

# MARILEE

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## PARIS WAS A WOMAN

(BRITISH — DOCU)

A Jezebel Prods./Cicada Films production, in association with Salzgeber Medien. (International sales: Jane Balfour Films, London.) Produced by Frances Berrigan, Greta Schiller, Andrea Weiss. Executive producer, Berrigan. Co-producer, Bjorn Koll.

Directed by Greta Schiller. Screenplay, Andrea Weiss. Camera (color/B&W, 16mm), Nurith Aviv, Fawn Yacker; editor, Schiller; music, Janette Mason; sound, Ronald Bailey. Reviewed at London Film Festival, Nov. 19, 1995. Running time: 69 MIN.

Narrator: Juliet Stevenson.

Interviewees: Berthe, Shari Bestock, Catherine Stimpson, Gisele Freund, Sam Steward.

**T**hough ultimately flying under false colors, "Paris Is a Woman" still emerges as a very watchable docu on Left Bank arty expatriates between the wars. Painstakingly researched, and with a wealth of rarely seen footage and interviews, it should be a natural for specialist cable channels and discerning Eurowebs.

Main problem — and annoying, as it skewers the content — is that the film is not simply about its professed subject. Pic purports to be a gender-balancing look at the femme side of the coin, showing there was more to the city's international artistic community at the time than guys like Ernest Hemingway, Ezra Pound, Pablo Picasso, James Joyce and F. Scott Fitzgerald. More by design than accident, however, the docu focuses solely on lesbian participants and, given their uneven accomplishments, ends up more as an intriguing footnote on a community of sexual self-exiles than a convincing argument that artistic history should be rewritten in any major way.

## FILM REVIEWS

Even stranger is the fact that helmer Greta Schiller ("Before Stonewall," plus docu on women musicians) stubbornly refuses to acknowledge the Sapphic subtext that runs through the film. Ordinarily, this wouldn't matter, but there's a nagging suspicion all the way through that it's the women's sexual orientation as much as their artistic bent that has dictated their inclusion.

Mingling wonderful period footage of Paris with archive and contemporary interviews, pic sketches a cosmopolitan city that became a natural home for (mostly American) women looking for an alternative lifestyle away from their upbringing. Structured mostly as a series of pairs portraits, we're introduced to characters such as the eccentric Gertrude Stein and her partner, Alice B. Toklas; pioneering publishers Sylvia Beach and Adrienne Monnier, who loaned out as well as published books; columnist Janet Flanner, who went to Paris with a girlfriend in '23 and stayed to write for the New

Yorker for 40 years; Washington, D.C., heiress Natalie Barney and painter Romaine Brooks, who held literary salons through the '30s; and acerbic writer Djuna Barnes and love of her life Thelma Woods.

With the exception of the gifted Flanner, and bookshop owners Beach and Monnier, most were more remarkable for their bohemianism than any lasting achievements. Pic, however, does them more than justice, and with its copious on-camera testimonies and eerie voice recordings (such as a '52 audio of Toklas) skillfully conjures up a magical period in 20th-century cultural history that played for a limited engagement and disappeared forever in the turmoil of WWII. Tech credits are fine.

—Derek Elley