

Rare documentary opens closets to history of gay life

by John Hartl
Times film reviewer

It isn't easy to create a feature-length documentary about the history of the American gay-rights movement when that movement didn't surface publicly until the late 1960s and early 1970s.

First you have to raise the money, mostly from small investors. Then you have to dig up newsreels, movies and other archival footage from that very closeted

FILMS

era. And you have to find people who are willing to talk about growing up during a period in which Americans lost their jobs and were even sent to asylums for admitting a preference for the same sex.

The creators of "Before Stonewall," which opened this weekend at the Grand Illusion Theater, spent most of the past five years working on the movie, which won an award last spring as the best documentary at the Los Angeles Film Exposition (FILMEX). The title refers to the riots at the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village that established a militant gay community in 1969. The filmmakers have given the movie a subtitle, "The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community."

"It's the history of people whose history isn't recorded," said Greta Schiller, who co-directed the film with Robert Rosenberg and visited Seattle this week for the opening. "Documentaries give people who don't have much of a voice a chance to express themselves."

"We spent a lot of time on fundraising, which was formidable, and we've had to stop a number of times because we were broke. But we felt that the 1980s were the right time for an introduction to gay history on film, and we want other films to grow out of this. We're hoping films like 'Before Stonewall' and 'The Times of Harvey Milk' will get Americans to acknowledge the contributions of gays and lesbians, to see them as equals."

A film-school graduate from City College of New York, Schiller got her start on the project when she co-produced "Greetings From Washington, D.C.," a 30-minute 1979 film about a gay-rights march on Washington, D.C. Deciding to expand on that, she and Rosenberg began working with 18 part-time researchers around the country, looking for home movies of gay weddings and snapshots of lovers, and trying to uncover hidden material. Notices in gay publications produced a flood of mail to the filmmakers.

"We had a list of code words and subjects that made it easier to find information about gays and lesbians before the late 1960s," she said. If, for instance, newspapers in the 1950s referred to someone as



David Whitten Promotions
Creators of 'Before Stonewall' are, from left, Greta Schiller, co-director; John Scagliotti, executive producer; and Robert Rosenberg, co-director.

an "introvert," that probably meant that he or she was gay. If someone was arrested on a "morals charge," it might mean simply that he or she had been present at a gay bar.

One of her assistants was Vito Russo, who hopes to make a film of his 1981 book about gays in the movies, "The Celluloid Closet," and helped her with a section of "Before Stonewall" that deals with gay cowboys.

"We found some of the most amazing scrapbooks and pictures, but a lot of it we couldn't use," said Schiller. "They were of people who had been in the closet for 40 years and didn't want their parents or children to know."

While she was able to get the rights to use a clip from the Beryl Reid/Susannah York movie, "The Killing of Sister George," which shows Hollywood's version of a lesbian bar in 1969, Schiller couldn't afford to pay for a similar clip of a gay male bar from the 1962 movie, "Advise and Consent." Although CBS did an hour-long special in 1967 about homosexuals, she said, the network was "touchy" about the subject and wouldn't allow her to use any of the material.

She added that getting newspaper coverage of the movie, which opened in June in New York, has been a problem as well. The New York Times' mainline critics, Vincent Canby and Janet Maslin, told her they didn't review documentaries, so a TV critic did the review. The New York Post's critic, Archer Winsten, wrote that he'd lived through the 1950s and remembered that "these controversialists are the ones who sought and found trouble." He concluded that the movie makes the past "seem much more foolish than it actually was."

Schiller said these attitudes still make it particularly difficult for well-known homosexuals to "come out" on film and talk about

their experiences.

"Professionals still have a high-risk factor," she said, "and it isn't always possible for them to discuss their private lives. If people showed any indication of wanting to talk, I'd go to their homes and get to know them, make them feel comfortable, before we'd film anything. We especially wanted people who aren't gay activists now, who had grown up in a more repressive time."

One of the "best talkers in the movie is Johnnie Phelps, a former WAC who confronted her commanding general, Dwight D. Eisenhower, when he tried to get rid of all the lesbians in her battalion. When she informed him that 97 percent of the women in her battalion were gay, including herself, he canceled the order.

"She has an amazing storytelling ability," said Schiller. "No matter how many times she told that one, it always came out exactly the same way."

Part of the movie was shot in Seattle's Pioneer Square, and Schiller was tempted to do an episode about a 1950s gay witch hunt in Boise, Idaho — which did become the subject of a Channel 9 documentary, "The Boys From Boise," several years ago. She did one interview here with a man who recalled leaving Boise, which was his home town, because he was afraid he might be named.

"That situation was so hysterical and repressive," she said. "We could have done episode after episode about that kind of thing. It wasn't at all isolated. But we finally had to cut back. This started out as a 60-minute film about the 1950s, but that turned out to be the tip of the iceberg. We started adding more material, and our first cut ran about 2½ hours. We shot more than 100 hours of interviews."

Schiller is now editing a documentary about a 1940s all-woman jazz band, The Internation-

al Sweethearts of Rhythm, and wants her next project to be a film about the writer Willa Cather. She's also thinking of making a shorter film, incorporating some of the "Before Stonewall" material she had to leave on the cutting-room floor, that would examine the way gay people view themselves. But she doesn't have the highest hopes for the future of documentaries.

"I think '60 Minutes' and '20/20' are murdering them," she said. "Everything is done in an 'objective' interview format. They don't have the passion of documentary filmmakers, the love of the subject. We find our creative voice in who we interview, and how we

shoot the interview."

Still, "Before Stonewall" is the first film about gays to get a grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Even "Word Is Out," the 1978 collection of interviews with gay people that was finally telecast on the Public Broadcasting System, didn't have that kind of support until it was finished and PBS decided to show it.

Schiller hopes to see "Before Stonewall" widely shown on PBS next year. She thinks, however, that a letter-writing campaign will be necessary to get it telecast on the PBS affiliates that are sensitive about the subject and which refused to show "Word Is Out."

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