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## Entertainment : Film & TV : Interviews

**Greta Schiller**

19 Jun 2009

**The evolution of the gay community has been fascinatingly documented in *Before Stonewall*, a film made in 1984 and released on DVD to coincide with the 40th anniversary of The Stonewall Riots.**

Directed by Greta Schiller, *Before Stonewall* is the most comprehensive film on gay history from the bohemian enclaves and speakeasys of 1920s Harlem, that housed the beginning of gay liberation, to the first gay activist group The Mattachine Society. *Before Stonewall* not only includes interviews with famous figures such as Harry Hay and Allen Ginsberg, but every day people whose lives were turned upside down from outing, bigotry and persecution.

The constant uphill struggle for acceptance is chronicled through footage of gays in the military during the Second World War who felt it their duty to enlist just as much as straights, many in the hope that joining the army would dispel the cliché of the effeminate queen. The closeted realised they weren't the only ones and gays were mixing with and making new communities, friendships that stayed once the war ended.

The 1953 Kinsey Report, stating that 10% of Americans were gay, may have been over zealous in its estimations, but it shouted loud and clear that homosexuality couldn't be ignored. The Communist witch hunts of the McCarthy era extended its discriminatory arm to the expulsion of many gays from the public sector and the armed forces.

The idea that homosexuality was perverted gave birth to The Mattachine Society, shortly followed by The Daughters of Bilitis and self-expression became acceptable. The drag queens came out in full force, as did the publishing of gay literature, which helped to strengthen the community. Gays became a significant minority with voting power and politicians started to take angry notice.

And here we are in 2009 looking back on the great strides that have been made, 40 years after Greenwich Village's Stonewall Inn was raided by police and gays decided they'd had enough of being discriminated against.

Rachael Scott caught up with Greta Schiller in Vienna to talk about her important film.

**“Cops would come in and cruise around and say they weren't going to arrest anyone for being perverted, but they had to get free drinks. The bartenders would always piss in the glass, pour it out and put the beer in before they served the cops.”**

**What are you doing in Vienna?**

I'm at their film festival. The theme is identities and because it's 40 years since Stonewall the idea is to show classic films from the early gay film scene.

**I know it sounds like an obvious question, but can you tell me why you wanted to make *Before Stonewall*?**

My whole life I've been a history buff, the place of the individual within history, the way that the social movements happen. There was a wave of films made in the late 70s, early 80s telling the other side of American history and so it was kind of in the air in a sense. But no one had ever done anything about gay history.

**How difficult was it to make? Can you talk me through the hoops you had to jump through?**

It was really difficult. There were absolutely no places where you could go into an archive and it would be organised under Gay or Lesbian History. The words 'gay' and 'lesbian' weren't even common vernacular. The word was 'homosexual'. So that was one obstacle.

We began to look at archival images and newsreels from the dominant culture with a gay eye and ask how would a gay person at the time have seen this image, for instance, girls running around playing softball. The people who made the film probably didn't think that these are gay women but we know from cultural history that probably there was a high percentage of those women who were gay so we decided to use that as gay footage.

The other big thing was that we didn't have complete funding, but we were the first gay themed film to receive money from public funding. We raised money from individuals and other small state funding bodies and scraped it together, well that was John Scagliotti really, the executive producer who was the person who co-ordinated all of that.



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**How did he manage to persuade people to give you the money?**

It was the end of the golden period of public television funding where they really were interested in allowing diverse voices to be heard on public TV. It's done in a very commercial slick way now but at that time it was very rough and tumble. Once we'd shot some of the material and the film evolved it became evident that this was something that had never been seen before and worth seeing.

**I have a copy of a letter you wrote to friends and associates asking for donations towards the completion of the film. What sort of response did you get?**

It's kind of like what Obama did for his presidential campaign, we went to grass roots. \$50, \$100 maybe \$1,000 and you've got to remember that was in 1984 so it was worth a lot more. So the individual fundraising was really crucial. Some of them were anonymous. We'd get a cheque for \$2 with a note saying they were on a fixed income but they were gay in the 50s and really believed in the project and that type of thing.

**Contributors would have felt they had a role in making an important historical document.**

I guess so. From touring with the film 25 years after its initial release I've been thinking about this and of course we wanted the film to have an impact but we didn't realise quite how much of an impact it would have and resonate with people for so long.

**“People have written letters saying they’ve watched the film and cried through the whole thing because they never thought they would see their experiences reflected on television and people saying that their mother never really understood them until they showed her my film.”**

**How long did it take from conception to completion?**

Three years. Well, two and a half from beginning to end and then six months of playing in festivals before getting it into cinemas.

**How did you manage to source the archive footage and did you even know what you were looking for before you found it?**

I'm going to pass you over to Andrea Weiss who was the researcher. *Andrea:* There is so much archive footage in the film and each piece has its own story. You can break it down into three kinds of footage, one being that we used a lot of clips from the Hollywood mainstream. We were fortunate to have Vito Russo who wrote *The Celluloid Closet* to help us. He hadn't written the book yet, but he was doing research and as he found stuff he called us, so that was a really great boon.

The second thing is mainstream newsreel footage and that was like looking for a needle in a haystack. You'd go to these duty filing cabinets and there were no categories that were useful to us. Under 'Perversion' you'd find people talking about homosexuality or whatever. It was so difficult finding images of pre-Stonewall gay life and I thought I would look at street scenes of Greenwich Village thinking there's got to be a gay person there somewhere. You can imagine how much time this took.

And the third category was collections, home movies and scrapbooks. That was really hard and a lot of times they'd have pictures of an ex-girlfriend who they hadn't seen for 20 years and we had to get clearance on every person who appeared in the film. We basically set up a missing persons agency and tracked people down. It was a really comprehensive amount of work.

**How did you manage to find and persuade individual people to take part?**

*Greta:* We used a lot of regular people and I think that's one of the reasons the film has held up. We did principle and primary research both visually and in terms of finding subjects. When I was looking for people to interview I was really interested in finding people who were not famous, or in leadership positions. They were just like ordinary people who were trying to live ordinary lives as homosexuals. No one had ever done that before.

In the early 80s there were probably 50 independent gay, lesbian and women's newspapers or magazines. So we sent out press releases announcing we were doing the film and looking for people who were interested in telling their stories and we hired researchers who co-ordinated the stories.

Andrea and I did a lot of travelling together where we interviewed people and her job was to convince them that their private archive was actually history.

**You must have developed very intimate relationships with some of the people you interviewed.**

Completely and we maintain close friendships with many. The woman who was interviewed in shadow because of her horrific experiences in the military because she was still so afraid, for instance. It had really decimated her life. She was such an inspiring person to me as a young lesbian.

**What happened to the extra footage that you didn't use?**

One of the things that John Scagliotti has been doing is painstakingly reassembling the 16mm film that we cut into small clips and digitising them because they are such an important collective resource. He makes them available very sparingly to researchers, but we're just trying to figure out what to do with that material.

**Are there any stories that have particularly stuck in your mind that you didn't or couldn't include?**

There was one great story about a guy who was a merchant marine in San Francisco and he tells this hilarious story about how there were a particular bar down at the waterfront where the cops would come in and cruise around and say they weren't going to arrest anyone for being perverted, but they had to get free drinks. The bartenders would always piss in the glass, pour it out and put the beer in before they served the cops.

**“1969 was really the launch of a much more visible movement for gay rights, so we're talking only 40 years to go from being completely ostracised, losing**



**your job, no legal status whatsoever to the position where you have the President of the united States issuing a proclamation for Gay Pride.”**

**Was there anything that you found out that really surprised you on a factual level?**

One thing I've been thinking a lot about in terms of being surprised, more now than I did then, is what it really meant to be exposed as a homosexual and to lose your family or your job. Someone once asked me if the people who were exposed or pushed out of the military were ever compensated? It's such an obvious question, but I hadn't thought of it. Of course they should have been, but many of them weren't. I remember when people's names were published after a Chicago bar raid we tried to find some of the people whose names were in the paper, but we couldn't trace any of them.

**Lesbians are very well represented in *Before Stonewall*, which often isn't the case with gay films.**

The reason they are so well represented was because when we were getting stories we had so many more men write in that we could have easily made it disproportionate, but we knew viscerally that this film had to represent lesbian and gay history. We made a really conscious, specific effort.

**Do you have any interesting stories of how *Before Stonewall* has changed people's lives?**

People have written letters saying they've watched the film and cried through the whole thing because they never thought they would see their experiences reflected on television and people writing in and saying that their mother never really understood them until they showed her my film. Things like that, so it's had a really deep and profound affect on many people's lives.



**You're working on a film called *No Dinosaurs in Heaven* at the moment. What's that about?**

I've made quite a few feature docs, but because I have a daughter I got really interested in science and how we approach science vs humanity. I started doing research and realised that the creationists in America have a specific strategy they use to undermine science in that they send creationist students to university to get degrees in science education so they can become science teachers and therefore influence students surreptitiously. It's much more widespread than you can imagine and one third of high school biology teachers polled have said they don't accept the evidence for evolution. It's not really the triumph of religion but the failure of education.

**Tell me about your company Jezebel Productions.**

We wanted to make films about people whose voices weren't heard and ordinary people who did extraordinary things. We are always very interested in women's stories, so the next three movies we made after *Before Stonewall* all had central female characters.

**“One thing I've been thinking a lot about... is what it really meant to be exposed as a homosexual and to lose your family or your job.”**

**What do you think about the state of gay rights today in the US?**

1969 was really the launch of a much more visible movement for gay rights, so we're talking only 40 years to go from being completely ostracised, losing your job, no legal status whatsoever to the position where you have the President of the united States issuing a proclamation for Gay Pride. Barack Obama is the first President who has appointed openly lesbian and gay members to his government.

**The opening of *Before Stonewall* states: “The people who appear in this film should not be presumed to be homosexual...or heterosexual”. What was your intention in doing that?**

You know those disclaimers they have at the beginning of movies, you know, “This story is true, but the names and incidents are purely fictional” or whatever? You know the idea that you can tell if someone's gay or not, I just thought it would be a good way to turn the disclaimer thing on its head and have some fun.

**[Read Our Review Of \*Before Stonewall\* »](#)**

Click for the full review including image gallery, trailer, verdict, plot and queer ratings.

**[Before Stonewall Trailer](#)**

**Before Stonewall** [1984]  
**Studio:** Peccadillo Pictures  
**Released:** 22 June 2009  
**ASIN:** B001TLWR71

Buy ***Before Stonewall*** online now and save some money to put towards ***Out at the Movies: A History of Gay Cinema*** and ***Blood Moon's Guide to Gay and Lesbian Film***.

Author: Rachel Scott

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