

MOVIES

'Stonewall' a moving look at gay history

By Carrie Rickey

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Before Stonewall." Directed by Greta Schiller. Co-director: Robert Rosenberg. Executive producer: John Scagliotti. Narrated by Rita Mae Brown. With Allen Ginsberg, Dr. Evelyn Hooker and Audre Lorde. No rating. At the Nickelodeon.

"BEFORE STONEWALL" chronicles the homosexual subculture prior to the 1969 riots at the Stonewall Bar in Greenwich Village that brought Gay Liberation above ground when pub patrons actively resisted police brutality.

A candid and often moving profile of gay and lesbian life, "Before Stonewall" begins with a provocative disclaimer: "No one represented here should be presumed to be homosexual... or heterosexual." The first faces we see are those of Ronald Reagan and George Murphy in a wartime color movie where they propose to a commanding officer the advisability of a drag chorus line to raise G.I. morale, a wry kickoff for an otherwise sobering movie.

Filmmaker Greta Schiller offers a decade-by-decade chronology of significant historical events such as the Depression, World War II, McCarthyism and the Civil Rights movement, annotating them with talking-heads testimony.

A former Women's Army Corps officer reporting to General Eisenhower remarks, "At least the lesbian WACs weren't getting pregnant and forced out of commission." (Eisenhower wanted to rid the WACs of all lesbians until his assistant informed him she'd be the first to resign. "Forget the order," he rescinded.)

Most affecting in "Before Stonewall" is the diversity of opinion among those interviewed, some of the elders resisting out-of-the-closet candor, some of the youngers insisting "Better blatant than latent."

A now-geriatric gay who first realized his same-sex preference back in the '20s reflects, "We didn't call it anything - we did it." Though, as one of the interviewees shudders, "Back in the '30s, being gay could get you committed," there is consensus among the eyewitnesses that "homosexuality is a dirty word, to some, but not a dirty act." This belief was not held in currency at the Department of State during the '50s and '60s when the "Gayola" scandals led to the passage of a law prohibiting known homosexuals from employment.

If this compelling and informative account has any flaw, it's one shared by most progressive documentaries: that of framing the movie by answering a rhetorical question. The question redundantly asked here is, "Homosexuality isn't a dirty word, is it?" The effect is one of preaching to the converted rather than converting the resistant.

Among those interviewed, most engaging and enlightening are poet Allen Ginsberg and psychologist Dr. Evelyn Hooker, who talk of the implications that the so-called subculture hold for the culture at large.

Speaking of the notorious 1956 censorship trial for his collected poems, "Howl," which contained explicit homoerotic passages, Ginsberg laughs, "In effect, the censors acted as publicists for the new sensibility." Dr. Hooker firmly insists that her research proves conclusively that homosexuality is not a disease—and shouldn't be treated as one either by doctors or by society.