

IT DIDN'T ALL HAPPEN IN NYC

ROCHESTER FILMMAKER SHOWCASES
THE VOICES OF BUFFALO'S ECLECTIC GAY
HISTORY. BY MICHAEL KLEMM

Oral histories are important. Through them, witnesses to history have their lives and their stories preserved for subsequent generations. *Swimming With Lesbians*, a radical documentary by Rochester filmmaker David Marshall, chronicles the important voices that have emerged from my native Buffalo's eclectic gay, lesbian and transgender history. Folks, it didn't *all* happen in New York City and San Francisco.

The film's Mistress of Ceremonies is Madeline Davis, one of Buffalo's leading players on the gay stage. She is the founder and curator of the Madeline Davis GLBT Archives Of WNY and the film is centered on this unique historical treasury. A long-time political activist, Davis made history by addressing the 1972 Democratic National Convention, identifying herself as a lesbian, and demanding the inclusion of a gay rights plank.

Davis is the co-author of *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (1993). This groundbreaking study inspired director Marshall to preserve the memories of Buffalo's gay elders before yet another generation passes on. A tour of the archives introduces viewers to pioneers like Peggy Ames, a transgender woman disowned

by her family in the 1970s. It was a "rite of passage" for children on her street to throw rocks at her.

Among those spotlighted is John Minzer, AKA Tangara, a legendary female impersonator whose career dates back to the 1920s. Tangara, who died shortly after being interviewed, was 94. He recounts working with Mae West (who taught him how to walk like a woman with attitude) and tales of police harassment, arrests, and assaults. Photographs and home movies



(including a performance of his signature song, "Red Hot Nuts") show a grand diva in drag who lived life on his own terms.

Adding further poignancy, one of Tangara's interviewers, Dan Winters, is also a drag performer himself. Local audiences will recognize him immediately, but others will be unaware of Dan's alter ego until an absolutely lovely sequence, later in the film, shows Dan

dressing as Vicky Vogue for one of the many charity vaudevilles that, at age 75, he still hosts.

Stories like theirs are vital. Gay youth has no sense of our rich history and it is up to us to create and preserve it. Straight society sees monuments to the country's founders while *our* history remains invisible. One doesn't have to be Harvey Milk to make a difference. When defining our legacy, Davis rightly acknowledges the drag queens who really showed what it meant to be "other" and "to defend it." (Don't forget that it was the drag queens who fought back first at Stonewall.)

Now almost 70 years old, Madeline Davis is tired of trying to make people understand us but insists that "we are not going away." For her, Gay Pride Parades symbolize both "pride" and "protest" because of still-lingering homophobia. Summing up the importance of her archives, she states that "We have to have the past or we can't have a future. You don't build a future out of nothing. You build the future out of where you've been."

Local audiences will feel like they are at a family reunion, others may be amazed to learn that these things actually happened in Buffalo!

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