

Greta Schiller- Director's Statement

Before Stonewall was my first foray into feature documentary filmmaking. As the first film on an LGBT topic to receive funding from Public Television, we had an enormous responsibility to get it right- and a lot of peer pressure from people around the country who wanted to tell their stories. I was a young woman director in the early 1980's, setting out to tell the "History 101" version of a people systematically ignored and erased from the historical record. (For example, *The New York Times* did not even cover the Stonewall Riots). Perhaps if I had been older I would not have taken on the task with such naïve zeal.

Once I settled on the idea of constructing the narrative using the personal histories of "ordinary people" rather than of public personas or early gay activists, we set out to find a cross section of characters from five decades, from the fin de siècle through to the Stonewall riots of 1969. With no internet to rely on, regional researchers placed ads in newspapers, we relied on the infamous queer gossip circles, and the few gay and lesbian organizations that existed helped us to locate potential interviewees. Pre-interviews solidified my working script (still in my archive) and the filming was set up.

But how do you create a visual story of a subculture that was so invisible? Archive Research Director Andrea Weiss scoured newsreel archives and found "bar raids" under the category of "perversions"; she read mainstream images against the grain, such as finding homoeroticism in army footage shot from the point of view of the male gaze. The late film historian Vito Russo pointed us to Hollywood clips, which was an invaluable contribution, but most crucially Andrea and her team convinced people that their home movies and photographs were of historical significance, that their lives mattered. Getting women and people of color to share with us was both a priority and extremely difficult; being more vulnerable, they had made themselves even more invisible. At one point I had to not even consider any more stories from men, as they were that much more willing and able to take the risk of exposure on national television. In 1982, neither women nor gay and lesbian peoples had won many civil protections.

Weaving these stories into the social and political tenor of each decade, with my point of view emerging from the material, and the mix of humor and pathos, music and archive footage, has shaped my directorial style ever since. It also honed my focus on making films that map the journeys of "ordinary people" whose lives both impacted and were impacted by historical forces usually unbeknownst to them at the time.

When we set out to make the film, I had no inkling of the impact it would have on people literally around the world. I am enormously grateful to the distributors and programmers and audience members who have kept the movie in the cultural zeitgeist for nearly four decades. Thank you.