



Dong on DVD

Filmmaker releases trilogy

By Lawrence Ferber
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Out filmmaker Arthur Dong has personally assembled three of his award-winning, gay-focused documentaries into an essential boxed set - "Arthur Dong: Stories From The War on Homosexuality Vol. 1" (Deep Focus Productions).

"Coming Out Under Fire" (1994) examines the World War II-era's origin of the military's policy against gays. "Licensed to Kill" (1997) investigates convicts jailed for murdering gays. And "Family Fundamentals" (2002) profiles gay children of religious fundamentalist parents.

Engrossing, socially important works, Dong has heaped on the extras, too: deleted and additional scenes/interviews, new follow-up interviews (one with "Licensed to Kill" serial killer Jay Johnson, who sports a John Waters 'stache, and informs us that in prison murdering a homosexual is considered a "cool" crime), musical selections, and listings of resources and liner note booklets worthy of classroom discussion.

A filmmaker of undeniable integrity, Dong's magic act is blending highly personal issues - being bashed motivated the disturbing "Licensed to Kill" - with an open perspective toward his compelling on-screen subjects. Dong recently discussed his trilogy.

PGN: What made you decide to put together this trilogy now, Arthur?

Dong: I think timing has a lot to do with the project. The right-wing power structure in America is solidly in place. Indeed, post-Sept. 11, a large portion of our country's psyche seems to take comfort in fundamentalist doctrine fed from a conservative base.

I'm not a politician in the traditional sense - I don't typically attend rallies or gay pride parades - but I do consider myself an activist, and my films have always been my way of speaking out. I would've never imagined back in 1990, when I first started work on "Coming Out Under Fire," that I'd end up with three films that examine the entrenched second-class citizenship our community still lives under.

Taken individually, none of my films blatantly points a direct finger at those forces that suppress us. Together, they do, but, hopefully, in a way that encourages dialogue and a common quest for justice for all concerned, not rhetorical and

heated ugly debates.”

PGN: There's a ton of extras on the DVDs. How much work was involved in compiling them?

Dong: A lot. And I have to really give credit to my producer, Joe Hoffman, and designer, Jump House Design, for pulling it all together. My first step was to dig through more than 100 boxes in storage. Going through old interview tapes was like revisiting old friends. While watching those I had totally omitted from final cuts, there was sometimes a feeling of regret: Why did I leave that great story out? An interview of Pat Bond [a World War II vet who also appeared in the gay classic doc, "Word is Out"] was shot on video in 1990, and the tape was flaking. Luckily, I caught it in time, and transferred the interview onto a digital format and it'll keep for at least another decade.

PGN: What surprised you about the films while going back over them?

Dong: I remember thinking: How did I muster the energy to do this in the first place? But, you know, once I find myself entrenched in a subject all sense of real time is gone - I'm on a mission.

When I watched "Licensed to Kill" again, I shuddered. For a moment I couldn't fathom the nerve that the filmmaker had to approach this topic in this way. Of course, that filmmaker is me, and I think for the first time since I finished the film I was able to see it objectively. During its making I had to distance myself from the brutality of the stories in order to work on the film. Now I can eliminate that separation and start to dissect the subconscious creative process I underwent, and to see the finished product for what it is. That was a striking experience.

PGN: Could you talk about the follow-up interview with Jay Johnson? And did you consider any other follow-ups with subjects?

Dong: It was 1998, and I was an artist in residence at Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, just a few hours away from where Johnson was incarcerated. We received special clearance from prison officials to show the video to him, and conduct a follow-up interview.

I was, of course, apprehensive about his reactions but he wiped that fear away immediately: He liked it. So the remainder of the interview was quite casual in tone, but disturbing in content.

As for other possible follow-ups, I'd like to revisit some of the families in "Family Fundamentals," and see if their situations changed. I'm not sure if I need to record their changes, although -have camera, will travel!

PGN: I got a note from you some months ago, as did many people you know, asking for suggestions for titles for the DVD box set. What were some of them? The most ridiculous?

Dong: Originally, I thought of using "America's War on Homosexuality." A majority of folks liked it, but others found it confrontational and possibly offensive to our straight allies - not all Americans are against homosexuality; the word homosexuality is so clinical; the films aren't about America, but about extreme subcultures, and so forth. Other suggestions that helped me included "Setting Things Straight: Gay Rights Films by Arthur Dong," "Soldiers, Killers and True Believers," "Do Ask, Do Tell" and "Intolerance: An Arthur Dong Trilogy."

Fun, intentional, I think ... suggestions included: "Three Dong Nights," "Three Dongs In A Box" and "The Dong Probe Set." I have some goofy friends, no?

PGN: Did you have schools and classroom and community center discussions, etc. in mind when putting together the DVD sets, or just home viewers?

Dong: Both. And in some ways I saw little difference between the two audiences. My goal was to come up with a product that was both engaging and socially relevant, not to mention politically meaningful. I don't see why media consumers need to be constantly fed mindless candy, empty of protein.

Conversely, why must educational tools be didactic and ponderous? I've always striven to combine a yearning for entertainment with a passion for learning - that was my approach with past films and definitely with this collection. In the "Coming Out Under Fire" DVD, I have a section of historical documents. That could be pretty dry, and a lot of the research we dug up was tedious. What I chose, though, were fun items like the "Drawing A Man" test and the "Gay Reflex and Fellatio" test. I found these to be perfect examples of how learning about history can be entertaining.

Institutional editions of the collection come with comprehensive study-discussion guides, 25 to 30 pages each, for both "Family Fundamentals" and "Licensed to Kill." That's where we really get into some heavy-duty discussions!

PGN: You released this whole shebang by yourself?

Dong: Crazy, huh? But for me having control over distribution is an extension of the creative process. I've been distributing my own work for over 20 years, and I'm still learning. This is my first real venture into home video - almost all of my distribution has been to the educational market - and I wouldn't have jumped into it without the Internet. But in the end, there's a certain kind of satisfaction when I hear directly from people who use my films.

Last week, I received a letter from the Deer Park Police Department in Texas who'll be using the new "Licensed to Kill" DVD in their police training courses, and they specifically requested our study guide. I mean, how cool is that?! It's a study guide that discusses about police ignorance of l/g/b/t life, heterosexism, religious bigotry against gay people, and other topics that may not be on the radar of the Deer Park police force. And now it will be.

PGN: Will there be another trilogy in the future?

Dong: Not a trilogy, but a quintet [tentatively titled] "The Arthur Dong Collection, Vol. 2: Stories from Asia America." This DVD set will include "Dance of the Lion" [1970], my very, very first film, about a lion dance celebration during Chinese New Year's; "Living Music for Golden Mountains" [1980], student Oscar-nominated documentary about my Chinese music teacher; "Sewing Woman" [1982], Oscar-nominated documentary about my mother's immigration from China to America; "Lotus" [1987], a short feature about one woman's fight against footbinding in 1914 China; and "Forbidden City, U.S.A." [1989], documentary on the legendary 1940s all-Chinese nightclub Forbidden City in San Francisco, which was the original inspiration for "Flower Drum Song."

For more information about
or to order Arthur Dong's films and DVDs, call (800) 343-5540;
Web site: www.deepfocusproductions.com

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