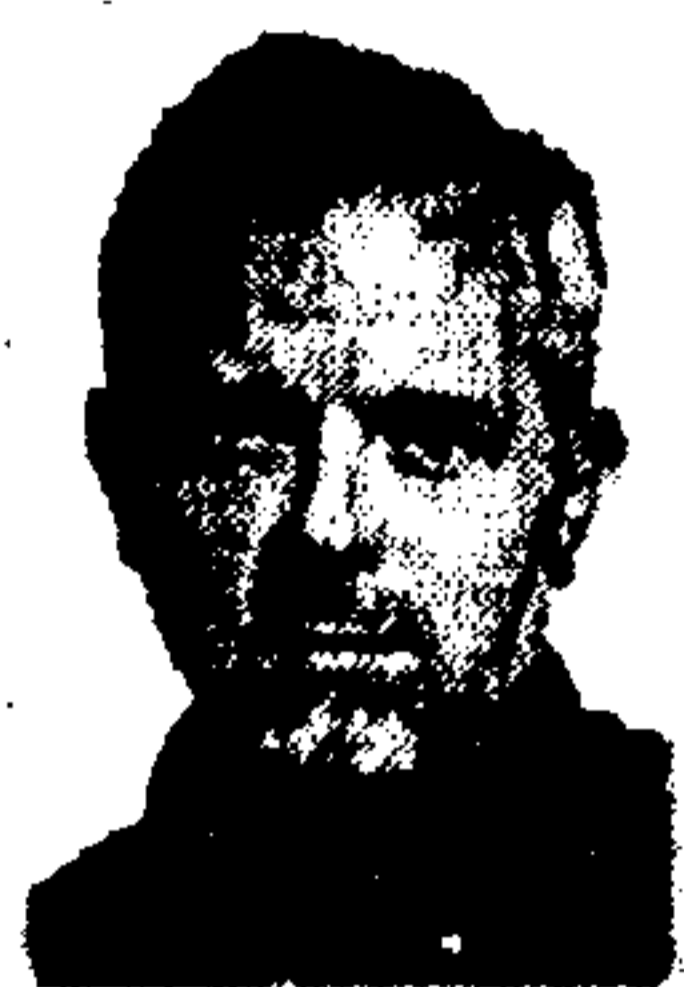
Review, see Reel News, page F 4

Varsity: 5:40, 7:30, 9:20

'Paris Was a Woman' returns

JOHN HARTL

Times staff columnist



For those who couldn't get into the packed screenings at the most recent Seattle International Film Festival, the Varsity is bringing back "Paris Was a Woman," Greta Schiller's captivating documentary about the female artists, photographers and writers who thrived

in the 1920s on the Left Bank.

Scheduled to run tonight through Monday, this 75-minute celebration of feminist influence in the age of expatriates and literary salons doesn't play down the impact of Hemingway, James Joyce, Ezra Pound or Picasso.

But Schiller is more interested in what Gertrude Stein had to contribute to Picasso's early achievements, and how Alice B. Toklas inspired her to write Toklas' "autobiography," and how Adrienne Monnier set up a lending library, and what the devoted publisher Sylvia Beach did for the ungrateful Joyce. (She went broke publishing "Ulysses," and when he left her for Random House, he did nothing to help her. She coolly told him not to darken her door again.)

In general, the women come off here as more stable and generous than the men, although the movie does briefly chronicle the bitter breakup of sculptor Thelma Woods and "Nightwood's" author, Djuna Barnes, who regarded her as the love of her life and never quite recovered from the split. We also learn that Stein briefly developed writer's block after the Toklas book became a bestseller.

Schiller previously created "Before Stonewall" and "The International Sweethearts of Rhythm" by using a similar mixture of interviews, home movies and archival footage. She's on familiar ground through much of the film, which acknowledges the lesbianism or bisexuality of these women without really commenting on it.

Stein is quoted to the effect that she feels free to be herself in France, but not in the U.S., and there's a tacit understanding that Parisians were more accepting of homosexuals. The Nazi occupation, briefly touched on here, was another matter, but Schiller mentions only a couple of instances of survival-oriented subterfuge during the period.

The only direct statement that a woman might have had an easier time of it in France is a segment on Josephine Baker, the African-American entertainer who discovered that she could forget about segregation in France. At the same time, we learn that the Academy Francaise discriminated openly against all women, no matter what race or sexual orientation.

Crisply narrated by Juliet Stevenson, "Paris Was a Woman" could have been longer and more wide-ranging. Andrea Weiss' script might have benefited from dealing more explicitly with some of these matters. But the movie never wears out its welcome, and it succeeds in presenting a famous place and time from a revealing new perspective.



ZEITGEIST FILMS

Alice B. Toklas, left, and Gertrude Stein are featured in "Paris Was a Woman," playing tonight through Monday at the Varsity.