

Scapegoating queers

by Brian Bromberger

After viewing the new documentary “The Lavender Scare,” there’s no doubt that the 1950s were the worst time to be LGBTQ in this country. “Lavender” played this year’s Frameline festival to huge applause, and in a return engagement will be screened free to the public tonight, Thurs., Oct. 19, at the Roxie Theater, 7 p.m. It’s for anyone who wants a tutorial on the birth of the gay rights movement in the US. It’s the first film to tell about the decades-long witch-hunt that began with Pres. Eisenhower’s Apr. 27, 1953 executive order demanding that all gay and lesbian government employees be fired immediately. This edict was carried out in the mistaken belief that during the Cold War hysteria against Communism, LGBT workers would be easy prey to blackmail. In a 1991 Dept. of Defense study of 117 cases of spying for foreign governments since WWII, homosexuality wasn’t a factor in any of them. No gay or lesbian person ever betrayed our government, yet thousands of lives were destroyed



Scene from writer-director Josh Howard’s “The Lavender Scare.”

for no reason.

“The Lavender Scare” makes clear this panic was a perfect storm of two fears gripping the country during the 50s: Communism and queers, the latter due primarily to Kinsey’s 1948 finding that 37% of American men had homosexual experiences to the point of orgasm. Even when the Communist frenzy abated, the

purge of gay people continued. Every person interrogated wasn’t allowed to have a lawyer present, see the evidence against them, or confront their accuser(s).

Many co-workers thought it was their patriotic duty to inform on their associates. (“My feminine intuition tells me Mr. Hand is a homosexual. He has a jellylike

handshake.”) Two stories highlighted are poignant. One involved Joan Cassidy, a captain in the Navy Reserve. Approached to consider becoming the first woman Admiral, she said no because she feared her secret, being lesbian, would be exposed. The second involved Drew Ference, who had a job in the Foreign Services and a lover. Investigated for homosexuality, rather than having to tell his close-knit family why he had to leave, he committed suicide.

One man fought against his dismissal, igniting the gay rights movement. Frank Kameny wanted to join the space program, but was denied a security clearance. Believing the Mattachine Society was ineffective, he formed his own, more confrontational group in Washington, DC, writing letters to legislators correcting myths about gay people. He took his case to the Supreme Court, but lost. But he helped Jamie Shoemaker, a linguist in the NSA, become the first openly gay man to retain his security clearance. Kameny also led the first-ever public gay protest in 1965 by picketing the

White House. He lived long enough to witness Pres. Clinton rescind the employment ban in 1995, and be praised by Pres. Obama for his courage in 2009. Kameny was the godfather of gay rights. Without him, there never would have been a Harvey Milk.

Writer/director Josh Howard, adapting David Johnson’s book of the same name, uses archival footage and interviews with FBI agents who spearheaded investigations, and with victims of the purge. One agent remarks chillingly about one case, “I don’t give a hoot about him. Get rid of the son-of-a-bitch. Put him on the bread line.” Others call LGBT people “perverts” and “undesirables.” Fortunately some of the survivors went on to lead full lives despite these traumatic events. The final frame announces that in 2017, Sec. of State John Kerry officially apologized for the government’s actions. Yet two days after he became President, Trump ordered any mention of the apology removed from the State Dept. website. Without vigilance, hard-fought rights can easily be rescinded. ▼

« Tom of Finland

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After the war Touko signed his drawings of humpy men with enlarged body parts, especially pecs and genitalia, “Tom of Finland.” He would forever remember the sight of the dead Russian soldier. The memory was not tinged with grief or trauma. Instead it produced a terrifying but also terribly exciting erotic charge. It inspired fantasies that would launch the quite incredible story of this visual artist who emerged from a small, climatically challenged country during a time in its history when it was being

squeezed to death by totalitarian war machines, Nazi Germany and Stalin’s Soviet Union.

Finnish filmmaker Dome Karukoski presents the story of a legend. Touko Laaksonen (1920-91) was a one-time obscure artist whose work ultimately became not only well-known but iconic among gay men into leather. This narrative biopic, a hit at the Frameline 41 film festival, concentrates on a handful of pivotal moments and relationships that inspired Tom’s patented hypermasculine drawings. His art would excite gay men worldwide, especially in pre-Stonewall America, where gay freedom would march

hand-in-hand with a dissolution of our society’s anti-sexual Puritan codes.

There’s a terrific sequence halfway through the film that demonstrates what Tom faced trying to get his artwork into the hands of queer men. Arrested on a train by East German authorities, Tom is faced both with defending his unique artistic vision and maintaining his freedom at the hands of vicious homophobes like the German officer who exclaims, “We used to put scum like you in concentration camps and gas them to death!”

Tom’s arrest is complicated by his relationship with a closeted Finnish official who’s at first reluctant to bail him out of trouble.

“I know him. May I speak with him?”

“What about?”

“Pheasant-hunting.”

“Do you know this man?”

“No.”

“I’m Lieutenant Laaksonen. We fought together. We had a number of close calls.”

“There were no battles in Tahilolominmaki Hill Park.”

“I meant the air battles over Helsinki. We served together. I served under you.”

“Is this some trap? Are you trying to trap me?”

“It is I who’s trapped.”

“You’re asking for trouble with pictures like these.”

“It’s just a piece of paper. A



Josef Persson, courtesy Kino Lorber

Pekka Strang as Touko Laaksonen, a.k.a. Tom of Finland.

naughty picture someone drew for fun.”

“It’s not just a piece of paper. It’s an atomic bomb. You could go to prison for that. The police will search your house and interrogate family and colleagues.”

There’s a subplot that fuels the film’s rush to capture your heart: Tom’s relationship with a beautiful young man at the onset of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s. In an especially poignant moment, Tom confesses to the fear that his erotic drawings may have fueled reckless behavior on the part of some men.

Finnish actor Pekka Strang, as Tom, gives a quietly moving per-

formance, somewhat reminiscent of Liam Neeson as the concentration camp-rescuing Oskar Schindler in “Schindler’s List.” Like Schindler, Tom was an unlikely peacetime hero, an artist willing to depict illegal gay sex acts that were severely frowned upon in 1950s Finland, where queer men were pressured to pass for straight, to marry women and have kids.

“Tom of Finland” is rated R for shots of both male rear and frontal nudity, has a beautifully muted color scheme, is in English, Finnish and German with English subtitles, and is Finland’s entry for the 2018 Foreign Language Oscar. ▼

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« Kathleen Turner

From page 21

Turner’s most notable small-screen role is that of Chandler’s transgender father on the classic sitcom “Friends.” She also became somewhat of a cult figure when she starred in John Waters’ “Serial Mom” (1994).

Cabaret theatre is a new addition to Turner’s impressive resume. She spoke to the B.A.R. about why she’s calling her show “Finding My Voice.”

“It’s a new way of expressing myself,” she said. “I’m not just a baritone! I love it, it’s a chance to learn something and to test myself. There’s very little work I’ve done that is repeated.”

Turner recalls the unexpected origins of her singing career. “I was in Washington, DC, driving around in a VW with Molly Smith of Arena Exchange Theater,” she said. “Molly asked if I could sing, and I did ‘Since I Fell for You.’”

Work by the great composer Michel Legrand will be part of her show at Feinstein’s. “I fell in love with his music,” she said. “‘You Must Believe in Spring’ is a most beautiful song.”

The star doesn’t think that people are going to be surprised by this latest venture. “People don’t comment on the body of my work because my roles aren’t the same,” she said, noting the sharp contrasts between her various film roles. She expressed a great deal of fondness for John Waters. In Waters’ “Serial Mom,” Turner plays a gleefully psychotic serial killer who becomes a cult celebrity.

“Sam Waterston, who played my husband, was afraid we were glorifying serial killers,” she said with a laugh. “But John Waters and I are great friends – we had fun! I had a great time on the film. It was a delight to play a character who, when you see her eyes change, you say, ‘Oh, shit!’”

She accepted her three-episode

guest stint on “Friends” because it was in keeping with her history of not repeating herself onscreen. “A woman playing a man playing a woman!” she said. “I couldn’t stand the hairspray!”

Turner recalled that her dresser on “Friends” was a gay man who took her to drag clubs. “It just seemed to me that the humor was hard-edged,” she recalls. “The first time we rehearsed I was biting off those lines!”

And now, as Turner prepares for her new role as a cabaret singer, she’s faced with the dilemma of what to wear onstage. “I’m not a diva,” she said. “I don’t like sparkly things. It’s got to be comfortable. I’m not out there to advertise a designer. I told my designers that I want designer PJs!” ▼

Kathleen Turner plays Feinstein’s on Fri. & Sat., Oct. 20 & 21, at 8 p.m. The Friday show is sold out, but tickets remain available for Saturday (\$42-\$80). Info: feinsteinsatthenikko.ticketfly.com