

“Stonewall”

the Movie

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There were fewer than a dozen people at the movie “Stonewall” (2015) when two friends and I saw it on an October Sunday. This implied judgment by potential audiences seems general. The movie earned a modest \$113,000 in the week of its release, \$61,000 the second week, \$12,000 the third, and then fell off the online charts. So what’s the reason for commenting on a movie that is already dead in the water? I think “Stonewall” has important lessons to teach us. Unfortunately, despite some good acting and stirring scenes of the June 1969 Stonewall rebellion and the first Gay Liberation march a year later, most of the lessons point to the wretched choices good people make because of lack of artistic vision and their own inferable ideologies.

“Stonewall” is a pro-gay movie. (There’s a reason I don’t use the more current term LGBTQ, and not only because it is anachronistic.) The producer-director, Roland Emmerich, and screenwriter, Jon Robin Baitz, are open about being gay and are among the top talent in their fields (though Emmerich is mainly known for invasion/disaster films like “Independence Day” and “The Day After Tomorrow,” as well as for an unintended disaster, “Anonymous,” about who really wrote Shakespeare). The movie is structured so that it climaxes with the first night of the four-day Stonewall rebellion and, after more plot business, the first Gay Liberation march up New York’s Fifth Avenue on the rebellion’s first anniversary in 1970. The message of gay pride is loud and clear, and it’s good to be reminded that protest violence is justifiable, can get results, and can lead to, rather than interfere with, organized protest. All this is positive. The movie was criticized before release for centering on a white character when the rebellion was multiracial, and for not using any trans actors, but while both points have some merit, the first is too narrow and the second doesn’t relate to “Stonewall’s” artistic vision.

The movie’s real problems begin with point of view, and do involve the central character, who is not only white but conventionally masculine and middle class. He is Danny Winter (Jeremy Irvine), a well-built, handsome boy from Indiana, who arrives in Greenwich Village a couple of months before the rebellion and falls in with a group of street queens and hustlers, several Black or Puerto Rican. The largest support role is for Ray/Ramona, a Puerto Rican queen expertly acted by Jonny Beauchamp. Flashbacks show Danny, in Indiana, being discovered sucking off his high school love and being ordered by his father to get “help” or move out; in New York, he discovers that his dad has refused to put through the papers for his Columbia scholarship, prolonging his time on the street. While there, he turns tricks for money and is also strongarmed into performing as a highly paid rent boy (that is, his Mafioso boss is highly paid) for a grotesque aging transvestite. Rage at successive police raids on the Stonewall Inn and at its owner, the Mafioso just mentioned, build up to the rebellion, a roughly twenty-minute sequence. In these scenes, while all the members of Danny’s crew mix it up with the cops, it is Danny who first yells out “Gay Power” and who throws the first brick through the Stonewall’s window, making the rebellion’s course seem to turn on his acts. In the aftermath, Danny revisits Indiana, where we learn that his mother, having broken up with his homophobic dad, has belatedly sent in the scholarship papers, so it’s as a Columbia student living uptown that Danny visits his old street acquaintances and joins the march a year later.

Happy ending, nice and tidy,
It’s a rule I learned in school
Get your money every Friday,
Happy endings are the rule.

—“Mack the Knife,” from *The Threepenny Opera*, English version by Marc Blitzstein,
1954

“Stonewall” and the Middle Class

As I hope this summary makes clear, the film is told from the viewpoint of a middle class gay youth on a temporarily-interrupted upward academic trajectory, who has inadvertently put in some time with working class and street youth before returning to his studies and, we guess, future academic or professional success as a more open and proud homosexual. The movie’s positive vision appears to be one of middle class existence expanded through the gay empowerment that Danny’s working class comrades fought for along with him. This is a thoroughly corrupt viewpoint: the audience is confronted with an act of violent street protest, but led to view it not from the standpoint of those who were most prominent in it, but that of a youth assumedly more like their own demographic. These emphases are the artistic team’s choices. Of course, middle class gay youths—and many more working class gay youths—did come to the Village in the Sixties. Many stayed there, lives transformed. (More on the working class youths below.) But it’s Emmerich and Baitz’s choice to sanitize this life for a presumed middle class audience by focusing on a protagonist this audience can easily identify with—so handsome! so masculine! and...a Columbia boy.

This choice, I’m guessing, is partly one of artistic corruptness, that is, a conscious adjustment of the realities of a situation to fit the preconceptions of one’s audience on the assumption that the direct viewpoint of working class and street youth would be of little interest or appeal to that audience. Further, though this is only speculation, I am also guessing that the choice also represents the limitations of the creators’ artistic vision, that is, their own ability to identify most closely with someone most like themselves. After all, if we project Danny at Columbia some decades into the future, we can imagine him as a successful, gayidentified film producer or writer like his creators. The result is a flattening of the richness of the homosexual cultures of the 1960s—that mix of middle class and professional males, street youth, Black and Latino youth, lesbians, working class patrons of neighborhood gay bars in Queens and the Bronx—and an impoverished view of why Stonewall was important.

“Stonewall” flattens that time’s culture in another way as well, by leaving out the boiling radical political scene of 1969 New York that helped fuel the rebellion. Danny’s abrupt “Gay Power” shout sounds incongruous if one doesn’t bear in mind the popularization of “Black Power” from 1966 on; the rebellion itself is harder to understand without the heroization of Black urban rebellions and the Black Panther Party so characteristic of radical youth then; the words “Gay Liberation Front” on a banner in the 1970 march seem just words without including the popularization of “Women’s Liberation” from 1968 on and that generation’s identification with the National Liberation Front in Vietnam. A movie that showed the Village cross-cut by winds from all these events, as it was, would be a very different film.

The irony is that these choices are not only corrupt but also unnecessary—the movie failed totally to reach the mainstream demographic it so clearly aimed at—and that it could have been made better and more honestly. To take just one example, but a central one: nobody really knows who did what at Stonewall. (I wasn’t there; I was living in Chicago at the time.) Various memoirs and historians have credited drag queens with the initiating role (an earlier “Stonewall” with this

premise was made in 1995), have stressed the roles of women, have focused on people of color and on male identified hustlers as central to the fightback against the police. Since no one knows for sure, why not focus on different individuals from varied groups and leave it unclear—as in reality—who threw that brick? Such an approach, truer, more experimental, more “indy,” might have made a more interesting film.

Homophobia

Though pro-gay, “Stonewall” is also significantly homophobic. Not as paradoxical as it may sound—some homosexuals have always looked down on others—this homophobia shows in two ways. First, Danny is masculine in affect, a high school athlete with no effeminate mannerisms (though he has a little trouble with pushups). His cohort of street friends does include flamboyant queens, and the film values them, but doesn’t see the world from their side. The most significant of them, Ray/Ramona, is played as a somewhat pathetic fantasist, imagining a middle class life that is beyond his/her competence as a disadvantaged youth and a love with Danny that will never materialize. In real life, most queens would make a play for Danny—who just might say yes—and, if he didn’t, would say, “Tough shit, girl doesn’t know what she’s missing.” In the film, in their most significant moment together, Danny answers Ray’s overtures, in a heartfelt tone, “I can’t love you, Ray.” The most telling point is that in the film’s context the reply needs no explanation—someone like Danny can never love someone like Ray/Ramona. Of course some gay men did have such limited self-conceptions. But the film nowhere suggests that it’s the narrowness of Danny’s sense of himself that keeps him from opening out to a possible love.

The second type of homophobia involves Danny as hustler and rent boy. He is shown with two customers, one on the street and the other in a garishly luxurious apartment. Both are shown negatively—one is a conventionally unattractive, uptight businessman who goes down on Danny in a vacant lot, the other is conventionally ugly as well as massively fat and middle aged (stereotypical negatives), and during both sex acts we focus on Danny’s face, looking soulfully upward, appearing tormented and close to tears. (We never get a crotch shot—too bad.) Sex for money, in other words, is degrading and sad for decent people like Danny. That this presentation is homophobic is less obvious than with Danny’s rejection of Ray/Ramona, but it is. In reality, many gay men have had sex with hustlers and many have been hustlers. I myself have had friends who were or had been hustlers and have paid hustlers for sex. Most customers are pretty ordinary people who for one reason or another don’t find it easy to form relationships, or who do but also like working “the trade” at times. Most hustlers are working class youths, white, Latino, or Black, streetwise and pretty toughminded. In the film’s period, they often lived not in the Village but at the Sloane Y (34th Street, close to Times Square, where much hustling took place). Though the sex could take place anywhere, most often the hustler would go to the customer’s place or bring him to the hustler’s own, and in either place would have sex in a bed, just like he knew what a bed was. The idea of a hustler being brought to the verge of tears by the degradation of his act is pretty laughable and only plausible at all because Danny is so new to “the trade.” In other words, this response in the film is connected to Danny’s status as a middle class newcomer to the street, who will not be there for any length of time. How can this be happening, the film seems to ask, to someone as nice as Danny? And so “Stonewall” substitutes an outside view of hustlers and their customers, which ultimately devalues both, for an honest look at either.

There are some who are in darkness
And the others are in light
And you see the ones in brightness
Those in darkness drop from sight.

—“Mack the Knife,” *The Threepenny Opera*, English version by Blitzstein, 1954

I wish I could write a “happy ending” for this review, find a way in which “Stonewall” fulfills an important social or artistic purpose. But beyond the obvious—it’s socially important that these events can be treated as a celebration of praiseworthy heroism—there are no real virtues to reveal. The film’s viewpoint is one in which, as in *The Threepenny Opera*, “Victoria’s messenger riding comes” for the protagonist but not for the ones in “darkness” who made Stonewall happen. And the film can’t be called pro-LGBTQ—Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transvestite-Transsexual, Queer—because it celebrates a much narrower conception of gayness, one that values other groups than Danny’s but keeps them at a distance. “Stonewall” remains a basically flawed representation of major events, mainly as a result of weak artistry and a narrow world view.

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