

FILM

Macho Men in Love?

BY MILES CHRISTIAN DANIELS

In case you've been hunkered down on Mount Kenya, *Brokeback Mountain* opened in limited distribution its first weekend last month. No hurricanes destroyed Orlando. No meteorites were reported in Los Angeles.

In fact, the film quietly attracted record-breaking crowds in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco and premiered in other markets the following weekend. And so it seems Ang Lee's film about two cowboys in love is – at minimum – surviving.

Why is a question we'll have to figure out later.

Could be that all three opening cities have hefty gay populations. Another option is that major right-wing groups, like Focus on the Family, are all but keeping silent in hopes the film just goes away. Or, it might have to do with Hollywood muscle hunks Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal and their huge female fan bases.

Whatever the reason, Exhibitor Relations Co. reports that over the opening weekend, the film brought in the highest per-screen average for any theatrical release in 2005. And, if that's not enough, *Brokeback Mountain* has already landed awards from the Los Angeles Film Critics Associations and New York Film Critics Circle.

Even some real-life cowboys applaud the flick.

"I think it's something that's now just being more understood," seven-time World Champion Cowboy Ty Murray, a straight man, recently told ABC's *Good Morning America*. "Hopefully, this movie helps people further understand it."

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A welcome change, I'm sure, for many – especially gay Americans.

Two years ago, I published a column called "Queer TV: Advancing Tolerance or Fostering Stereotypes?" In it, I questioned whether or not shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* and *Queer as Folk* were

anything more than ratings ploys. And I wondered once they found themselves uninterested, what viewers might come away with.

Would these programs help in showing the normalcy of being gay or would many viewers come away thinking we were indeed "different?"

Hollywood has featured gay characters since the 1930s, usually cast as the effeminate best friend of a leading man. Their

orientation was understood, but not discussed. This continued through the 1950s, when gay characters were portrayed as emotionally troubled, often suicidal.

By the 1970s, both cinema and television started to discuss real-life gay issues. And, during the 80s and 90s, gay characters and gay-themed programming moved to the forefront. Still, the way in which they were depicted – in most cases – cultivated dated stereotypes.

Now, through movies like *Brokeback Mountain*, Hollywood is shedding light on the fact that not all gay men are fashion gurus, hairdressers, interior designers, and superior in the arts, but that some might be – god forbid – cowboys herding sheep in Wyoming. And, more importantly, capable of love-based relationships.

Not all of us gay folk are comfortable with the flamboy-

ance of gay pride parades. And many would rather sip a Killian's in an Irish pub than dance to techno in a noisy gay bar. "Gay" has nothing to do with lifestyle.

And rather than coming out of the closet to make a declaration of individuality or identity, most of us "come out" so that we can share the gift of love openly with another individual.

So when the numbers are tallied and the awards dispersed, my hope is that *Brokeback Mountain* is not only seen as a monumental moment in cinema history – but a daring and original attempt to prove that love is not bound by interpretation or stereotype. ▼

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