

# arts & leisure

## Snipping the Zeitgeist

An interview with award-winning filmmaker John Scagliotti

BY SCOTT SHERMAN

John Scagliotti has a cold. He always gets them when he flies, and he's just returned to his Vermont home from San Francisco, where he was shooting material for the Here!TV premiere of his new film *Dangerous Living: Coming Out in the Developing World*.

The award-winning Scagliotti (responsible for Public Television's *In the Life*, and the documentaries *Before Stonewall* and *After Stonewall*, and the film *Oliver Button in a Star!*) may want to scarf down more Vitamin C. His new documentary looking at GLBT oppression outside the western world is taking him all over the planet – and the film is being featured at the Geneva Human Rights Conference's Film Festival. Scagliotti will join a panel discussion on homosexuality and oppression – the conference's first-ever discussion of gay rights.

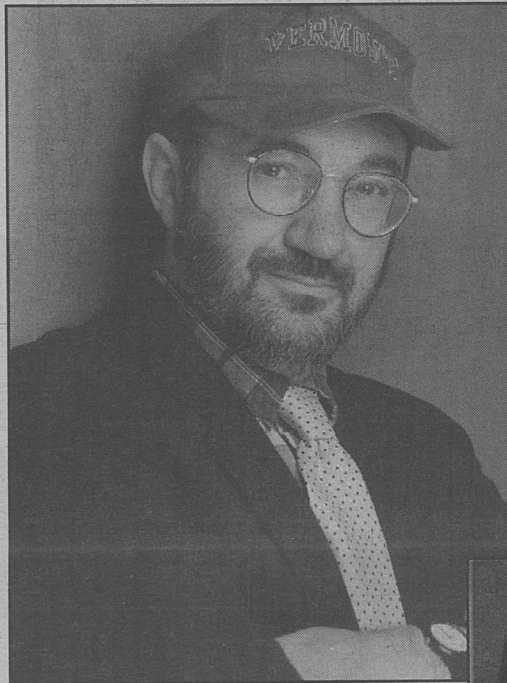
*Dangerous Living* may be his most influential film yet. The documentary uses the experiences of 52 men in Cairo, Egypt, who were arrested, tortured and imprisoned for gathering at a gay disco on the river Nile, as the springboard for looking at the dangers of being gay in places such as Pakistan, Honduras, the Philippines, India, Namibia, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Watching the film, it is impossible not to be moved by the incredible struggles of LGBT people in these developing nations. Scagliotti shows us the insurmountable odds they face, as well as the indomitable courage they possess.

We had the chance to speak to John Scagliotti about the film, as well as a few other things, by phone from his home in southern Vermont.

**You've made a career of showing the world the true face of LGBT people. What motivates you to do this?**

I came of age during Stonewall. When you come of age in such an



**"We wanted to focus on people who survived and continued. We chose people who went on despite the brutality they faced. Resiliency is a big theme of the movie." Filmmaker John Scagliotti**

below, the Cairo 52 in a scene from *Dangerous Living*



historic moment – and most people didn't realize how historic it was – you have the chance to document it. To snip the zeitgeist, so to speak.

Almost every institution has been changed by LGBT people coming out: church, schools, entertainment, and literature, to name a few. Thirty years ago, I was excited to buy one LGBT book – now I have to find more places to put them because I've run out of room.

**Is there one universal truth you've learned about LGBT people in your work?**

I think because LGBT people were so despised by society, we've been able to reevaluate the old rules. We've had to see the world differently. If the rules didn't work for us, maybe they don't work for anyone.

I think we are different – and there's nothing wrong with being different. The whole concept

of diversity came about because of the gay community. The idea that you can be different, and that there is value in coming together to share those differences, comes from the gay community.

**Describe *Dangerous Living* in a sentence or two.**

I went after the idea of identity. What happens when LGBT people gain an identity in the developing world? Homosexuality is not new anywhere. What is new is gay identity. That's what I was interested in exploring – how LGBT identity transforms the individual and the society.

**Why did you make the film at this point?**

When we were at the Gay Games at Amsterdam, I learned the Games attract a lot more than athletes. You could see there was the beginning of

a human rights movement forming. I wondered what kind of effect this is having in Vietnam or Thailand.

Then I saw *The New York Times* page-six story on the Cairo arrest. In the past, no one had covered this kind of thing.

**Describe the logistics of the film.**

Making this film was a two-year process. Traveling to some of these places was tricky. Due to the subject of the film, we had to sneak in equipment and pose as students or tourists. We also had other crews that shot some of the footage of the demonstrations and such.

**The stories in the film are very poignant. We meet men who are jailed for their sexuality, and women who are threatened with violence and rape. But the film isn't depressing, it's hopeful. How did you choose the stories you featured?**

We wanted to focus on people who survived and continued. We chose people who went on despite the brutality they faced. Resiliency is a big theme of the movie.

Some stories I didn't use because they were just so horrifying – stories of young transgendered people who were really tortured. There were some things that were just too difficult to watch.

**We see a lot of oppression in these interviews, but also a strong desire for liberation. We see LGBT people wanting to come together and organize, despite terrible risks. What did you learn about human nature making this film?**

It wasn't so much learning as experiencing. I've read books and seen these great changes take place. But to actually meet the people who are making these changes, to have the chance to touch them, it added a whole new dimension to my understanding. I've never met Joe Hill or Rosa Parks, but I imagine to sit with them and look them in the eye is probably an overwhelming experience. It was like that for me making this movie.

**Why do you think Americans need to see this film?**

There's a direct line to our neighbors in the world. The root of the oppression is the same, but the expressions of it are different. The first time I showed this film was in Amsterdam, but what was exciting was the connection people made to their own lives, the realization that we can't just sit there and do nothing.

All of the gay organizations in VT can think internationally. They can make connections, form sister cities. There are a lot of imaginative ways to create relationships. ▼

*Dangerous Living will be shown at the Green Mountain Film Festival on March 20 and March 26. The Montpelier festival runs March 18-27, with showings at the Savoy Theater and at City Hall (see [www.focusonfilm.net](http://www.focusonfilm.net) for a list of films and showtimes).*

*Scott Sherman lives with his husband and son in Richmond.*