Subtle Gems and Flaming Flops

by WARREN SONBERT

The 17th San Francisco International Lesbian & Gay Film Festival is about to kick off its biggest-ever festival this week.

Spread over six different venues, wielding 117 various programs, some 260 films from diverse corners of the globe, presided over by two festival directors, an executive committee and a horde of hard working consultants, advisors and volunteers, the enterprise is daunting to say the least.

Scrupulous attention has been paid to almost every aspect of this festival (the unreadable festival brochure is another matter), particularly in terms of its gender parity, ethnic diversity and unbiased representation. Ward has it that the new film by Gus van Sant, "Even Cowgirls Get the Blues," unveiled recently in Berlin, was turned down by the festival screening committee because of some questionable misogyny in its characterization. Noticeable, too, is a preponderance of films by Asians, women and junior cineastes. It's great that the lesbian and gay community can show its sensitivity to issues of race, sex and age, because no one else is.

Unfortunately this doesn't guarantee anything but that people won't be offended by gleaning examples of racism, sexism, ageism and other inequities in the programming. Perhaps, now that the festival has covered those bases, some enterprising souls should establish a screening committee whose sole purpose it is to weed out mediocrity, as some of us find that equally offensive, especially when it pops up so frequently in a festival that purports to be a showcase of the most distinctive examples of a visual art form.

Indeed, out of the 60 films from various programs I was able to screen, I found only nine films—three features and six shorts—that really impressed. Su Friedrich's "Rules of the Road" begins with an unseen protagonist playing solitaire, extends to rambling city drives in various station wagons while a woman's voice-over recounts the disintegration of a lesbian love affair. The bitter after-effects of thwarted romance, cruelly giving way to fights and accusations, is treated with an objective foreboding amidst wistful recollections. The narrator misses her lover's cigarette smoke, a veil of endearing affection. She checks the ashtrays for discarded artifacts of their love, after they split. And, after the unseen and unheard ex borrows the car the narrator, later, ruminates on their mutual love when she turns on the car radio and hears the station that her departed lover had been listening to. This strategy carries more meaning than all the misanthropic finger-pointing we usually get in broken love affair movies.

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