

Two Films Find Community in Tenderloin

by David L. Brown

Filmmaker friends shoot and release on the same subject simultaneously, an artistic race between the narrative and doc genres

There are obvious similarities between first-rate, recently released films by three local film luminaries about the gritty San Francisco neighborhood, the Tenderloin. Both are superbly crafted and compelling stories filled with authenticity, addiction, hardship, humor, and wildly colorful characters, as well as the hope that can emerge from a supportive community.

There are also obvious differences. First of all, “Empress Hotel,” made by the Academy Award – winning partners Irving Saraf and Allie Light, is a documentary, and “Tenderloin,” by the acclaimed director of photography Michael Anderson, is a fictional feature as well as his directorial debut. Appropriately, these three exemplary filmmakers have been close friends for 43 years, and Anderson was one of the cameramen on “The Empress Hotel.”

Anderson shot, directed and edited “Tenderloin,” which will be at San Rafael’s Rafael Film Center (Wed, May 12, 7pm). Produced by Sam Rider and from an autobiographical screenplay by Ned Miller, who lived in the neighborhood for eleven years, it tells the story of Ben, an emotionally and physically damaged Iraq war vet (beautifully played by Kurt Yaeger). Ben takes a job managing a seedy hotel (The Boyd for exteriors) and befriends a wild group of residents in-



Tenderloin Director Michael Anderson with the drag queen Felicia played by Stephen Smith Collins.

cluding a transvestite-hooker saving for a sex-change, an old sailor stowed away in the basement, a smack-snorting stylist whom Ben falls for, and a mother-figure named Myrna. Rounding out the drama is the evil landlord.

Beautifully shot, hand-held, and on video, “Tenderloin” feels like a documentary, like the hundreds Anderson has filmed over his distinguished 40-year career, including the Oscar-nominated “Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.”

“After many decades of shooting fly-on-the-wall documentaries, when you never tell anyone what to do,” Anderson comments, “It was liberating to have the freedom to direct from behind the camera, even if it was merely saying ‘walk slower’ or ‘once more with feeling.’”

Adding to the realism was Anderson’s decision to allow his actors to improvise –

to place them in real situations and have them ad lib the scene as it evolved. This is how the local blues guitarist, Mark Hillard, whom Anderson saw street busking, ended up in the film, as well as the hard-hats who whistle at the women sun-bathing on the roof of the Empress. That scene also produced a wonderful improvised moment when Cassandra, a post-op transsexual, advises her friend, Felicia, a transvestite saving for his/ her transition, on how to find inner beauty after the operation.

The film is grounded by lead actor Yaeger’s touching chemistry with Jack Indiana, the sweet-faced child actor playing his son. Their relationship, complicated by a custody battle, is one of the most moving father-son relationships I’ve seen on film in a long time. Yaeger said Anderson encouraged him to build rapport with Indiana hanging out with him—time well spent.



Tenderloin Director, Michael Anderson

There are several other very strong performances – notably Felicia, in a tour-de-force by Stephan Smith Collin. A muscular 6’1” L.A. actor with a shaved head who usually plays cops and killers, Collins got the role after arriving at the audition in character. Indeed, the cast and crew knew him only as the drag queen Felicia and didn’t meet Collins until months after the film wrapped. “Who’s that guy? Where’s Felicia?” was their reaction.

Having never played a transvestite, Collins researched the role through weeks at the Tenderloin’s main transsexual bar, “The Diva,” and by shopping in drag for Felicia’s wardrobe, including the girdle which disguises the male “equipment.” He faced hostile comments on the street and was banned from the ladies dressing room at Marshalls. Still, he said he loved playing Felicia and working with a “dream ensemble,” especially the “amazingly warm, gracious and generous” director and the gallant male cast and crew who would open doors for him.

Actors Glen Caspillo and Charles Branklyn also improvised several terrific scenes, playing off each other so comfortably, they seemed like old friends and actual Tenderloin residents.

The “lean and mean” five-person crew shot for only fifteen eight-hour days, a tribute, Anderson claims, to producer Sam Rider’s tight scheduling, the skilled cast, good rehearsing and his ability to direct from behind the camera, including doing reverse angles without turning

the camera off. “The director and cameraman didn’t have to spend a lot of time talking to each other,” Anderson joked.

Combining a naturalistic script, the wealth of local color, and first-rate editing, “Tenderloin” portrays a moving and fascinating proof that a caring family can

be created anywhere. The filmmakers just signed a seven-year (non-theatrical) distribution deal with Vanguard Cinema, and “Tenderloin” will soon be

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available at Netflix, Amazon, iTunes, Blockbuster, and hopefully cable. See vanguardcinema.com.

Over at the Empress Hotel, in Saraf’s and Light’s documentary of the same name, the extremely diverse, real-life residents are often struggling with substance abuse and living arrangements. The film opens, appropriately, with Bessie Smith singing “It can rain all day, I ain’t got no place to stay.” Interestingly, the hotel’s caring and unflappable manager, Roberta Goodman, also co-produced the doc, which is being distributed by National Film Network. See www.nationalfilmnetwork.com.

The newly renovated Empress Hotel is funded by the San Francisco Depart-

ment of Health to provide housing and supportive services, embodied by the compassionate care offered by Goodman. Saraf and Light were attracted to the Empress specifically because of Goodman’s accounts of the fascinating characters, her introduction to them, and her recommendations on which stories to follow. Goodman anchors “Empress” in the same way Ben, the manager in “Tenderloin,” does that film. The filmmakers are unsparing in their depiction of life at the Empress, weaving together stories of chronic homelessness, addiction, and violence that are raw but, as in the “Tenderloin,” tell of a slow progress towards hope.

“They will beat you up down here,” says a man who has just been attacked. Another character, Tina, is grateful one moment and outraged the next. “I have been saving my money to get the heck out of here. This is as bad as it gets. It is like an insane asylum.”

In contrast, Lynn is a soft-spoken “there-but-for-fortune” character, with a graduate degree from M.I.T. and a keen interest in holograms. “I specialized in something and it went away. Nobody buys holograms. So I became homeless. Homelessness – if you weren’t mentally ill when you got there, you are going to be.” We see her bedding down on the street near a coveted warm air vent, in a tragic scene shot by Michael Anderson.

For me, the most compelling character was Sonya, an energetic and very funny former crack dealer. The camera follows her on the bus, to the doctor, and into the neighborhoods where she used to sell crack, then back to her room where she cooks chicken.

“My mother died and I had no one to turn to, so I turned to crack,” Sonya says, now over-joyed to have a place of her own. “I love this room. It’s a nice room. I keep it clean. I go shopping.” She calls Goodman “Mama,” and tells the filmmakers that Goodman is making this place better.

Saraf shot most of the film hand-held, but had help from Anderson and Andrew Clark, who also worked on both films. Both Saraf and Light conducted the



Empress Hotel Directors, Irving Saraf and Allie Light with their camera bag.

interviews. For security reasons, they would carry all their video gear in shopping bags, much like their previously homeless subjects.

Saraf and Light built trust by introducing themselves at an open meeting for Empress residents and by “talking about their failures in life” to show their vulnerability. They also promised, in a generous gesture rarely offered by docmakers, to cut any comment or footage that anyone found objectionable.

Harry Belafonte called “Empress Hotel” “an extraordinary film... on a supportive housing model that truly offers hope to us all.” And Goodman lavishly praised the filmmakers’ “talents, skills, humanity and sensitivities.”

“In both films, we see people finding some form of salvation, rescue, or hope through community,” Anderson reflects. “Empress Hotel is an excellent example of what a city can do to create community where people support each other. In [my] fictional movie, ‘Tenderloin,’ the people are living in a slum hotel run by a bad landlord, but still they form their own community to help and support each other.”

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