

The Sixth Annual Gay and Lesbian Film Festival premieres a number of important new films this year, including "Hedwig and the Angry Inch" and "Taboo"

BY NATHAN GELGUD

There shouldn't be a need for a Gay and Lesbian Film Festival, but there is. Gay and lesbian characters are more absent from commercially released films than almost any other group of people, and--at least for now--a festival concerned exclusively with such characters seems to be the only way to offer the public the opportunity to see a number of films by and about gays and lesbians.

COVER FEATURE

But in order to really succeed, the films at the North Carolina Gay and Lesbian Film Festival have to do more than simply display gay characters. Whether documentary, short, or feature narrative, films at GLFF fail when they behave as if, in order to be noteworthy, it is enough to contain gay subject matter. We have perhaps reached the point where, ironically, a queer film must succeed on cinematic terms if it is to succeed on social or political terms. There's just nothing progressive about a bad movie.

As with any festival, there's no shortage of bad films here, but sorting through the chaff will eventually yield rewarding enough work to warrant the effort. As is usually the case at film festivals, the most mixed bag contains the film shorts. They range here from intriguing (*Basement Girl*, *Drawing Girls*) to amusing (*four P.M.*, *Her Urge*) to altogether unwatchable (*The Tell Tale Vibrator*, *Coming to Terms*). Huge is an hour's worth of three-minute videos

that offer nothing but surface; there is no room for interpretation. One or two stand out as somewhat experimental, but only by comparison. *Basement Girl*--a Canadian video written and directed by Midi Onodera, then translated into French and subtitled in English--was the best short available for screening. The "basement girl" is a depressed girl coping with a breakup, but this short works not because of its subject matter, but because of its treatment of time and boredom--in the space of 12 minutes, it captures the passing of months using slow motion, superimposition, and well-written voice-over.

The documentaries are the most lackluster group of films at GLFF this year: Essentially, a subject is presented, a number of interview clips are patched together, and the surface of the subject is scratched, but little is really investigated or revealed. *Sex Becomes Her: The True Life Story of Chi Chi LaRue*, *Straight Down the Aisle*, *On The Bus* and *Queen of the Whole Wide World* serve as passable entertainment, but they are interesting only as documents, not as films.

The problems with most of the features are similar. For the most part, the feature films are low-budget conventional narratives that struggle to complete even a pedestrian narrative arc. While stilted acting and technical problems (bad sound, poor lighting) can be overlooked in low-budget features, lack of funds is no excuse for artistic bankruptcy (it can, in fact, force creativity's hand). Most discouraging is the lack of any atmosphere or unique mood to most of the features.

The great number of night exteriors in the feature *Swimming* gives the film a distinct feel, but this seems to be incidental rather than the result of an intentional filmic aesthetic. *Swimming* is a conventional narrative about Frankie, a homely girl who is enamored of a new girl in town named Josee. Between Josee's arrival at the town diner and the final shot (a ghastly freeze-frame