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ARTS FEATURE

Finding strength in pain

Gay filmmaker Arthur Dong releases documentary trilogy, 'Stories from the War on Homosexuality,' on DVD

By [MATTHEW FORKE](#)
Friday, December 26, 2003

LISTENING TO THE heartbreaking struggles of gay generations past and present has a funny way of putting our daily inconveniences into proper perspective, which is one of the many meaningful "take-aways" viewers should appreciate in prolific documentary filmmaker Arthur Dong's new DVD box set, "Stories from the War on Homosexuality."

An Oscar nominee for his 1983 documentary short-subject film "Sewing Women," Dong's substantive three-part trilogy explores the unyielding culture of discrimination against gay men and lesbians by conservative religious groups, hate-crime perpetrators and the U.S. military.

The first film in the trilogy, "Coming Out Under Fire," (based on Allen Berube's book) was filmed in 1994, not long after the infamous "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" debate of the early '90s. Through a montage of rare photographs and documents, government newsreel footage and contemporary interviews with gay veterans, the film traces the history of homosexuals in the military as far back as World War II, complete with government screens for "sex perverts," gay newsletters written in "code" and homosexual "witch hunts" conducted by superiors.

Far more harrowing, though, is Dong's second entry, 1997's "Licensed to Kill," which comprises a series of interviews with incarcerated killers, many of whom are on death row or serving life sentences.

Dong, himself a victim of a gay bashing in the late '70s, turns his lens and microphone to some seriously sick (and vastly uneducated) individuals and asks the question, "Why?" In return, everything from religious upbringing to AIDS to self-hatred — one convict, Jay Johnson, is gay himself — is used to justify their horrific crimes.

Riveting stuff, though the postmortem photographs of the victims are not for the faint-of-heart.

Dong completes the trilogy with 2002's "Family Fundamentals," a remarkably balanced and sensitive look at three conservative Christian families who happen to have gay children.

Brett Mathews is the son of a Mormon bishop. Brian Bennett is the former campaign manager and chief of staff for U.S. Rep. Robert Dornan, a conservative Republican from California who lost his seat to a Democrat several years ago. And finally, Susan and David Jester are the estranged gay daughter and grandson of Kathleen Bremner, a Pentecostal church and community leader in San Diego. (Bremner's idea of good "family communication" involves passing along grave and God-fearing letters to family members at Easter



Documentary filmmaker **Arthur Dong** is unafraid to speak in glowing and critical terms about the gay civil rights movement. In a recent interview, he says: "We have been under a spell of homophobia for so many decades that we accept second-class citizenship. I'm not just happy with 'Will & Grace' and 'Queer Eye for the Straight Guy.' That's fine, but it's not good enough." (Photo courtesy of XXX)

MORE INFO

To order 'Stories from the War on Homosexuality,' visit www.deepfocusproductions.com



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dinner).

The DVD box set comes with some well-selected bonus features, including introductory interviews by Dong himself; featurettes; deleted and extended scenes; unreleased interviews (brace yourself for those in "Licensed to Kill"); liner notes, essays and illustrated booklets; music selections and trailers, among others.

Arthur Dong recently discussed the DVD release of the trilogy with the Blade.

Washington Blade: What other filmmakers inspire you and your work?

Arthur Dong: You would think someone had asked me that. Hmm. I've been asked what filmmakers I admire. Stanley Kubrick is one of my all-time favorites.

Blade: Thinking long-term, what are some of the goals you've set for yourself as a filmmaker?

Dong: At this point, I'd say it's not to be making the kinds of films I've been making. I'd rather be making "Terminator 4." Did I really think 15 years ago that I'd be making this trilogy? No, I'd rather not have to do this. But I have to. Eventually, I'd like to be making more "fun" films.

Blade: Do you feel that your own personal experiences have influenced the kind of films you create?

Dong: Oh definitely. In the early part of my filmmaking career I focused a lot on films that focused on Asians in America.

Blade: In "Family Fundamentals" you said you were interested in documenting conservative Christian families with gay children that fell into three categories: a family headed by a political leader, a family that had dealt with reparative therapy and a family headed by a church leader in a rural community. How did you decide on these three criteria?

Dong: I came up with those criteria after researching about 30 stories where various aspects or structures were apparent. I wanted them to be diverse.

Blade: How did you find the interview subjects who participated?

Dong: I found Brett after a screening of "Coming Out Under Fire." You know, he's a vet. And I knew of Brian's story. Rich Tafel, the former executive director of Log Cabin Republicans, introduced me to him. And Kathleen's story, I was referred to her from another ex-gay ministry up North. I was thinking about doing a different family's story and it didn't quite work, but they said they [knew] of another family [I] might want to think about.

Blade: And you had no problems in coaxing them to be involved?

Dong: It's funny, Kathleen and Susan didn't think that David would participate at all, because he is so quiet and reserved. But after that letter Kathleen showed to him at Easter, we approached him. He was so livid, he said that, "I must speak out." He was outraged.

Blade: You said in "Family Fundamentals" that each of the three families' stories served as "microcosms" of the larger social and political struggles being fought in the public sphere. What direction do you feel the country is currently headed, both politically and socially?

Dong: I think it's all up in the air right now. I do know that as our community progresses, it motivates the opposition to become even stronger. That's what I've seen in the past few decades. It's going to be very interesting what will happen next [election] year because of the two great leaps we recently made in Massachusetts and the U.S. Supreme Court ruling [involving] Texas.

_____ I do think that the right community is much more passionate

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Gay filmmaker Arthur Dong completes his trilogy, 'Stories from the War on Homosexuality,' with 2002's 'Family Fundamentals,' a sensitive look at three conservative Christian families who have gay children. (Photo courtesy of Deep Focus Productions)

about their principles than we are. We have been under a spell of homophobia for so many decades that we accept second-class citizenship. I'm not just happy with "Will & Grace" and "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy." That's fine, but it's not good enough. We don't have that level of fanaticism. We become complacent and we fight where we think we can win.

That marriage question is such a good litmus test of who our best friends really are. I hear so many of our straight allies come back and say, "Of course you can get your legal rights, we're all for that, under the Constitution, but when it comes to marriage, I don't know."

I think Rev. Sharpton said it best. He said it's like saying to a white couple, "Oh, marriage is just for white folks. You can't get married." It's the same thing. If a minority, non-white community was ever faced this kind of oppression, I think the whole world would be up in arms.

Blade: In "Family Fundamentals" you worked without a crew and used hand-held cameras and audio equipment. How was this experience different from your other films, both on subjects and as an interview?

Dong: I think it totally liberated both the subject and myself as well. I wanted to go for a certain kind of spontaneity in meeting these folks.

Blade: In "Licensed to Kill" you mentioned that you experienced a traumatic gay bashing incident as a youth. How did that experience affect your perspective as a gay man and as a filmmaker? You said that you wouldn't have been able to make the film 20 years ago when it happened.

Dong: I have to think back at that time in 1977, when anti-gay violence was not on the front burner of the issues we were all working on, like it is today. I just started collecting data and research out of my own self-interest, and first the question was, "Why did this happen to me?" which eventually evolved into the question of, "Why did this happen at all?"

And I started to realize that what happened to me was not isolated — it happened a lot more than what was reported at that time. I didn't want to approach the film from an emotional point of view, so I put on my journalist's hat so that I wouldn't be wrapped up in feelings about being a victim. I also wanted to make films that were accessible to a non-gay audience. I think I would have approached things differently if I thought my only audience was gay people.

Blade: Your documentary "Licensed to Kill" contains some of the most disturbing and graphic footage of hate crimes I've ever seen, especially the 47 minutes of unreleased materials included on the disk. What influenced your decisions of what materials to include?

Dong: That was very difficult. I did test screening [without the photos] and I found that it created a distance to what their crimes were. There was too much compassion and sympathy for the men because the audience didn't see the horror of what they did. So I started slowly putting those graphic images back into the film. I struggled the first time I inserted one of the pictures. It took me a long time. But it was important to underscore their crimes they committed and to show people, "this is what you get."

Blade: I found it strange how many of the convicts tended to distance themselves from their crimes, almost as if someone else had committed them.

Dong: I learned that they had to, especially in the subsequent interview with Jay Johnson, he said that after watching his own interview that he had to be distant in order to survive. That's a typical defense mechanism of people incarcerated. Of course they have to distance themselves or they'd go crazy too.

Blade: What current news events interest you most today and what new projects can we look forward to from you?

Dong: I'm working on a new project about Asians and their portrayal in Hollywood, from the silent era up through today.

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