Double Identity

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Like some anti-HIV meds, the fare at “identity” film festivals—whose flicks have nothing in common other than the ethnicity or gender of their makers or stars—is often well meaning but, between the parent-produced student projects and documentaries so personal they’re practically home movies, hard to stomach. The lineup at June’s New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, however, transcended the stereotype, and two foreign-made AIDS flicks deserve special note.

In the Australian documentary *Chrissy*, filmmaker Jacqui North records the last year in the life of her best friend, an HIV positive lesbian named Chrissy Napier. Outwardly, Chrissy is unremarkable—a Madonna fan, the oldest of four close-knit sisters who, in all their prettiness and irrepressible cheer, seem like characters who skipped in straight from *Meet Me in St. Louis*. Moreover, North’s camera threatens to catalogue the mundane: Chrissy opening presents, getting a makeover, showing off her home. But as these scenes go by, it’s the restraint about what Chrissy doesn’t say—about her rape at 17 and her serostatus—that makes the film extraordinary. In the face of both Chrissy’s silence and her death, the devotion of North and the sisters is, for the viewer, as quietly uplifting as it is devastating.

The same can be said of the Mexican-American feature *Del Otro Lado*, a look at, literally, “the other side” of the AIDS universe—the developing world, where everything from HIV awareness to lifesaving medicine may be taken for granted, but not by you. The handsome young gay couple Beto and Alejandro have an idyllic relationship until Alejandro learns that his CD4 count is dwindling, and there is nothing available in Mexico for him to do about it.

Rejected for a visa to enter the United States, Alejandro must make a night crossing that’s both illegal and dangerous; preparing for it tears apart his relationships with his lover and his family. *Del Otro Lado* is smart and sexy, with moments of heart-stopping tenderness. Films like this make me grateful that festivals unspool, for better or worse, what commercial distributors would leave in the canister.

Good news for late-comers like us: *Del Otro Lado* continues to tour the festival circuit (call 415.252. 9926) and *Chrissy* has been picked up by Frameline Distribution (415.703.8655).

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