



Film Festivals

by Jenni Olson

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Paralleling the growth of the modern gay rights movement since the 1970s, the diverse collection of glbtq film festivals, now recognized as the queer film festival circuit, came into its own in the early 1990s, just as the "New Queer Cinema" achieved mainstream recognition. It has now burgeoned into a major international phenomenon.

The New Queer Cinema

The 1990s opened with the 1991 arthouse release of such unapologetically queer films as Todd Haynes' *Poison*, Jennie Livingston's *Paris is Burning*, Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*, and Norman Rene's *Longtime Companion*, which paved the way for the 1992 phenomenon known as the New Queer Cinema.

This term was coined by cultural critic B. Ruby Rich in her seminal *Village Voice* overview of the 1992 Sundance Film Festival. The triad of gay features she identified as characterizing the term--Christopher Munch's *The Hours and Times*, Tom Kalin's *Swoon*, and Gregg Araki's *The Living End*--were the hot tickets on the gay festival circuit for 1992, with both *Swoon* and *The Living End* achieving limited theatrical release from Fine Line Features and Strand Releasing, respectively.

While 1986 had seen a mini-boom that was dubbed the "Gay New Wave" by *Film Comment* magazine, few of these films (Donna Deitch's *Desert Hearts*, Bill Sherwood's *Parting Glances*, Arthur Bressan's *Buddies*, Jaime Humberto Hermisillo's *Dona Herlinda and Her Sons*) were exhibited at the major gay film festivals of the time.

Unfortunately, the New Queer Cinema was basically a gay male phenomenon. The real lesbian crossover did not happen until 1994. The Sundance Film Festival was once again the origin of mainstream legitimacy when the Samuel Goldwyn Company acquired worldwide rights for a scrappy lesbian feature out of Chicago, Rose Troche and Guinevere Turner's *Go Fish*.

Although the film was only a moderate success at the box office (with a national gross just under \$2.5 million), it was a major turning point in lesbian cinema. Goldwyn's marketing plan for the film capitalized on the big three summer festivals (New York, San Francisco, and Los Angeles), timing the film's release in each city to make the most of its high profile in the gay film festivals.

On opening night at the 1994 San Francisco festival a choked-up Rose Troche explained to 1500 delighted lesbians (okay, there were lots of gay men there too), "I made this film for you guys." The film opened the next day in San Francisco for a very successful run and remains one of the top ten lesbian releases in terms of box office grosses.

This marketing strategy continues today as many distributors clamor for opening and closing night slots at the major gay film festivals as a means of creating excitement and garnering exposure for their films in an increasingly saturated marketplace.

This is a drastic change from earlier prevailing attitudes when distributors went to great lengths to avoid having their films pegged as "gay" or "lesbian" and thus avoided gay film festivals. "It's not a gay film, it's universal," was a common refrain of the time.

From Akron to Zurich

There are currently more than 150 glbtq film festivals listed in PlanetOut's PopcornQ Directory of International Lesbian & Gay Film Festivals. These festivals cross the globe from Akron, Ohio to Zurich, Switzerland.

Most festivals are annual events (more than 30 take place in October, also known as GLBT History Month). Some take place over the course of a weekend, some last a week to ten days, and some carry on over the course of many weeks, as is the case with touring festivals.

While screenings of new and recent films predominate, the festivals also create additional programming such as archival and repertory film showings, panel discussions, speakers, or clip and comment shows offering overviews of anything from gay film history (the origin of Vito Russo's *The Celluloid Closet* [1981]) to a tongue-in-cheek look at the career of porn star Ryan Idol (Richard Dyer's clever foray at the 1994 San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival).

The oldest and largest of the glbtq festivals is the San Francisco International Lesbian & Gay Film Festival, which was established in 1977. The festival's 25th Anniversary in June 2001 was celebrated with an expanded festival and a huge international queer film and video conference called *Persistent Vision*.

A random sampling of the festivals conveys a sense of their range and diversity: Tokyo's International Lesbian & Gay Film and Video Festival, Memphis's Twinkie Museum GLBT Film Festival, Cape Town's Out-in-Africa Film Festival, Calgary's Fairy Tales, Kalamazoo's Queer Arts Film Festival, Stockholm's Queer and Feminist Video & Film Festival, Bozeman, Montana's Lesbian, Gay, Transgender, Questioning, Queer Film Festival, and Berkeley's East Bay Gay Asian Men's Film Festival.

Types of Festivals

There is a considerable diversity of types of festivals within the queer film festival circuit. Over the years different types of specialty festivals have evolved, the most notable being the strong collection of experimental gay festivals spearheaded by MIX.

MIX: The New York Lesbian & Gay Experimental Film and Video Festival was founded by Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman in 1987. The festival is now firmly established as one of the leading gay festivals in the world and has been a pioneer in the fields of digital production, online film exhibition, and interactive multimedia.

The festival originated as an alternative to what was then called the New York Gay Film Festival (the word "lesbian" found its way into festival titles in the early 1980s, with "bi" and "trans" gaining some ground in the late 1990s). MIX has also evolved into a groundbreaking international franchise, spawning sister festivals such as MIX Brazil and MIX Mexico, as well as sponsoring a college touring program of MIX highlights.

The mid-1990s also saw the launch of the first Black GLBT Film Festival, in London, as well as an increasing effort on the part of the major queer festivals to address their constituencies of color in programming, staffing, and audience outreach efforts. Again showing its leadership in the field, MIX: The New York Experimental Lesbian & Gay Film Festival was the first of the queer festivals to have co-directors of color, bringing on Shari Frilot and Karim Ainouz in 1993.

Numerous lesbian specific festivals have also thrived over the years, the oldest being Cineffable, the Paris Lesbian Film Festival, established in 1988. The last five years or so has also seen a burgeoning trans festival movement; especially notable is London's International Transgender Film & Video Festival and San Francisco's Tranny Fest, both of which held their fourth festival in 2001. Olympia, Washington hosts Gender-Queer: Northwest Transgender and Intersex Film Festival.

San Francisco is also home to an annual Bi Film Festival while Sydney, Australia hosts an annual Queer Documentary Film Festival and Bologna presents an HIV/AIDS film festival.

Many of the larger glbtq film festivals also began taking the show on the road in the 1990s. The London Lesbian & Gay Film Festival began touring highlights programs to regional British cinemas as early as 1991. Berlin's Verzaubert festival tours to various German cities and Sao Paolo-based MIX Brazil tours across Brazil.

The most recent technological innovation for the festival circuit is the advent of the online queer film festival. Pioneered by MIX New York and PlanetOut's PopcornQ in 1998, the Online Queer Digifest lays claim to being the first such festival. Several of the larger gay film festivals have also begun showing clips and/or shorts on their web sites as an adjunct to their events. The PlanetOut Short Movie Awards is certainly the largest online festival with roughly 50 short films and videos being exhibited in the 2000 event.

The Eco-System

As the glbtq community has evolved and become more tolerated (even embraced) by mainstream society, so the festivals have thrived and flourished. Nonetheless, festival organizers are under immense pressure to justify their existence, as they are forced to compete with the wider availability of gay cinema in general--in theaters, on television, on home video and DVD, and now on the internet.

A frequent question posed in gay film festival panel discussions is "Are gay film festivals still necessary given the significant number of gay-themed films now seeing wider theatrical distribution?" The answer, of course, is simple: There is nothing like seeing a film at a gay film festival. It is an irreplaceable and unforgettable experience.

The glbtq film festival circuit evolved as part of a queer film eco-system that continues to grow and evolve today. The film and video makers create the movies, the festival organizers show the movies, the distributors circulate the movies, the publicists draw attention to them so that the gay movie lover will plunk down a few dollars to see the movies, so that the whole process can happen again.

Of course, it is not literally that simple. But the truth is that pretty much every person who makes up that chain is relatively underpaid because of the economy of the whole thing (an \$8.50 ticket price does not go very far divided among that many people).

As a group, we are a diverse and complex people yearning for the experience of community--being together, sharing our different realities, exchanging ideas, cruising each other. Our glbtq film festivals, wherein our lives and aspirations are on display and command the center of attention, are one of the relatively few places where we get to experience community.

Bibliography

PlanetOut's PopcornQ International Directory of Lesbian & Gay Film and Video Festivals (www.planetout.com/popcornq/fests/).

About the Author

Jenni Olson is one of the world's leading experts on glbtq cinema. She is the director of entertainment and e-commerce for PlanetOut.com and Gay.com, and is the founding producer of PlanetOut's PopcornQ, a massive film website based on her book, *The Ultimate Guide to Lesbian & Gay Film and Video*. Co-Director of the San Francisco International Lesbian & Gay Film Festival from 1992 to 1994, Olson continues to be a consulting programmer to the Minneapolis/St. Paul Lesbian, Gay, Bi & Transgender Film Festival. She is working on her first feature film as writer/director, an experimental documentary called *The Joy of Life*.