



Dong, Arthur (b. 1953)

by Greg Varner

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Arthur Dong.
Photo by Amy Rachlin.
Courtesy Arthur Dong.

The documentaries of filmmaker Arthur Dong, including several works that examine the roots of anti-gay attitudes in American culture and society, are distinguished by their humanity and complexity. This gay Asian-American director's subtle, open-ended approach deepens understanding by encouraging viewers to situate themselves in relation to the issues, including homophobia and racism, that he explores in such films as *Coming Out Under Fire*, *Licensed to Kill*, and *Family Fundamentals*. Dong's movies amount to a particularly thoughtful form of activism.

Coming Out Under Fire, completed in 1994, is based on Allan Bérubé's well-received nonfiction book of the same title. It comments on the development (and stupidity) of the "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" policy of the U.S. military by focusing on a group of gay and lesbian veterans of World War II. Speaking candidly for the camera, these men and women tell what it was like to hide their sexuality while in uniform during wartime. A former marine who entertained fellow service members by performing in drag says, "That was why we were marines--to make other marines laugh." His powerfully ambivalent comment is characteristic of the film as a whole.

Licensed to Kill, televised by the PBS network in 1998, is Dong's harrowing look at anti-gay violence. For this film, he went to prisons around the country and interviewed killers of gay men, asking them directly, "Why did you do it?" Not surprisingly, their answers point to religious and political leaders whose anti-gay pronouncements seemingly gave them license for their crimes.

Dong, who survived a gay-bashing attack in 1977 by throwing himself against the front of a passing Volkswagen bus and holding on as it carried him up the street to safety, was castigated for giving killers a platform--after all, critics said, these men had already had their say. "Once the film got out," Dong said later, "I think I quelled those fears. People said, 'Why would you give them a forum?' My idea was that we need to learn from them if we're going to overcome the problem."

Family Fundamentals, released in 2002, focuses on three families in which fundamentalist Christian parents reject their gay son or daughter. "*Family Fundamentals* is a little tame," Dong acknowledged, "but I wanted to reach a certain audience. We need to speak their language to get the message across." In another interview, Dong said that the question boils down to: "Do you want to shout down the opposition or do you want to work with them? My film is trying to ask, 'Can't we work on this together?'"

These three films are available in a boxed set under the umbrella title, *Stories from the War on Homosexuality*. In keeping with his grass-roots philosophy, Dong distributes his own work through DeepFocus Productions, his company based in Los Angeles, where he lives with his partner of more than 25 years.

"Self-distribution is a big part of what I do," Dong has said. "I've been doing it since the early '80s, when that notion was kind of crazy. Now more and more people are doing it, and it's become easier with the Internet, which has changed the marketing of films for independents. They don't need to rely so much on the

machine."

Arthur Dong was born the son of Chinese immigrants in 1953 in San Francisco, where he came out in 1969 and made his first film in a high school art class in 1970. Entitled *Public*, it was a five-minute animated short presenting a child's-eye view of the war in Vietnam and other issues.

Dong went on to study filmmaking at San Francisco State University and at the American Film Institute.

Sewing Woman, Dong's 1982 film focusing on his mother's experience as a Chinese immigrant making a new life in America, was nominated for an Academy Award. *Lotus* (1987) is a dramatic short condemning the binding of women's feet in China. *Forbidden City, U.S.A.* (1989) spotlights a San Francisco nightclub featuring Asian-American performers that became an international tourist attraction during the 1930s and 1940s.

Another documentary directed by Dong, *Out Rage '69* (1995), was the first of four episodes in the PBS series, *The Question of Equality*, a history of the gay rights movement. Typically for this filmmaker, it asked difficult questions, focusing on racism, sexism, and class prejudice *within* the movement, and not just outside it.

Arthur Dong's work has won numerous honors and awards, including a George Foster Peabody Award, three Sundance Film Festival awards, five Emmy nominations, and two GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) Media Awards.

In 2007, Dong's *Hollywood Chinese*, an examination of the representation of Chinese in American films, won the Best Documentary Award at the Golden Horse International Film Festival in Taipei. Often referred to as the Chinese Oscars, the Golden Horse Awards are Asia's most prestigious film awards. Dong's feature-length documentary was also honored by being selected to open the festival.

He is a member of the Board of Governors of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, representing the Documentary Branch. In that capacity as in his own distinguished work, he heightens awareness of (and appreciation for) the documentary form.

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About the Author

Greg Varner was arts editor of the *Washington Blade* from October, 1997 until September, 2001. He earned

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