

SEPTEMBER 10, 1991

Don't Blink

By Manohla Dargis

PBS blinked. Three weeks ago the network canceled Robert Hilferty's *Stop the Church*, bumping the documentary about the ACT UP/WHAM action on St. Patrick's from its schedule because of dreaded controversy. Too bad PBS didn't think its audience mature enough to pass judgment on Hilferty's analysis without a Big Bird or Bill Moyers to guide us through our emotional and intellectual ABCs. Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman, cofounders of the annual New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival, never blinked: they gave *Stop the Church* its local premiere last year.

Now in its fifth year, the NYLGEFF has evolved into an essential platform not only for gay artists and audiences, but the experimental film (and video) community at large. It's more vital than ever before, especially since these days the city's casualty lists aren't measured only by shuttered venues and slashed funds, but by a numbing body count. The festival speaks loss as never before. But even as Hubbard and Schulman damn the decade as the "miserable '90s," they forge a series that spotlights the new and the old ("Unknown Warhol Film"), the celebratory as well as the elegiac.

Elegant and uncluttered, Su Friedrich's *First Comes Love* (Friday, September 13, at 9 p.m.) is a deceptively simple work about straight marriage. 22 minutes of pop tunes and creamy black-and-white, hand-held images—think plump brides and white Rolls-Royces, whirls of tulle, lace, and satin—punctured briefly by scrolled statistics. There are visions of wedding parties making their way from car to chapel as "Sexual Healing" gives way to Wagner. Minutes later, the young dazed marrieds leave church, one heartfelt moment set to Linda Ronstadt belting out "Love Has No Pride," the next made superbly ironic by the rasp of Janis Joplin's "Get It While You Can."

Disdain, curiosity, delight, anger, envy, longing. Each sentiment in *First Comes Love* is keyed to music and Friedrich's discreet camera. Throughout, she keeps a

gracious distance, building a critique that doesn't patronize the very real, very naked emotion she captures. A virtuoso of clarity, here as elsewhere, Friedrich recasts the personal as the political, makes the public curiously intimate. In her hands, a slow pan to a discarded box of Carolina Rice is both poignant and absurd, a fit coda to a ceremony of privilege that's at once desired and denied.

Less ambitious is Cecilia Dougherty's *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* (Monday, September 9 at 7:30 and 9:00 p.m.), a thoroughly groovy and deadpan follow-up to *Grapefruit*, her frothy Beatles spoof. It's Vietnam and flower power and love beads redux. This time the focus is set sharply on the Dobsons, yet another American family under glass. There're Mom and Dad, commune-bound daughter Renee, brother John, and Baby Jane, a female Lance Loud whose lesbianism is tracked from first kiss to first dildo. Dougherty shoots



The woman have it at this years festival: Cecilia Dougherty's *Coal Miner's Granddaughter*.



From Su Friedrich's *First Comes Love*

mainly in Pixelvision (via a Fisher Price toy camera), making splendid use of the camera's fixed focus and its gloriously degenerated quality. She fluidly moves from choker closeups of eyeballs to two-shots, sweeping down bodies to fix on quixotic details like a pair of funky platform shoes that

bop in time to the sounds of seduction. Although scripted in part, most of the dialogue is improvised, the tape adroitly shifting between moments of pure vérité parody and stark fiction.

The exuberant, heady sexuality on tap in *Coal Miner's Granddaughter* is mirrored by other les-

bian films and videos in the festival. This is the first year works by women outnumber those by men, which in other circumstances would be unreservedly inspiring, but here is somewhat grim. In contrast to just a few seasons ago, there's little work by men that's explicitly sexual; the erotic has been supplanted by an atmosphere thick with memory and mourning. One of the most devastating entries is by the late Phil Zwickler, whose *Needlestick Nightmare* (Sunday, September 15 at 7:30 and 9:30 p.m.) was made after the filmmaker/activist had already gone blind. While achingly sad, as Schuiman points out, it's also a testament to the specific ways in which nonmainstream images can speak to the marginalized. The single film Zwickler mentions as having relevance to his life as a PWA isn't *Longtime Companion*, but Carl Michael George's *DHPG Mon Amour*, a documentary about two lovers that premiered at NYLGEFF two years ago.

Other works to watch for include Jerry Tartaglia's fearless, aggressive film, *1969* (Thursday, September 12 at 9 p.m.), a barbed critique of political amnesia, as well as Terrence Hopper's *A Blue*

Movie by Lincoln Steele (Friday, September 13 at 7 p.m.). By turns melancholic and infuriating, *Blue Movie* transforms a stroke session into a poetic refrain by juxtaposing clips from hardcore porn with the image of a solitary male nude. But this autoerotic reverie is haunted, increasingly obscured by shots of Helms, Reagan, and Bush, all of whom force their way into the stroker's psychic landscape. Here, the mind and the flesh are under siege.

Given the quality at this year's NYLGEFF, it's a shame the programmers chose P. J. Castellana's platitudinous bore *Together Alone* (Monday, September 9 at 7 and 9 p.m.) to kick off its fifth season. No question, the topic of safer sex is vital but the fact that this excruciating 87 minutes got onto the festival circuit speaks more to the dearth of features targeted toward gay men than to the merits of this work. Take it or leave it, just don't cop out on the rest.

The New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival, September 9 through September 15, at Anthology Film Archives, 32 Second Avenue. For more information call 925-5883.