



## Weiss, Andrea (b. 1956)

by Deborah Hunn

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Andrea Weiss is an award-winning writer and documentary filmmaker whose innovative work has provided many unique insights into lesbian and gay life in the twentieth century.

Any serious account of Weiss's work must acknowledge the crucial role of her collaborative partner, director-producer Greta Schiller, with whom Weiss founded Jezebel Productions, a New York based non-profit film production company, in 1984.

Weiss, a New Yorker now resident in London, was born in 1956, and completed a Ph.D. in cultural history before moving into film work. In 1984, she was research director on Schiller's documentary *Before Stonewall*, winning an Emmy award for Best Historical Research. The film--a pioneering study of pre-Stonewall gay and lesbian life in the United States--won an Emmy as Best Historical and Cultural Program.

Three subsequent Jezebel projects, produced in association with Britain's Channel Four, successfully explored marginalized women jazz musicians. *International Sweethearts of Rhythm* (1986) focused on the multi-racial all-woman band of the 1940s; *Tiny and Ruby: Hell Divin' Women* (1988) explored the partnership of trumpeting legend Tiny Davis and pianist-drummer Ruby Lucas; and *Maxine Sullivan: Love to Be in Love* (1991) recounted the fluctuating fortunes of 1930s jazz diva Maxine Sullivan.

The challenge of representing minorities--lesbians and gays, blacks, Jews, and women--led Weiss and Schiller to forge experimental documentary techniques to overcome a paucity of archival footage. *Tiny and Ruby*, for example, skilfully utilizes superimposed images, video animation, and the narrative poetry of black lesbian writer Cheryl Clarke.

The politics and poetics of lesbian representation also preoccupy Weiss as a critic. In 1992 she published *Violets and Vampires: Lesbians in Film*, an acclaimed study of films by and/or about lesbians. Her next book, *Paris Was a Woman* (1996), is a companion piece to her research and writing on a 1995 documentary of the same name.

Directed by Schiller, the film *Paris Was a Woman* is a stylish study of the lesbian coterie associated with the Paris left bank in the 1920s and 1930s, offering insights into such modernist luminaries as Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes.

Skilfully chosen archival footage, a stylish and informative script, and pertinent interviews garnered *Paris* the audience award for Best Documentary at the Berlin Film Festival, and led the *New York Times* to comment: "Time travel to golden ages doesn't exist . . . but *Paris Was a Woman* is the next best thing."

Weiss has continued her exploration of hybrid forms through her work as a director. *A Bit of Scarlet* (1997), a "collage" documentary, addresses the history of lesbian and gay representation in British cinema, while *Seed of Sarah* (1998) melds video collage and archival material with Mark Polishook's electronic chamber



A portrait of Andrea Weiss by Ekko von Schwichow.  
Courtesy Andrea Weiss.  
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opera to convey the wartime memories of Hungarian holocaust survivor Judith Maygar Issacson.

Recent Weiss ventures include *Escape to Life: The Erika and Klaus Mann Story* (2000), co-directed with German filmmaker Wieland Speck and featuring Vanessa and Corin Redgrave as the voices of Erika and Klaus, the dissident queer children of acclaimed writer Thomas Mann; and *Recall Florida* (2003), a documentary road movie following former Attorney General Janet Reno's botched campaign for Governor of Florida, which Weiss directed and co-produced (with Schiller and Hunter Reno).

Speck and Weiss's joint directorial statement of purpose eloquently sums up Weiss's contribution to contemporary gay and lesbian culture, especially when it refers to a "seemingly contradictory commitment to art and political action without sacrificing one for the other; a strong sense of the individual's responsibility to society; the search as a gay/lesbian person to find one's own way in the world."

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### **About the Author**

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