Those Darned Kids

June 1, 1995 By Casey Davidson

What sexually provocative photographer-turned-filmmaker Larry Clark has made is a sexually provocative drama -- one that centers on 24 hours in the lives of a group of New York City street kids. Simply titled Kids, the Miramax film features incredibly frank language, sex scenes and drug use as well as frontal nudity by actresses who look underage (but aren't), gay-baiting and the beating of a black man in Washington Square Park by a predominantly white group of kids.

The engine driving the whole production is the spread of AIDS through unsafe teenage sex. Its core story follows a 14-year-old girl who has just discovered she's HIV positive and her efforts to contact the only boy she's ever had sex with. He is a self-proclaimed "virgin buster" who, as the film opens, is scoring again. Kids achieves a brutal immediacy as tension builds over whether the boy will make yet another conquest before the girl can reach him with news of her (and presumably his) HIV status.

Since Kids premiered in rough form in January at a midnight Sundance Film Festival screening, there has been speculation it could not escape an NC-17 rating, both for its graphic sexuality and unrelenting streetwise language.

Miramax, the Walt Disney Co. subsidiary earlier embroiled in an Easter season ruckus with the Catholic League over their clergy picture Priest, is reportedly under pressure from the Mouse Factory to sell Kids. Miramax's agreement with Disney forbids them to distribute any film rated NC-17. At press time, Miramax's plan to show Kids at May's Cannes Film Festival held some hope of bringing critical acclaim and quieting the controversy.

FILM

Dogs Rolls Over: Sexy, Funny and Gay

Filmmaker Anthony Bennett went from producing the documentary Living Proof: HIV and the Pursuit of Happiness ("More Proof," POZ No. 4) to his current feature, a romantic comedy and coming-of-age story, Lie Down with Dogs. The shift from fact to fiction, he insists, was not so great.

"Actually, I was working on both projects simultaneously. Both films reflect a consciousness about AIDS and HIV that are part of everyday life in the '90s," Bennett says.

But the scourge of independent movie making -- raising money -- loomed large. Bennett read a magazine article about product placement and found that companies would actually pay to have their brands appear in films. But that only half-solved his problem. "People were eager to give to

Living Proof because it’s a film dealing with HIV and AIDS. Dogs was a tougher sell because it’s not an activist film. It’s a sexy, funny movie about gay life.”

Like so many September assignments in English class, Dogs is based loosely on what writer/director Wally White did on his summer vacation in Provincetown. “AIDS and HIV are a matter of fact within the gay community. While the characters in the movie practice safe[r] sex, they still have irrational fears about their health. When the narrator gets the flu he goes to get tested at a clinic, thinking somehow he might be positive [even though] he tested negative,” says Bennett. “This is a realistic scenario among gay men.”

The June Miramax release also features non-Latino Randy Becker (the most memorably naked guy in Broadway’s Love! Valour! Compassion!) as the narrator’s Latino love interest. Becker’s character won’t kiss the narrator on the mouth -- is this an intimacy issue or more AIDS paranoia? “It’s not clear,” says Bennett. Just remember, the film is called Lie Down with Dogs.

THEATER

AIDS Flag Waiver

One character laments, “Lovers are easy, friends are hard,” during an embroidered-pillow moment in Steven Dietz’s Lonely Planet. But what most people want to know during the first act of Dietz’s neo-absurdist play is -- why the hell are all those empty chairs piling up on stage? Is this just another Ionesco wet dream, or are we in some phenomenally unpopular coffee bar?

For anyone grieving an unspeakable number of friends and lovers in recent years, the mysterious chairs will telegraph their meaning, instantly, in that ineffable Morse Code of loss.

When Lonely Planet drifts into view at New York City’s Circle Repertory Company this June, it will be the 15th or 16th staging (Dietz isn’t counting, so why should I?) in an impressive three-year national orbit. Audiences from San Jose?conservative to Seattle?cool warmed to the prickly friendship between two gay men -- Jody, a map store owner with his head in the sand (played by Mark Shannon) and Carl (Dennis O’Hara), a brittle jack-of-no-trades who collects his dead pals’ occupations (and furniture) like some morbid kleptomaniac.

Lonely Planet expands and dignifies that bashful subgenre of AIDS plays that never say the A?word. “The word itself can close people’s ears and minds,” explains the Seattle-based Dietz. “It’s tantamount to abortion, gun control, the death penalty. These words go up as flags, and half the audience salutes and the other half of the audience leaves. By leaving the word out, it keeps the audience’s minds open significantly longer, so that they can meet these men and listen.”

The nonspecificity also keeps the spotlight focused on the mystery of friendship. “I find myself constantly surprised by the depth and breadth of my friendships, the lengths I will go to for my tight circle of friends,” says the playwright. “Why is it so resilient? Why do we fall out of love, but sometimes when we are at our absolute worst this odd relationship that we can’t define springs back to life and saves us?”

FILM

Eric Roberts is a Party Pooper

Electing not to wait for fate to intervene, when Harry Stein felt he was succumbing to AIDS he chose suicide. But, being a fabulous West Coast decorator to the stars, Stein first had a party to say goodbye to all of his friends.

That event has now taken on a fictionalized life of its own as a United Artists movie, It's My Party , starring Eric Roberts as Nick Stark, a successful architect with AIDS who invites his friends on a weekend celebration before his doctor-assisted suicide. The movie partygoers include Olivia Newton-John, Lee Grant, Marlee Matlin, Bruce Davison, Roddy McDowell, Gregory Harrison and Margaret Cho, under the direction of Stein's ex-lover, Randall Kleiser (The Blue Lagoon, Grease, Big Top Pee-wee).

Undoubtedly, suicide is a radical choice, but executive producer Gregory Hinton describes the character of Stark as "a man who has no denial left in him." Hinton, who is HIV positive, defends Stark's choice and his movie. "It's My Party isn't an anthem of what HIV positive people should do when confronted by the challenges of AIDS," says Hinton. "It's a film that portrays a person with a terminal illness deciding his own fate with the support and love of his family and friends." Get ready for the sound of moviegoers crying if they want to.

MUSIC

Long Distance Love

Tenor/composer Tom Briggs' Moonlight (SaturnDisc) is a Brazilian-Jazz fusion collection brimming over with easy and infectious bossa nova melodies. The solid backup includes Bob Kindrid's sweet and solid sax and Romero Lubambo's nimble guitar. The effect, like a cool sea breeze on a warm summer evening, is inviting. Speaking of the inspiration for Moonlight, Briggs says, "Being on a beach at midnight and making love is a universal fantasy. And sometime reality. Mine wasn't in Brazil. It was Riis Park in New York City, and I can't honestly say it was very romantic."

The album is remarkable and inspiring on another level. In 1989, with his career in jazz taking off in L.A., Briggs was stricken with a paralyzing attack of Gillain-Barré syndrome. His doctors believed that the attack was related to Briggs being HIV positive -- a status he was unaware of until he fell ill. With no known cure for Gillain-Barré syndrome, an experimental treatment, plasmapheresis (which involved blood being removed from, filtered, and then sent back into his body), was tried. Remarkably, today Briggs has only slight residual effects from the illness.

But back then, survival, much less being able to perform again, seemed very uncertain. While on a respirator Briggs had what he describes simply as "a very powerful spiritual encounter, kind of a rendezvous with eternity. There's too much subjectivity with the word 'God.' I was simply aware of a very powerful benevolent presence, like a telephone line of the universe, to a very joyful feeling."

Joy is what permeates Moonlight. With this album dedicated to his lover who died of AIDS, future plans include another Brazilian-influenced collection, concert appearances and a straight-ahead

jazz collection to be called Too Much Gin and Cigarettes. Clearly the man has a lot more music in him.

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