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Reel Affirmations 28: A Complete Guide to All the Films

Reviews of all the films and shorts showing in this weekend's online and in-person LGBTQ film festival

By Rudy Malcom, Rhuaridh Marr, Sean Maunier, Doug Rule, Randy Shulman, Kate Wingfield, and Cary Wong
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Design by Todd Franson

The 28th Annual Reel Affirmations LGBTQ Film Festival is up and running now through Sunday, Oct. 24.

All films — shorts and features — are available online, but select features will get in-person screenings at the GALA Hispanic Theatre, 3333 14th Street NW in Washington, D.C. starting Friday, Oct. 22.

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THE MAGAZINE



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Presented in observational, slice-of-life vignette style, the hour-long documentary gradually if obliquely, and with little fanfare, builds to a climactic celebratory gala outside El Mejunje at which the participants take the stage to reflect on their progress and revel in the moment. You'll revel, too, in the opportunity to see such everyday LGBTQ heroes deserving of Heidenberg's rare spotlight and then some. —*Doug Rule*



Raw! Uncut! Video!

RAW! UNCUT! VIDEO!

★★★★☆

CRITIC'S PICK

GALA Hispanic Theatre
Saturday, Oct. 23, 11:30 p.m.

Also Available Online

RAW! UNCUT! VIDEO! BEGINS with a clip of an old television spot discussing the legality of pornography — “that is, hardcore obscenity,” the gravely concerned host helpfully clarifies. We then cut immediately to a grainy clip of a man with his jeans half-down fucking a puddle of mud as if to playfully say, “See? Obscenity!”

With that clip, co-directors Ryan A. White and Alex Clausen ease us into the story of Palm Drive Video, a pioneering safe-sex fetish porn studio. The brainchild of Jack Fritscher and his partner Mark Hemry, Palm Drive specialized in highly niche kinks, the type of content that was vanishingly rare in 1979, if it existed at all. The couple left San Francisco to set up the studio in rural Sonoma county and sought out everyman types as performers, lending their content a ruggedness that audiences enthusiastically responded to.

As if to make the point that the luridness and unconventional nature of Palm Drive's content has aged well, clips from their film catalog are interspersed with interviews with the people behind and in front of the camera, and occasionally, the performers' families. The fetish content depicted in them is graphic, raunchy, and highly niche, but also genuinely enjoyable for the performers and producers — enjoyment that everyone involved seems to agree translated well onto the screen.

Fritscher recalls at one point that in the fraught cultural climate of the '80s, he believed they had a mission to celebrate the fun of sex. The documentary is not just a history of

a moment in the history of pornography, but of a cultural shift in the way sex and kink were thought of and talked about among gay and queer men. Set amidst the background of the AIDS epidemic, White and Clausen take care to underline that sex and activism were inseparable, and that there was enormous significance in Palm Drive's championing of kink and sex positivity as AIDS raged through the community.

Filmed and compiled with incredible attention to detail and sensitivity for the context and importance of its subject, *Raw! Uncut! Video!* is a love letter not just to Palm Drive Video or even the history and cultural significance of adult filmmaking, but also to the ways sexuality thrives in an uncomprehending and hostile world. —*Sean Maunier*



The Greenhouse

THE GREENHOUSE

★★★★☆

CRITIC'S PICK

GALA Hispanic Theatre
Saturday, Oct. 23, 1 p.m.

ZOOM Watch Party
Saturday, Oct. 23, 1 p.m.

Also Available Online

FULLY IN THE TRADITION of quality independent and well-acted Australian filmmaking, *The Greenhouse* is a stunning study in family grief, if a little less persuasive when it comes to some attempts at magical realism.

Set in and around a large Australian country house (and peripheral guest house business), daily life gradually, but potently, reveals that the family in residence has suffered an almost unspeakable grief in the loss of matriarch Lillian (played with affecting stoicism by Rhondda Findleton). Left behind is her wife, Ruth, and their four adult children. Although we learned that the kids were once joyously and irreverently close, three have moved on with their lives, while daughter Beth has stayed to help run the business. As Ruth's milestone birthday and family reunion approaches, Beth makes a mind-blowing discovery that will mark a turning point for everyone and their grief.

Although it is Beth we follow through this interesting tale of grief and the danger of trying too hard to hold the past, the real power here is in director Thomas Wilson-White's delicate touch in suggesting the quiet agony of facing a death that will leave behind a beloved partner and children (no matter how grown-up). Although there are a few unlikely emotional contrivances — such as Lillian's request that Beth put her life on hold — many of the moments here are brimming with artful authenticity. One scene in particular, in which Beth wants to photograph Lillian ("because I want pictures of you") is nothing short of devastating in Beth's innocence of what is to come and Lillian's grief for what she will lose.