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June 2003

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The Stereotype Next Door

PBS's new documentary throws a bright light on a multiculti 'hood in transition.

by Candace Moore

Debuting on PBS June 17 on

the occasion of Pride month, *Flag Wars* portrays a protracted battle of prejudices between a working-class community of African Americans—many of whom have resided in their Columbus, Ohio, neighborhood for generations—and a mostly white influx of gay and lesbian homebuyers with yuppie-sized wallets. The newcomers are displacing the locals but also renovating the often-dilapidated housing. What's new about this cinema verité-styled documentary, however, is its concern for each side's suspicions as they fight over territory quickly gaining in market value.

Filmmakers Linda Goode Bryant and Laura Poitras shot footage of Olde Towne East's vintage mansions—some with deteriorating

awnings, some swathed in new paint—and their up-in-arms residents over a period of four years. The artistic union of Bryant, who grew up

in the then-black suburb of the 1950s, and Poitras, an out lesbian, mirrors the opposing constituencies in the film. The name *Flag Wars* comes from the film's recurring visual motif of battling "For Sale" signs, rainbow flags, and good old red-white-and-blues.

The filmmakers taped conversations in neighbors' dens, cars, porches, and hospital rooms, as well as courtrooms, construction sites, and zoning committee meetings. These exchanges tell the bulk of the story. The subjects rarely acknowledge the camera. With

this technique *Flag Wars* succeeds in creating riveting drama out of a mixed bag of hearsay; by focusing on a few representative characters and



Filmmakers Bryant (front) and Poitras; an Olde Town house.

their casual comments, the film elucidates the racism, homophobia, and greed fueling the fight.

For example, there's Linda Mitchell, a middle-aged black woman with a bad liver and a sunken face who lives alone on a monthly income of \$501. She's desperately trying to retain her run-down home, which the gay faction sees only as a fixer-upper waiting to be vacated. Her nemesis is Nina Masseria, an Italian-American lesbian real estate agent extraordinaire who, the footage implies, loves her commissions as much as she does the sauce.

Masseria's slurred commentary provides the film with some much-needed comic relief. But the film also gives us the sobering impression that Masseria is facilitating black emigration by siccing city officials on

those too poor, elderly, or ill to keep up their houses. New "historical site" statutes, for example, force Mitchell to dispose of two rusty cars in her yard, move her flywheel-challenged camper into the back, and fix her leaky gutters—a repair she's unable to afford without the help of a non-profit.

Gay newcomers aren't simply the villains of *Flag Wars*. The film also documents the prejudices, both racial and sexual, of the area's residents. "I don't want to wake up in my black community and see white people when I open my door," says one subject; citing Sodom and Gomorrah, he goes on to announce that he

intends to pull his son from his first-grade class because the teacher is a "flaming homosexual." It gets worse when a white, self-proclaimed gospel minister, flanked by prepubescent boys playing with naked Ken dolls in nooses, pulls a rainbow flag down from the State House.

Flag Wars ends by driving home its message of patience, humanity, and the need to resist the seductions of Mammon. Viewers won't be able to avoid a comparison between this story of misunderstandings between blacks and queers—both sides trapped and fooled by their preconceptions—and America's current conflicts. Grade: **B+**

Candace Moore recently co-edited *Revolutions of the Mind*.

Flag Wars

dir. Linda Goode Bryant, Laura Poitras
Zula Pearl Films, 87 min.

Women on the Run

Queer ladies with a taste for blood indulge on DVD.

by **Candace Moore**

Rebecca Romijn-Stamos makes an

even sleazier, crueller heroine than film noir's queen-of-the-genre, Barbara Stanwyck. Throughout this Brian DePalma thriller you just want to put Stamos's jewel-thieving, murderous character in your mouth—especially in the opening lesbian sex sequence, when the con artist deflowers a piquant supermodel at the Cannes Film Festival. Hiding out in Paris from thugs



Con and striptease artist Romijn-Stamos

Femme Fatale
dir. Brian DePalma
Warner Brothers, 110 min.

she doublecrossed to save her lady-friend, she manipulates a tabloid photographer (Antonio Banderas) with a juicy striptease. Gimmicky in moments, but surprisingly well-plotted (complete with *Sliding Doors*-

esque alternate realities), one wonders why this film didn't get more press. Grade: **B+**

Thelma and Louise (MGM, 1991)

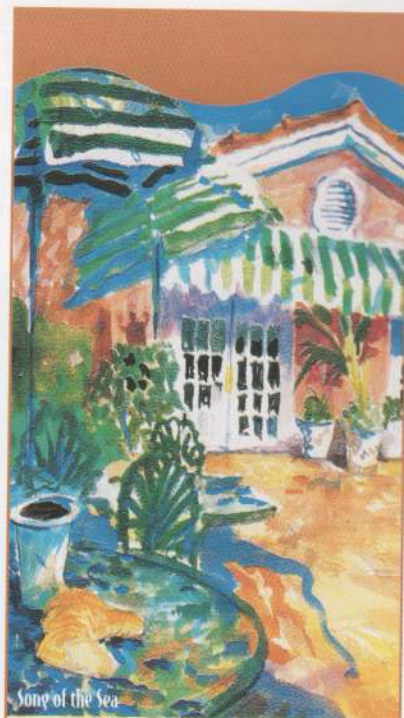
The DVD has arrived of this girls-on-the-lam classic, starring Susan Sarandon as an Arkansas waitress and Geena Davis as an unhappy housewife who peel out in their green 1966 Thunderbird. This female-bonding riff on *Bonnie & Clyde* offers two lovable amateur criminals, pushed to the limit by masculinist surroundings. An attempted rape incites a murder that has the best friends hightailing it to the border on off-highway desert roads, politely robbing convenience stores, and shooting up sexist truckers' rigs. As the empowered Thelma quips, between swigs of Wild Turkey, "Something's crossed over in me." The DVD offers an alternate ending that goes further over-the-cliff, with commentary by director Ridley Scott. Grade: **A-**

Butterfly Kiss (Cinepix Film Properties Inc., 1995)

A bizarre, British *Natural Born Killers* with lesbians. Amanda Plummer is Eunice, a scruffy, compulsive killer who wears padlocked chains around her tattooed and bruised body as symbols of her sins. Bashing people's heads in when they rub her the wrong way, Eunice is searching U.K. petrol stations for her ex-lover Judith, whom she hopes to recognize by an employee name tag. A shy gas-mart cashier with hearing aides, Miriam (Saskia Reeves), falls for the apocrypha-spouting drifter and tags along for the ride, properly disposing of the brained bodies that keep popping up in the boots of assorted filched vehicles, making love to her heavily armored madwoman, and hoping to change her honey-bunny for the better. Grade: **B-**

Black Widow (20th Century Fox, 1987)

FBI agent Alexandra Barnes (Debra Winger) becomes obsessed by a murderess (Theresa Russell) whose M.O. is to seduce millionaires into marriage, slip untraceable poisons into their drinks, and inherit their assets. Alex trails "Catherine" to Hawaii, where, posing as a bored vacationer, she befriends the serial bride in a scuba diving class. While practicing CPR, their mouth-to-mouth embrace starts some heavy flirtation. The two soon share designer clothes, hairdressers, lovers, and more than one lip lock before Catherine can't resist the itch to hubby-kill again. Director Bob Rafelson doesn't make the queer subtext of this cat-and-mouse chase too subterranean. Grade: **B**



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Workplace Prospects

With the economy in the toilet and our soldiers in Iraq, it was hard not to get depressed about *Girlfriends'* annual career report. Whereas it's true that a record number of *Fortune* 500 companies offer domestic partner benefits and protection against anti-lesbian discrimination, because of the instability, a record number of them are also cutting jobs.

Recently I had to hire a graphic designer for our parent company. I received over 100 resumes. The discouraging refrain was, "I've been working in a corporate environment for a while, but I really want to work on something closer to my heart..." (read: "I directed all the creative at a dot-com, but got laid off"). Because it was a gay publication and I'd encouraged women of color to apply, many job-seekers began, "I'm not gay, but..." or "I'm not a woman of color, but I'm gay and Asian..." (One applicant offered, "I'm straight but I live in [our gay neighborhood] the Castro!") I stopped and

pondered how weird it was for an employer to get applicants who, instead of keeping mum about their homosexuality, apologized for being straight. World turned upside down.

When associate editor Jen Phillips and editorial assistant Saira Qureshi set out to rank the country's biggest employers on the basis of their friendliness to lesbian employees, they ran into a big bear market. Twenty of the 100-plus corporations who had participated in the past

declined to participate, not because they're not gay friendly, but because they're firing, not hiring.

Jen and Saira persevered, and on page 26 report on seven super employers who not only love lesbians, but are fiscally healthy enough to offer us a paycheck. May I recommend also Nicole Caron's "Partners, Inc.," an inspiring story about lesbian entrepreneurs who are their own bosses—that is, when their co-owners-cum-girlfriends aren't ordering them around.

Don't neglect to take Diana Cage's quiz on page 48 to determine how much further you have to step out of the closet at your job; it's fun and informative. And finally, in "Gays in the 'Hood" (page 22) Candace Moore unpacks PBS's bold new documentary about a wave of Columbus, Ohio, guppies (gay urban professionals) who clash with the black residents they're displacing.

Peace and good fortune,



Heather Findlay, Editor in Chief



Me (left), Saira Qureshi, and Jen Phillips at work on the lesbian career report.

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Girlfriends Magazine
Volume 9, Issue 12

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publisher of *Girlfriends*,
On Our Backs, and
Inside Pride guides
3415 Clear Chavez, Ste. 101
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editorial@girlfriendsmag.com.
Obtain writer's guidelines from
www.girlfriendsmag.com.

Girlfriends (ISSN 1076-8879)
is published monthly by
H.A.F. Enterprises,
3415 Clear Chavez, Ste. 101,
San Francisco, CA 94110.
One-year subscriptions are \$29.95.
(Canadian subscribers add \$10;
other foreign subscribers add \$15.)
Periodicals Postage Paid at
San Francisco, CA and at additional
mailing offices. POSTMASTER:
Send address changes to:
Girlfriends, P.O. Box 500
Missouri City, TX 77459-9904.

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