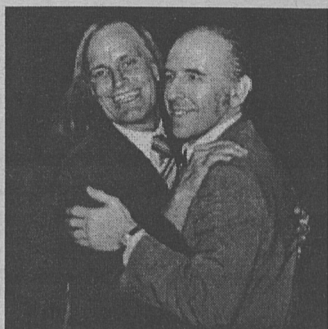


Documenting Our Struggles:

reviews by Tina Giangrande



Phil Johnson (left) and Frank Kamenny dance together at the American Psychiatric Association Banquet in Dallas, Texas, 1972.

After Stonewall

A documentary
by John Scagliotti
PBS, June 23, 9 pm

For countless months, the big buzz about John Scagliotti's *After Stonewall* was that Melissa Etheridge had signed on to do the narration. Sharing of this news was usually followed by a gleeful declaration that this in and of itself was a reason to watch in and of itself.

But if you're planning to tune in for the sequel to the acclaimed *Before Stonewall* solely to hear the husky tones of the divine Ms. Etheridge, you're going to be sorely disappointed. She speaks no more than a few dozen lines during the entire 86 minutes.

That, in my opinion, is a Very Good Thing.

Don't get me wrong. I have the same (sometimes unfortunate) Pavlovian response to those aforementioned husky tones as the next lesbian. But the ix-nay on her oice-vay means that there are a whole lot of other voices to be heard in this documentary.

There are the voices of leaders: Harry Hay, Rita Mae Brown, Dorothy Allison, Larry Kramer, David Mixner, and Jewelle Gomez, who participated in the struggles of the past three decades — and the struggles that preceded those.

There are the voices of the people next door: police officers out on the job, small-town residents who got tired of secrets, couples who didn't wait for marriage to be legalized and exchanged vows anyway.

There are the voices of Harvey Milk and Matthew Shepard and countless others who died for various reasons that all boil down to the same thing: they were gay.

There are the voices of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Coretta Scott King, the Reverend Jesse Jackson and other powerful straight allies who have helped our causes through their words and actions.

There are even the voices of Anita Bryant, Joe Briggs, Jesse Helms, and the Reverend (sneeze) Fred Phelps. Like it or not, they are all an important part of our story — and occasionally they,

too, have helped our causes through their words and actions.

Like a skilled choirmaster, Scagliotti blends the high and low notes of being queer in America during the last 30 years. There are some refrains, but few protracted solos, and almost everyone gets to be heard for at least a bar or two.

This is not going to be mistaken for a DreamWorks production; background music, sound effects and graphics are in short supply. It's the archival footage and the interviews that create the emotion, not the trappings of production.

That material seems fairly balanced between elements: women's and men's movements; East Coast and West Coast; urban and rural; celebrities and 'just folks.' The only way the balance seems to tip is toward the political. Segments on bathhouses, women's music, and weddings end up as tinged with politics as those on anti-gay amendments, the burning of churches, and anti-censorship demonstrations. But there's no pilot error; you're not hit over the head with these links. The relationships just become obvious — if they weren't already.

The balance also means that you shouldn't expect to find any single event explored in real depth. But that's not the point here. In fact, it's a real accomplishment that the film doesn't run off on long tangents and lose sight of the bigger picture in the details.

Think of *After Stonewall* as a video primer in Contemporary Gay American History told by those who have lived it before and with us. Watch it. Use it as a jumping-off point to learn about who you are and who you came from.

And if you need to listen to a Melissa Etheridge CD afterward just to get your fix o' that husky voice, so be it.▼

Golden Threads

A film by Lucy Winer
PBS, June 8, 10 pm

The first time I watched *Golden Threads*, I was disappointed. Annoyed, even.

It was my own fault.

I had misconceptions — lots of 'em. I was expecting some combination of a biography of Christine Burton and a comprehensive history of Golden Threads, the international connection service for elder lesbians that she started at age 80.

I knew from the press kit that Burton had been, at various points in her life, an actress, a horse farmer, a teacher, a nun, and a businesswoman. I knew that she'd been spurred to start Golden Threads when she was rejected by a lesbian dating service because she was "too old." I was looking forward to the stories behind all this, to more anecdotes about her experiences, to more facts.

But looking for hard facts in *Golden Threads*, while not an exercise in futility, is a waste of an

otherwise perfectly good film.

It does not provide a biography of Christine Burton, nor does it offer a comprehensive history of the eponymous organization.

In fact, I don't think it even delivers on the press kit's promise that it "profiles Burton's unconventional life."

But that broken promise belongs to the press kit, not to the film.

Because, as I discovered on my second viewing, the film delivers something even better than the story of Christine Burton. It delivers a sense of Christine Burton, and it does so with style and grace and humor.

Between interview clips and captured interactions with Burton, Winer cleverly uses scenes from the ninth annual Golden Threads gathering in Provincetown with a voiceover of Burton reading her own conference registration correspondence.

By combining biographical anecdotes, philosophical reflection, and social encounters, Winer fashions an image of Burton that is somewhere between portrait and abstraction.

But that is not all she does.

Even stronger than the portrayal of Burton, in my opinion, is her examination of what it means to be an elder lesbian in a world that doesn't really know how to handle its elderly or its lesbians.

Discussions and interviews with the assembled members of Golden Threads variously display strength and insecurity, wisdom and humour, patience, impatience, and the desire to never hear the words "feisty old woman" again.

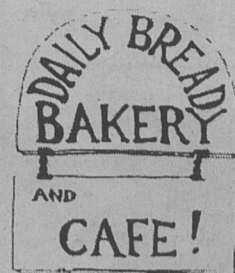
In short, they display a range of emotion and intellect that reminds viewers that aging does not necessarily diminish the capacity for either.

Despite these strengths, there is an Achilles' heel, and I think it's Lucy Winer's insertion of herself into the script in more than an incidental role.

Given my preference for the invisible documentarian, it surprises me to realize that it's a lack of Winer that rubs me the wrong way. Her progression through her own midlife crisis is a wonderful complement to the other two pieces of this pie, but there's something unresolved about the balance and the rhythm of her animated reflections that simply didn't work for me.

It's a little unsettling, but it's not a major flaw. The bottom line is that this film works best paying heed to its title — as the fabric formed when various and sundry threads come together. Viewers are free to enjoy the patterns that catch their fancy and learn a little something from the ones that don't.

So throw away your press kits and your TV guide descriptions — preferably before you read them. Throw away your expectations of facts and figures. Throw away your expectations of 'pure' documentary, open your minds to the threads of this film, and enjoy the moments they weave.▼



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