

Stonewall (2015)

Rated R. Running time: 2 hours 9 min.

Our content ratings: Violence 6; Language 7; Sex 8/Nudity 2.

Our star rating (1-5): 4

Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but those who are kind to the needy honor him.

Proverbs 14:31



Midwestern newcomer Danny is taken aback that gays can freely express themselves in Greenwich Village. (c) Roadside Attractions

Director Roland Emmerich's film about the rise of the LGBT Movement has ignited a storm of controversy, but is still worth watching, at least for those who think of Stonewall only as a stalwart Confederate General shot by one of his own men. The criticisms are justified in that any one of the supporting characters would have been a better focus for the film than the fictional white bread youth from a small town in Indiana arriving in Greenwich Village. With his well scrubbed looks actor Jeremy Irvine's Danny Winters would have been an ideal actor for one of those Midwest Boy (or Girl) Makes Good in New York films of the Thirties and Forties, but here his main

function seems to be that of our avatar for entering and understanding the strange world of social rejects that populated Greenwich Village's Christopher Street in the Sixties.

Danny's back-story, shown in various flashbacks, is that of a high school football player in love with the team's quarterback Joe (Karl Glusman). One night classmates spy them making out in a car, and the next morning the whole school knows, Danny finding "Faggot" scrawled on his locker door. His lover gets off by telling the coach it was a one-time incident initiated by Danny. The coach is Danny's strict, moralistic father (David Cubitt) who, when the boy resists demands for counseling, has his sorrowful but compliant wife pack Danny's bags. Only his liberal minded younger sister Phoebe (Joey King) objects to his leaving home.

He had intended to go that fall to NYC where he had been accepted as a scholarship student at Columbia University. However, having no money for lodging, Danny finds himself drawn to Christopher Street where he is taken aback by the motley crew of transgender hustlers and vagabonds. The naïve Hoosier is not used to seeing boys in girls' clothes and men flirting openly with men. Chief among them is a queen dressed in homemade clothes for whom the word "flamboyant" is an understatement, the Puerto Rican Ray/Ramona (Jonny Beauchamp). Hanging out with her are characters with such names as Queen Cong (Vladimir Alexis), Little Orphan Annie (Caleb Landry Jones), Lee (Alex C. Nachi) and Quiet Paul (Ben Sullivan), most of whom are barely surviving by turning tricks for the numerous outsiders who venture into the neighborhood. Later he also encounters Marsha P. Johnson (Otoja Abit), a real-life African-American drag queen who later became an activist leader.

Danny resists Ray's flirtatious welcome, but does accept dog walker Bob Kohler's (Patrick Garrow) offer to store his suitcase in his apartment until the youth can find lodgings of

his own. It is fortunate that it is summer, Danny spending his first few nights sleeping in alleys and doorways. As he becomes more acquainted with Ray/Ramon and "the girls," he accepts her invitation to bed down with them in the dingy rooms of West Village flophouses where ten or more of them sleep scrambled together on the floor. It is Ray/Ramona, harboring romantic feelings for him, who introduces Danny to the Stone Wall Inn, a dive run by the burly Mafia-connected Ed Murphy (Ron Perlman). Here, amidst its tawdry trappings drag queens, transgender men and women, gay prostitutes, and runaways feel somewhat safe, dancing, talking, and connecting with one another. I write "somewhat safe" because ever so often the police, led by vice squad deputy Seymour Pine (Matt Craven), make routine raids so as to appear to the public that they are complying with such anti-gay laws as the one that prohibit gays from gathering together in groups. As long as the patrons can show an ID and do not protest the cops let them go free. Actually the police are paid off to ignore the many illegal activities in which Murphy is involved. (We learn later that one of these activities is pimping handsome youth for a wealthy man, Danny becoming one such victim.)

The historic uprising of the patrons on the night of June 28, 1969 when the club-wielding cops barge into the Inn is well staged, though unfortunately it is the fictional Danny who is shown as casting the first brick into the Stonewall's window, not one of the real life characters. The crowd becomes so vociferous that for a time it appears that Murphy, Det. Seymour Pine, and his fellow cops will either be lynched if they venture outside beyond the barricaded doors or burned to death when the building is set afire. The riot control squads do finally arrive, starting a confrontation between the missile-hurling youth and shield-wielding line of police. Probably every one of the crowd has been beat-up one or more times by the cops (there is a scene in which Danny, trapped in the Meat District, then the site of nightly sex couplings, is ruthlessly bludgeoned by a cop who enjoys his work), so the

rebellious crowd refuses to disperse. (The riots went on for several nights, and not just the film's single one.)



Stonewall patrons finally are pushed by the police too far. (c) Roadside Attractions

Historically, as well as artistically, the film is flawed—the criticisms are right on in decrying the choice of making clean cut Danny the main character. The real life Trevor (Rhys Meyers), with whom Danny enters into a brief romantic relationship, might have been a better choice, he being a member of the Mattachine Society, a male gay rights organization that was pushing for gay rights. In this respect, the film does show well that there were two very different groups of LGBT people back then, Trevor's insightful activists pushing back against their oppressors, and Ray/Ramona's apolitical circle, disdainful of the activists dressed in their socially acceptable suits and ties.

When the theater lights came up I thought of how some of the films of the Sixties strove to support equal rights acceptable to audiences, most notably Stanley Kramer's *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. In this film that dared to center on inter-racial marriage the white Joey Drayton's betrothed John Prentice is played by Sidney Poitier. Her parents, played by Katharine Hepburn and Spencer Tracey, are stand-ins for those whom the filmmakers knew would make up the audience, Northern white liberals. Prentice is not just an average guy, but also a

highly educated doctor who works for or with The World Health Organization. Many liberals back then, both white and black, were all for equal rights but dubious about intermarriage, hence the presentation of a man so well qualified educational, socially, and morally that the only objections could be that of the difficulty the couple would have fitting into society.

In the case of *Stonewall*, Danny's story works as a coming out or transformational story, the boy changing during the course of the film from hapless victim to that of angry activist no longer tolerating society's oppression. There is even a touch of realism when he returns home and achieves but a partial familial reconciliation. However, his story should have been told in a separate film. Nonetheless, I think this one will serve well to provide us in the straight community with helpful insights into the history of a group once despised and rejected. We really have come a long way, though there are still "promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep."

Good scene for peace activists: During the riot the protestors form a chorus line, singing while kicking their heels high as they approach the police line. The police are dumbfounded. Protected by their large windowed shields, they know how to ward off the rocks and bricks hurled at them, but this unexpected reaction is a surprise. The cops look at one another in bewilderment. It is a Gandhian confrontation, but unfortunately gives way when the protestors again resort to their violence. One wonders what might have been the outcome had they stuck with their fleeting nonviolent approach.

This review with a set of discussion questions will be in the October issue of VP.