

MOVIE REVIEW

'STONEWALL' DOCUMENTS THE GAY LIB MOVEMENT

By KEVIN THOMAS,
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June 27, 1969, is the date when patrons of the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, had had their fill of harassment and transformed a routine police raid into three days of rioting. Such resistance so raised the consciousness of male and female homosexuals everywhere that it is now regarded as the beginning of the gay liberation movement.

But what about the events that led to this flash point, and what of the lives of homosexuals before gay lib? These are the vital questions that co-producer-directors Greta Schiller and Robert Rosenberg address in their comprehensive documentary, "Before Stonewall: The Making of a Gay and Lesbian Community" (opening today at the Los Feliz). Through interviews with many men and women, now middle-aged and older, and vintage clips and stills, the film relates the gay experience—from the '20s onward—to that of the larger American experience.

The result is a film that's invaluable as a historical record, rather than as an aesthetic achievement; appealing because its subjects have in abundance the wit and humor of survivors who have at times endured virtually medieval oppression and a crushing sense of isolation. "Before Stonewall" is slow getting under way, sometimes needlessly repetitive and not nearly as incisive as "The Word Is Out" or "The Times of Harvey Milk."

Andrea Weiss has done an exhaustive job of researching archival material, yet her findings would have been even more impressive with more rigorous selection. It's ironic, too, that a writer as vivid as Rita Mae Brown should speak the film's colorless narration so flatly.

"Before Stonewall" is most valuable for the historical outline that emerges from its subjects' experiences.

It unfolds thusly: The Roaring '20s gave gays their first taste of liberation, of being able to gather in bars and clubs in Harlem or Greenwich Village, San Francisco's Barbary Coast or New Orleans' French Quarter. The Depression, however, marked the beginning of a more conservative period, so that by

1935 even the word *homosexual* was banned from the screen by the Production Code. During World War II many gays and lesbians discovered that they were not alone in their sexual orientation, a discovery confirmed by the landmark Kinsey Reports, but the liberal period at the end of the war gave way to the McCarthy-era witch hunts that cost many gays their jobs in government. The subsequent civil rights, anti-war and feminist movements provided crucial experience and impetus for the slow, painful birth of gay liberation.

Within this broad context, the most crucial phenomenon to evolve is the changed attitude of gays toward their own sexuality, impelling their decision to assail long-entrenched attitudes of church, state and the medical profession that have traditionally branded them as sinners, criminals and sick people. Although American medical and psychiatric associations may no longer regard homosexuality as a sickness, there's a clip of President Reagan asserting his belief that it is a "tragic illness . . . a neurosis."

There are, of course, stories of terrible persecution, heartbreak and ignorance—of a time when a parent could and did commit a child to a mental institution simply because of his or her homosexuality; when careers could be destroyed merely on the suspicion of homosexuality; when marriage was felt to be an imperative. There's a touching reunion of the employees and habitués of the old Black Cat Cafe in San Francisco, a key center in gay life and the cradle of its political involvement. That we're left with the feeling that there's a whole documentary in the Black Cat alumni alone underlines "Before Stonewall's" signal contribution as a pioneering introduction for more gay documentaries to come.

**'BEFORE STONEWALL: THE
MAKING OF A GAY
AND LESBIAN COMMUNITY'**

A David Whitten Promotions release. Executive producer John Scagliotti. Director/co-producer Greta Schiller. Co-director/co-producer Robert Rosenberg. Archival research director Andrea Weiss. Narrator Rita Mae Brown. Film editor Bill Daughton.

Running time: 1 hour, 27 minutes.
Times-rated: Mature.