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## The past, present, and future of 'Before Stonewall'

by Joe Blttmann

Independent filmmaker Greta Schiller and her archivist-collaborator Andrea Weiss dropped by after a screening of their documentary *Before Stonewall* at the Inner Circle theater last Monday and answered audience questions about the film. Weiss was in town to do research at the Library of Congress and Schiller said she "tagged along" to see how the film was doing in D.C.

The film consists of an extraordinary montage of rare film footage, stills, and interviews rendering an overview of earlier eras when Gay life was strictly an outlawed, underworld subculture. Weiss and Schiller spoke of the difficulty in doing research, locating resources, and securing funds to make the film, a four-year project that they finished in June 1984. Getting a distributor took another nine months. Now the 16mm film is in general release in 20 major cities and opens soon in another 30.

Weiss described the tortuous search for a visual record to work from. Although there are now extensive Gay histories and archives, which were helpful, references to Gay topics in film bibliographies are scarce.

"I had to train myself how to look," she said, "because this stuff is there, but it's a question of how you interpret the material."

She had to search out elliptical references to homosexuality, including topics like "bar raids," "pervert," "invert," and "sexual perversion." She ran across a sequence from *This is the Army* (1943), in which Ronald Reagan oversees a military drag show. This she found while viewing clips at the Library of Congress.

Schiller noted the difficulty of finding interview subjects beyond the usual out-of-the-closet Gay activists or secure upper-middle class white males.

"It's a myth that it's OK to be Gay" in 1986, she remarked. "It was hard to get a representative diversity because those who would come forward weren't necessarily representative."

Schiller said the two got interested in the project after she made a short film, *Greetings from Washington, D.C.* (1981) on the 1979 National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights.

"I found myself wondering, where did this movement come from?" The two were also "inspired" by John D'Emilio's groundbreaking history, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, to undertake the documentary.

Schiller said the biggest surprise in researching the film was in discovering the many courageous ways people created survival support networks that



Greta Schiller

by Doug Hinckle



Andrea Weiss in D.C. last week.

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allowed them to be who they were "when everything around them was telling them what they were was bad and wrong and awful." She said the biggest shock was the epidemic level of alcoholism and drug abuse in the community then and now.

When asked how she would treat the present era if she were to do a *Beyond Stonewall* in the future, Schiller said the big story would be "the response of the community in a healthy, caring, supportive way to a crisis in its midst, to educate the society at large—to do what a national health service should be doing."

"I hope the Gay and Lesbian community progresses to understand the connection between political issues," said Schiller, "and to perceive Reagan's attack on civil and human rights as an attack on the Lesbian and Gay community."