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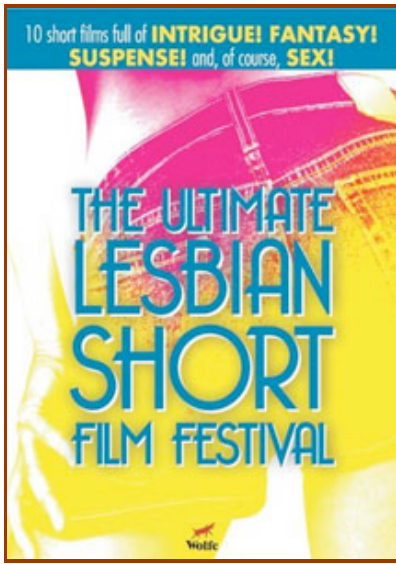
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The Ultimate Lesbian Short Film Festival

Grade: B-
by Jesse Berrios
EDGE Entertainment Contributor
Thursday Mar 2, 2006



Wolfe Video touts it's recently released **The Ultimate Lesbian Short Film Festival** as a collection of "10 short films full of intrigue! Fantasy! Suspense! And, of course, Sex!" and while the exclamations gracing the top of the cover are Wolfe's own, for many of the films in this collection they hold at least partly true. The films included on this disc yield a bevy of lengths, styles, shapes, and colors – for only ten films it is remarkably broad in its scope; perhaps even diffuse at some points for want of a clear unifying theme other than "women" or "the lesbian experience." Much of the direction shows promise, a number of films showcase a substantial skill and talent, and an unfortunate few seem starkly incomplete or poorly executed in

light of the other work presented.

Saint Henry, a 19 minute short directed by Abigail Severence, is undoubtedly one of the high points of this collection. The script, with its clear conflict and fascinating resolution, is significantly bolstered by the actors' strong delivery of the authentic, darkly comic dialog. Max Van Ville gives an inspired performance as Twiggy, gay brother-in-arms to title character Henry (Ashleigh Ann Wood), and his energy dramatically brightens Wood's cold, often deadpan speech. The cinematography beautifully captures the lush, distinctive darkness of the environs as the characters move from the streets to a strip club and then finally to an empty church.

Despite the diversity of perspectives in this collection, only one film, **Dani & Alice**, features people of color. Thankfully, it is also the most exquisite film of the ten, and is justification enough for the price of the DVD. The film, a 12-minute short by Roberta Marie Munroe, depicts the denouement of a violent, abusive relationship between two breathtaking Black women. Yolanda Ross is poised and exquisite as Alice, and Guinevere Turner gives the abusive Dani a beautifully nuanced treatment. The script and direction are both strong, but the film's highlight is the editing, which continually returns the audience to the moment of the attack to the point where the audience almost experiences the pain of that poignantly disturbing instance for themselves. The slow, heavy jazz soundtrack is also a welcome reprieve from the often-painful music of many of the other pieces.

Not all of the films were as well executed as Dani & Alice, or Saint

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Henry. Despite strong editing and direction, as well as the talent of Moira Kelly (of *The West Wing*, and *One Tree Hill*), Chris J. Russo's **A Woman Reported** falls just short of its mark. The film depicts the moments before and after a hate crime, in which Kelly is the victim to a seemingly random attack by two faceless men. The film is gorgeously shot with an excellent use of both lighting and perspective, and Kelly is as convincing as possible with the one line of dialog she has in the film. But at only five minutes, the impact of the film is somehow lessened – rather than heightening the sense of frantic hurry of a random attack, the length of the piece forces several key moments of exposition to be left out. The most poignant moment comes at the end when the title is incorporated into the film through a news-radio-styled voice over, which only accentuates the sparseness of the film itself.

Transit, a four minute piece by Kerry Weldon, could be seen as suffering from a similar shortcoming as "A Woman Reported," but whereas the direction and editing of the latter still makes for an interesting film, *Transit*, lacks the intrigue it hopes to convey. The film is a single scene of a woman making eyes at another woman across a New York City subway car, and, honestly, that's all it is. While it captures the experience of simultaneous isolation and intimacy that is public transportation, the director chooses to linger in this experience for too long without any attempt at movement. There is no story, per se – rather it implies a story yet to unfold. And while the woman at the film's focus seems intrigued by what she sees sitting across from her in the train, the audience seems only capable of viewing this intrigue through the closed glass and metal doors.

Low budgets, poor direction, and less-than-stellar acting were the downfall of many of the other films included in this collection. **The Black Plum**, for example, takes a bizarre and potentially interesting concept – a young girl discovering her sexuality through an encounter with two fairy-tale lesbian stereotypes in a magical cottage in the woods – and buries it under haphazard editing and ghastly special effects. The soundtrack is ridiculous and almost unbearable at points, and the depiction of the young girl's femme and butch fairy godmothers is practically offensive.

Half Laughing, was, for all intents and purposes, a good film which capitalized on a single physical characteristic as symbolic of a young lesbian's struggle with her homophobic mother. The opening sequence of the mother applying make-up and the daughter giving herself a buzz cut is an interesting juxtaposition (despite the revoltingly saccharine contemporary "jazz" background) and the subsequent interaction of these two characters is interesting and beautifully human. Where the film falls apart is in the quality of the film itself. The camera angles are often awkward and out-of-focus. The sound, in addition to the too often intrusion of a consistently horrid "musical" score, often drops off for entire parts of dialog and at other points has such reverberation to it that it becomes inaudible. If only we could be so lucky as to have the sound fade out during one of the "musical" interludes.

But while the low budget of many of the films dramatically decreased their overall quality, in **Everything Good**, the grainy, no-frills portrayal of the subject matter adds more than it hinders. In this piece, a 17-minute film directed by Elizabeth McCarthy, an overweight American woman in Amsterdam, named Lila (Lea Tolub), is joined at her hotel by Ivanna (Judith Partelow), a prostitute and the apparent woman of her dreams. The film presents the characters free of stereotypes and societal standards of beauty, showing simultaneously the humanity of the prostitute and the self-loathing beauty of a woman who has spent her entire life bombarded with images of a standard that eludes her. The darkness of each scene and the clearly low-budget sets allow the audience to focus on the interaction between the two women, which in the end liberates them both from self-inflicted oppression. The original soundtrack by Judith de los Santos is warm and sultry, and the film itself leaves the viewer with a sense of joy and satisfaction that may seem unexpected for the subject matter.

With both high and low points throughout, The Ultimate Lesbian Short Film Festival, may have been a bit ambitiously named. But in spite of the shortcomings of a number of the films, and the mediocrity of a few more, this collection is still peppered with enough moments of sparkle to more than make up for its duller points. Hopefully the exposure will lead many of the talents on display here to greater heights, and with any luck those films that came close or just barely missed the mark will

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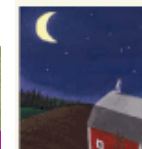
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evolve into the same caliber of work presented in pieces like Dani & Alice, and Saint Henry. And regardless of the quality of each piece, this collection is important in the voice it gives to a community that is too frequently silenced, and if for that reason alone it should be essential viewing for all who appreciate and care for women and the women who love them.

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