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## Pride And Protest

by Michael D. Klemm

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### Swimming With Lesbians

2009

**Director::**

David Marshall

**Starring:**

Madeline Davis

Danny Williams

(Vicki Vogue)

John Minzer (Tangara)

Camille Hopkins

James D. Haynes

Donald A. Licht

Wendy Smiley

Unrated, 68 minutes



*"This is a working class, impoverished rust belt city on the edge of the Midwest. We have done some amazing things coming out of that context."*

- Madeline Davis



Oral histories are important. Through them, witnesses to history have their lives and their stories preserved for subsequent generations to study and to learn from. *Swimming With Lesbians*, a radical documentary by Rochester filmmaker

David Marshall, chronicles many of the important voices that have emerged from my native Buffalo, NY'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 GLBT stage. For starters, Ms. Davis is the founder and curator of the [Madeline Davis GLBT Archives Of WNY](#) and much of the film is centered on this unique



historical treasury. A longtime political activist, Davis made history by addressing the 1972 Democratic National Convention at the age of 32, identifying herself as a lesbian, and demanding the inclusion of a gay rights plank. In 1971, she recorded a folk song entitled "Stonewall Nation." It was the first gay anthem - think Joni Mitchell's "Woodstock" but with a different political bent.



Davis is the co-author, with Elizabeth Kennedy, of the acclaimed *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (1993). This ethnography was the first-ever published oral history of a working class lesbian community - and it

specifically preserved the stories of lesbians in *Buffalo*. In 1995, Davis raised a few conservative eyebrows when she wedded her longtime partner, Wendy Smiley, at Temple Beth Zion; it was the first same-sex marriage to be performed in Buffalo's Jewish Community. This year (2009) she was the Grandmaster of Buffalo's Gay Pride Parade.

The voices enshrined in *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold* led director Marshall to make this film. Buffalo is, of course, not San Francisco and people from around the country did not come *here* to be gay. Even so, this rust belt town has quite the gay history.



***Swimming With***

***Lesbians***, while emphasizing Davis' archives, is a gallant effort to document the memories of Buffalo's gay elders before yet another generation passes on. One doesn't have to be [Harvey Milk](#) to make a difference. When defining our history, Davis rightly acknowledges the drag queens who really showed what it means to be "other" and "to defend it." (Don't forget that it was the drag queens who fought back first at Stonewall.)



There are the several major figures spotlighted; perhaps the most important is Peggy Ames. Peggy's records from the archives were the first that Davis showed to the director. Peggy was a transgendered woman who lived the first 52 years of her life as a

man. He became a woman during the 1970s and identified as a lesbian; her family declared her "dead" and children on her street threw rocks at her. Peggy was so much an "alien" that even the local lesbian group rejected her. Davis' friends, Don Licht and Jim Haynes (who jump-started the archives with Davis by donating all of Peggy's papers), remark that "pronouns get confused" and that they knew so little about transsexualism in those days. Many selections from her letters are read aloud by various readers and the contents are heartbreaking.

Another star player is John Minzer, AKA Tangara, Buffalo's legendary female impersonator whose career dates back to the late 1920s. Tangara, who died before the film was completed, was 94. His stories include working with Mae West (who



taught him how to walk like a woman with attitude) and tales of police harassment, arrests, and being assaulted. When asked if he was ever in love, Tangara replies "I suppose I was, it was so long ago I don't remember." Tangara made up his own rules and lived his life the way he wanted. Photographs and home movies (including a performance of his signature song, "Red Hot Nuts") show a grand diva in drag who never gave in.



An added poignancy is achieved when one knows that one of Tangara's interviewers, Davis' friend Dan Winters, is also a drag performer himself. Buffalo audiences will undoubtedly recognize him immediately, but national audiences will be unaware of Dan's

alter ego until an absolutely lovely sequence, later in the film, shows Dan dressing up as Vicki Vogue in preparation for one of his many charity vaudevilles. Vicki is well respected in Buffalo and, at 70, is probably our oldest living drag performer. His story, another filled with joy, sadness and the courage to live life on his own terms, is fittingly preserved in *Swimming With Lesbians* for the ages.

Davis states that she never had a sense of "my people" until her early activist days when she marched on the State Capital in 1971. It was then that she stopped being afraid and became "energized." Stories like hers are vital. Young gay people have no sense of our rich history and it is up to us to create it and to



preserve it. Straight society can see monuments to men like George Washington everywhere, while *our* history remains invisible. During a very telling sequence, Davis (and others) are profoundly disappointed when a delegation from Buffalo State College seems non-committal about housing the archives at the university - and oblivious to its importance.



*Swimming With Lesbians* sometimes paints a bleak picture of Buffalo and it is in this regard that I hope the filmmakers might tweak it a bit to show that what *then* is not necessarily *now*, and that a vibrant gay community exists here today. The joy of a recent Pride Parade is contrasted with a lone, and loony, protester

with a bullhorn who finally screams at the camera "You're wicked filth, all of you!" At this point, Davis remarks how a Pride Parade *must* symbolize both "pride" and "protest" because there are still people out there who hate us. Buffalo was not always a good place to be gay; from 1978 to 1993 we had a homophobic mayor who thought nothing of making comments in the press like "I don't want no fruits in the theatre district."

But we've come a long way and this film reminds us of that. Adding the tales of these pioneers to the history books is an imperative. Each is unique and so is this film's approach to them. There is a little bit of quirkiness to the proceedings, a sense of the offbeat to subvert the



usual documentary process. We learn, during a sequence filmed at a daring art exhibition, that Davis has no problem being identified as an "S&M dyke." In contrast, she and her partner live out in the suburbs - "We wanted a pool," she insists, as Vicki gently chides her about leaving the city, and invites Vicki to come swim with lesbians because they won't care what you look like. The director doesn't forget to be playful; early on when Davis plays the 45 RPM single of "Stonewall Nation," the record skips the first time.



In the end, we have a portrait of an activist who can certainly be proud of her accomplishments. The film is often very sad, but moments remain that soar with the eagles. At its conclusion, we hear Davis' speech at the

1972 convention and we also hear Walter Cronkite's amazing (given the time) report that "no matter how you feel about this issue, you have to recognize that this may be a portent of things to come." (This is another moment of enhanced poignance, given Mr. Cronkite's recent passing.) Now almost 70 years old, Madeline Davis says that she is tired of trying to make people understand us while insisting that "we are not going away." 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."

At this writing, *Swimming With Lesbians* is not yet available for purchase and may still be, in part, a work in progress as it makes the rounds at festivals. *Swimming With Lesbians* certainly captures some important voices and I sincerely hope that Mr. Marshall finds a distributor because I believe this to be a very important contribution to our collective gay history.

*Click Here for Madeline Davis' Archives*  
[Madeline Davis GLBT Archives Of WNY](#)