

'Stonewall' shows midwife of gay movement's birth

By Rick Kogan

Stonewall was a bar and the scene of violent confrontations in 1969 between its patrons—Manhattan homosexuals—and some quick-fisted guardians of morality—New York City cops. This melee might have rested forever in the back pages of yellowing newspapers if it hadn't come to symbolize the beginning of the homosexual rights movement and the end of some frighteningly dark years.

"Before Stonewall" is not about this notable barroom brawl. Rather, in its sensitive and passionate way, it tells why such a confrontation was inevitable. It takes us on an enlightening 87-minute trip that helps explain why and how the gay culture formed and finally pushed boldly from the shadows on that Stonewall night.

It's a thoughtful, precise and fascinating documentary. Liberally and judiciously using film clips, photographs, music and interviews [what wonderful in-

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terviews], it travels through the recollected back roads and back rooms of homosexual America from about 1920 through Stone-

wall. Back roads and back rooms, because those were among the few places homosexuals could meet and share. It was a tough, sometimes horrifying existence.

Listen to Donna Smith, a retired bookkeeper in Los Angeles: "My mother was told that I was living a lesbian life with Valerie. All she had to say was that I was living a lesbian life and that was grounds to have you committed to an insane asylum without any hearing. I was picked up off the streets on a Friday, thrown into a police car . . . and [they] put me down into a psycho ward of a general hospital."

This is but one of the remarkable interviews that fuel this film. We hear of the freewheel-

ing Harlem night clubs of the 1920s, listen to Allen Ginsberg discuss the furor caused by the homoerotic passages of "Howl," and are rapt as Johnnie Phelps relates a few things she taught Gen. Eisenhower.

The 30-some interviews that punctuate "Before Stonewall" are an alternately lively, funny, sad and intelligent—but always personal—exploration of the

"Before Stonewall"

★★★★

Mini-review: Out of the shadows

Executive producer, John Scaglioni; director/coproducer, Greta Schiller; codirector/coproducer, Robert Rosenberg; edited by Bill Daughton; archival research by Andrea Weiss; narrated by Rita Mae Brown. A David Whitten Promotions release at the Music Box Theater, 3733 N. Southport Ave.

lows and highs of being gay in America.

None of the older interviewees

begrudge today's new freedoms. You will find none of the grim griping encountered when old ballplayers talk about today's megabuck salaries. Veterans of battles that never should have been fought and denizens of shadows that should never have existed, the people of "Before Stonewall" are proud of where they've been and happy to be where they are.