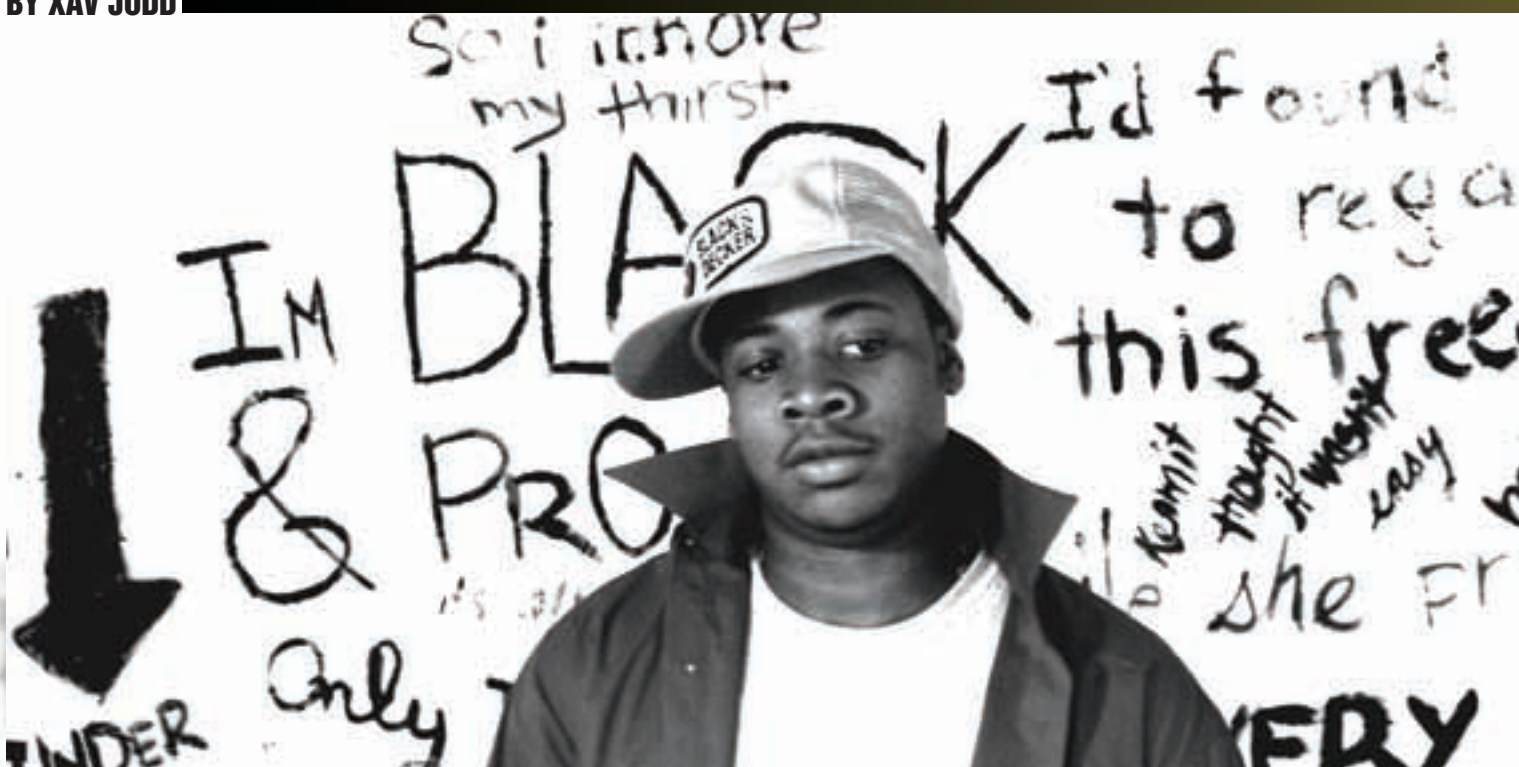


Shooting from a

BY XAV JUDD



This year's London Lesbian & Gay Film Festival once again threw up an innovative and exciting concoction of features, which illustrated some of the problems encountered in our often marginalised community. However, as a black gay man, I was particularly interested in movies that highlighted and tackled issues within the twofold minority that is the black and gay/lesbian/trans group. The three documentaries I was fortunate enough to see all covered various and occasionally overlapping aspects of what it's like to be both gay and black. Although two of the productions were shot in the United States, the concerns they identified were just as relevant to an audience in this country.

IN THIS OUR LIVES: THE REUNION (2008) + PANEL DISCUSSION

IN 1987, the only ever National Black Gay Men's conference was held in the UK. Topher Campbell's insightful film tells the story of what happened when a diverse group of Afro-Caribbeans who took part in that forum are reunited, and issues concerning their community and history are discussed. What's more, many of their views were once again aired when some participants reconvened in a special panel, straight after the documentary.

An important subject that seemed to cut through the whole debate in the movie about black activism was whether it was to a degree slightly redundant now, since the political landscape with regards to homosexuality has changed dramatically since the original meeting. Indeed, the age of consent has gradually been reduced from 21 to 16 (2000) and, of course, the odious bit of Conservative leg-

islation, Clause 28, was repealed by Labour (2003). Added to which, since Labour has been in government there has, for the first time, been a significant gay presence on the front bench, with cabinet ministers of said persuasion. Despite this recent progress, black activist and film participant Alex Owolade, who has formerly been elected to the national committees of the union's Black Members and LGBT self-organised groups, still believes there's a need for radical associations to push for the rights of non-straight Afro-Caribbeans.

One of the most examined topics amongst them was who would carry the torch for the next generation and in what form this would take. Step forward the Oh WoWoBoyz (Christian Neckles and Derek Jellow). Unlike Gordon Brown, whose recent foray on YouTube went down about as well as a nun in a brothel, their self-presented, written and directed show is a revelation. Indeed, every week, there's hardly a dry pair of eyes or even briefs of the observers who look-in for a mixture of humour and an exploration of issues affecting young black guys. From this point of view, the Internet with sites such as YouTube as well as blog spaces is a good thing as it's allowed people who would not have been able to afford traditional media sources – television, radio, etc – to get their

message out there.

Another paramount talking point was how much bigotry and prejudice there is within the black community towards gay people. Indeed, when I grew up, amongst my bunch of non-Caucasian friends, homosexuality was a white man's disease. Perhaps one possible reason for this is the fact that we've been oppressed so much due to our pigmentation over the centuries, that it's impossible to think of ourselves as being part of another minority, because we just couldn't handle any more victimisation. Possibly also, it's about the fact that men with dark skin in particular have traditionally been celebrated – even during times of persecution – for our physical prowess. Think athletes, boxers, Maasai warriors and chiselled, tattooed rap stars, etc. Arguably, then, it's harder for this group to even countenance what they mistakenly would view as an emasculation of their masculinity (not being straight) as it's been one of the only positive stereotypes of their race over the years. Thus, gay Afro-Caribbeans are often invisible in their communities because they are either scared to come out, or are blatantly discriminated against if they do. It's no surprise, then, that a need for all of the individuals in the black population to be accepted and embraced whatever their persuasion was discussed in *In This Our Lives* and later by the panel.

STILL BLACK: A PORTRAIT OF BLACK TRANSMEN (2008)

THIS UNIQUE FILM offered an interesting and multi-faceted insight into the general life and



Black perspective



inherent problems of being a black 'transman'. If you're not entirely sure of the meaning of this term, it's effectively short for a transsexual or transgender man (often referred to as FTM) i.e. somebody who was naturally born or physically assigned as female at birth, but who considers that this is not a totally correct or thorough enough description of themselves and thus identifies as a male. However, no such definition can really come close to giving a full understanding of those in this circumstance; especially when compared to a moving documentary that puts the intimate lives of six such people out there on celluloid.

Shot as a series of talking heads, each participant waxes lyrical about various issues from their eventful lives such as coming to terms with who they are, to the particular problems they have encountered as FTMs, etc. One obvious injustice detailed is the inevitable prejudice in the workplace. But who would consider how awkward it might be just to choose a toilet? For a transsexual, whether to go to the Ladies or Gents can be a seismic dilemma.

What gives Ziegler's flick an extra dimension is that although all of the individuals involved are from the same race, they have diverse backgrounds and careers. With this in mind, due to the often-complicated relationship between religion, the Church and homosexuality, Carl Madgett's segment was the one I personally found to be most absorbing. He is a preacher with an almost totally Afro-Caribbean congregation, yet is out as a FTM to his parishioners: "Whatever you identify as, whatever your religion is or your spirituality, we welcome all... you can be gay,

bisexual, transgender and still have a relationship with God." If only such an attitude prevailed throughout all of the faiths and their institutions.

What becomes inescapable whilst watching this movie is just how marginalised in society transsexuals can be. In former times, being black or gay – incidentally FTMs exhibit a range of sexual orientations just as non-transsexual people do – meant we were ostracised or branded as 'the other'. However, in Western culture, mostly we're now accepted as being part of the natural way of things. Transmen, on the other hand, are still trapped in the abyss of the demimonde, and therefore branded by some as peculiar or obscene. Being in one minority is hard enough, but any more and it becomes difficult to surmount the odds of intolerance and bigotry, and to have a decent, happy life.

Thankfully, all of those featured in *Still Black* have overcome any obstacles they may have faced due to their colour or gender status, because they epitomise the attitude of one of their number, Kylar Broadus: "I am very proud of being a Black American. I am very proud of being who I am and I think if you are not proud of being who you are, people can use that as power against you."

DREAMS DEFERRED: THE SAKIA GUNN FILM PROJECT (2008)

JUST OVER TEN YEARS ago, Wyoming teenager Matthew Shepard was killed in a brutal hate crime because he was gay. As I'd followed the harrowing story of what happened to him quite closely, I was especially interested in the last feature I witnessed at the festival, *Dreams Deferred: The Sakia Gunn Film Project*.

Like the aforementioned white adolescent, 15-year-old black high school student Sakia Gunn was also murdered (in Newark, New Jersey) just because of her sexuality. However, any parallels between the two individuals seem to end there. While the grim circumstances concerning Shepard's death subsequently flashed around the world's TV screens and were reported by a variety of other press outlets, Gunn's unfortunate demise in 2003 caused about as much of a ripple in the media as a tadpole in the North Sea. At first, this dichotomy might seem strange, as the only essential difference (except their sex) between the pair of innocent victims was that one of them was black!

According to Charles B. Brack's ground-breaking documentary, my lack of knowledge of the violent, unnecessary curtailment of Gunn's existence is of little surprise. Indeed, in what becomes a touching eulogy of the promising youngster's life, the movie actually begins with a series of short interviews of people within the American LGBT community, who are just as unaware of what happened to her on that fateful evening.

Mine and other's ignorance of such a traumatic event would practically be unforgiveable, if it were

not for the way it was grossly underreported. That is to say, that in the following seven months after Shepard's homicide there were over 650 articles in major newspapers about it, compared to less than 25 stories about Gunn's fatal stabbing, in the equivalent time span.

It's this devastating statistic that seems to suggest that black people in the USA appear to be forgotten or invisible when they are the victims of crime, rather than its perpetrators. Perhaps even more so, this could apply if they happen to be gay too, and the general attitude of the authorities Stateside when there's black-on-black crime – Gunn's assailant, Richard McCullough, is in this ethnicity – could be perceived as 'it's just another dead one of them'. Maybe such a lack of concern about Afro-American fatalities is made apparent by the fact that it took over twenty-eight weeks for Gunn's transgressor to be indicted; while Sheppard's two antagonists had been tried and convicted during the same corresponding period.

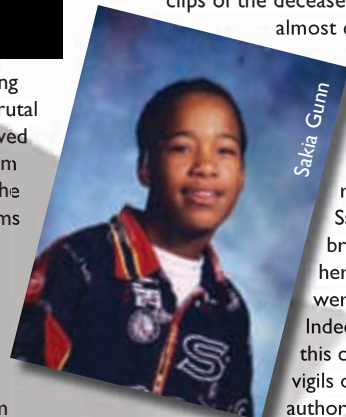
Without doubt, the most gripping parts of this exposé are the courtroom scenes. McCullough and the lawyer representing him try to make excuses, for example that he has never committed a felony before, or that Gunn ran into the knife. These claims are interspersed with the clips of the deceased's family and friends

almost choking on their tears as they repeatedly break down during testimony.

In many respects, the LGBTs of all races and creeds in Sakia's hometown were brought together by her catastrophe, as they were rightly outraged.

Indeed, different sectors of this community held mass vigils or lobbied the city's authorities; one request was for police officers to

patrol the Newark Penn Station/Broad Street corridor where Gunn was murdered, for 24 hours a day, as they wanted to make sure that such a tragic occurrence never happened again. Maybe that's the vital point here, that LGBT people are stronger when we stick together, especially if we are confronted with intolerance or prejudice.



UK BLACK PRIDE 2009

UK Black Pride is back for a fourth annual event which will take place on Saturday 15th August 2009 at the fantastically central, but tranquil setting of Regents Park College, Inner Circle, London.
More information at www.ukblackpride.uk