

Star - Ledger 11-17-96

They loved Paris — and each other

Paris Was a Woman

(Unrated) A Zeitgeist release
A documentary by Greta Schiller.
Exclusively at the Cinema Village,
Manhattan

★★

Quad

By Bob Campbell
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

The veiled message of Greta Schiller's new documentary is not only that "Paris Was a Woman," but that she was a woman who loved other women. Schiller's combination of cultural history and gossip scrapbook is glued together by a somewhat covert agenda.

The film purports to be a corrective tribute to the emancipated and creative females who served art and literature on the Left Bank in the '20s and '30s, but were long overshadowed by male contemporaries like Ernest Hemingway, James Joyce and Pablo Picasso. However, writer Andrea Weiss's real focus is narrower still. The movie's true preoccupation is the rise and fall of lesbian unions in this milieu.

Fortunately, this slant highlights some intriguing couples and individuals: the "married" Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, acerbic Janet Flanner (the New Yorker's "Genet"), witty bookseller-publisher Sylvia Beach and aristocratic novelist Djuna Barnes are among the bold young women who staked out a new way of life in a tolerant city.

Shorter credit is given to such non-gay culture heroines as dancer Josephine Baker and author Colette (though Schiller triumphantly comes up with a photo of Colette in male clothing). The only male given sympathetic play, surprisingly, is Picasso. As a friend of Stein's, he's in on a pass. Admiration for Joyce's writing is undercut by scorn over his fiscal "betrayal" of Beach, and Hemingway is characterized as a capricious, overgrown child.

The material is interesting enough to deserve frank, in-depth exploration. But the movie has the dashed-off, once-over-lightly feel of an offhand journalism assignment. Badly lit interviews with scholars and a handful of surviving hangers-on are spliced into the usual jumble of newsreel footage, still photos and period

Nothing quite links up. Except in Beach's endearing TV interview from the '50s, few of the major figures are encountered face-to-face. The filmmakers are reduced to interviewing the aged housekeeper of one late salon-keeper. The interpretations provided by the guest experts reek of '90s academic orthodoxy. Released in 16mm, the film is as technically shaky as it is historically patchy and thematically evasive.

A potential fatal weakness is that none of these women, with the arguable exceptions of Stein and Barnes, turned out to be artists of lasting import. If cultural history can be seen as an ongoing film production, they were

the below-the-line crew. Their major contributions were as booksellers, publishers of little magazines and mistresses of salons. Even their relationships don't set a particularly liberating example. Toklas, Stein's lover, suggests the classic patronized wife of the artist.

It would seem that the period's more serious women artists and writers preferred to stay away from this cozy, incestuous milieu. But to be fair, the movie doesn't make grand claims for anyone except Stein. And Schiller's casual approach, while frustrating, is also disarming. A slightly skewed angle can be more revealing than the view from dead center.

Even if "Paris Was A Woman" fails to make a profound case for its female creators, it does communicate the boldness and dash of their escape from convention. Their nerve and vigor come through despite the stale treatment.

The movie ends predictably with stock shots of the German occupa-

tion (thick, bread lines) and a brief postscript. This wrapup doesn't shy away from the grim, as exemplified by Barnes' descent into lonely alcoholism, or the deeply odd. It's to the credit of "Paris Is a Woman" that it makes room for the politically incorrect.

In fact, the film's most fascinating couple may be runaway American heiress Natalie Barney and her equally beautiful painter-lover Romaine Brooks. Defiantly and publicly lesbian, they were popularizers of Sappho's poetry, publishers of the meaningfully titled "L'Amazone," hostesses of a "notorious" salon — and proudly pro-Nazi.

Barney and Brooks wound up in Italy broadcasting fascist propaganda alongside the misogynist Ezra Pound, thereby affirming every cliché about strange bedfellows ever uttered.

RATING NOTE: The discussion of lesbianism is more informative than explosive; the focus is on relationships, not sexual behavior.