



PENELOPE SPHEERIS

"I DON'T KNOW" from 1972 is about a lesbian and a transgender man.

Change in the air

'Same Sex/Different Sex' program will feature movies about gay culture shot in the 1960s and 1970s.

BY JAMIE WETHERBE

The love story in Penelope Spheeris' "I Don't Know" is more than boy-meets-girl. The 18-minute black-and-white short shot in 1972 starts in an elevator where a lesbian meets a transgender man and the two become lovers (then exes) while French music plays.

These are the sort of expectation-defying stories that will be told with "Same Sex/Different Sex: Queer Identity and Culture," part of the Filmforum's Alternative Projections exploring experimental film in Los Angeles. Spheeris, whose later directorial credits include the era-defining "Wayne's World" and the 1981 punk documentary "The Decline of Western Civilization," shot "I Don't Know" while in film school at UCLA. She cast her lesbian sister as the female lead and Jimmy (also known as Jennifer) as her unconventional love interest.

"I always dealt with off-the-beaten-path subject matters," Spheeris said of the short, which will be featured in the collection of rarely seen short films presented by the Los Angeles Filmforum and Outfest on Sunday night at the Egyptian's Spielberg Theatre. "And I happened to be friends with a couple of very fun and colorful drag queens — Jennifer was the beautiful one."

The program opens with the premiere of a recently restored Robert Chatterton film, "Passion in a Seaside Slum," which was shot in

Venice Beach in 1961. Taylor Mead, who appeared in several of Andy Warhol's underground films, makes a rare West Coast cameo playing the lead role. The 32-minute film shows Mead using a magic wand to morph into various drag dress to woo a fisherman with amusing results.

"The films are realistic depictions and joyful of depictions of gay characters," said Adam Hyman, executive director of the Los Angeles Filmforum, who curated the show. "You can really see culture changes in freedom and sexuality that was prominent in the '70s in the queer community that we know changed in the '80s."

The most recent short in "Same Sex/Different Sex" is from the late 1970s. None of the films during Sunday's screening address the soon-to-come AIDS epidemic. "It's kind of a natural cutoff," said Kristin Pepe of Outfest, a film festival and nonprofit that works to preserve lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender films. "There was so much fear in the early '80s that [LGBT] films in the mid-'80s were wrestling with emotions and the government. People started banding together in a different way."

Other avant-garde works include Chick Strand's "Fever Dream," a stylized view of a lesbian coupling, and Kenneth Anger's "Kustom Kar Kommandos," a suggestive three-minute short of a young man buffing a hot rod. One of Pat Rocco's little-known shorts will also be on the playlist. The filmmaker started his career shooting men posing nude and moved into documenting the gay civil rights movements in the late '60s and early '70s. "He also made experimental films," said Pepe. "I hope we'll get his name in the canon that he's less known for."

Filmforum's Alternative Projections series will have

screened some 30 shows by the time it wraps its seven-month run in May, with topics that include politics and punk shot by Los Angeles artists from 1945 to 1980 — a time frame that becomes particularly potent when applied to sexual freedom.

Through the '60s these sorts of film screenings were mostly kept to small, closeted affairs. Theater programmers in Los Angeles were arrested for showing obscene works, including an exhibitor who in 1964 screened Anger's "Scorpio Rising." The conviction was later overturned in Los Angeles County Superior Court.

"Up to the '70s, the primary thing for gay people to do was hide," said Hyman. "You didn't want to discuss it; you wanted to get along in mainstream society."

Around 1970, the momentum shifted. "People got really brave and started making films and having these screenings," Pepe said. "Film is a very important vehicle for social change ... and having people come together to show images of themselves was really crucial. These are really the early heroes of the gay rights movement."

calendar@latimes.com

'Same Sex/Different Sex: Queer Identity and Culture'

Where: Spielberg Theatre at the Egyptian, 6712 Hollywood Blvd., Los Angeles

When: 7:30 p.m. Sunday
Price: Free; reservations required

Info: (213) 386-8482,
www.alternativeprojections.com

BOOK REVIEW

Detroit's troubled past and hope for a future

By JULIA M. KLEIN

Detroit

A Biography

Scott Martelle

Chicago Review Press: 288 pp., \$24.95

In February 1863, Thomas Faulkner, a Detroit saloon owner of mixed-race background, was arrested on the charge of raping a 9-year-old white girl. Despite his protestations of innocence, Faulkner was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. The Civil War-era incident incited a white mob to burn 35 homes, kill at least two black people and injure numerous others.

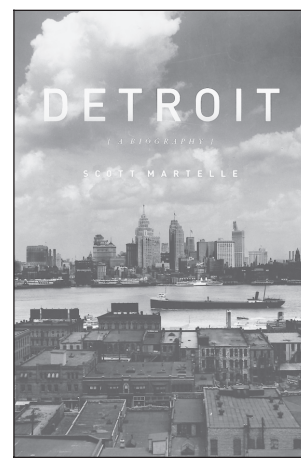
It's a chilling story — all the more so because there was no rape. The witnesses recanted, and Faulkner was pardoned "after serving seven years in prison for a crime that never happened," Scott Martelle writes in "Detroit: A Biography."

Martelle, a former staff writer for the Los Angeles Times and the Detroit News, caps this account by quoting a disturbing letter from a woman on a farm outside Detroit to her lawyer-husband in the city: "Abstractly considered, the burning of those houses was something to be thankful for." This, Martelle notes dryly, "was a timeless indicator of the relations between Detroit's future suburbs and the core of the city."

The American tragedy of race is a strong undercurrent in Martelle's readable, if deliberately sketchy, "biography" of what is arguably this country's most economically aggrieved city. Although Martelle never offers this precise statistic, with a black population of more than 80%, Detroit is also the most heavily African American of this country's major urban areas. Following decades of white flight to the suburbs, the exodus of the black middle class has further crippled the city's tax base and chances for recovery.

Detroit's abundant highways — built to accommodate the car culture of Motor City — only made the trip to the suburbs easier. There are plenty of similar ironies, as well as economic lessons, to be drawn from the city's history, which Martelle dates from the 1701 founding of Fort Pontchartrain by a French magistrate's son known as Cadillac. In those days, the predominant tensions were between Native American tribes and French settlers, who were succeeded by the far more brutal British before the area passed into American hands.

In the early 19th century, Detroit was a bustling frontier town, focused on agri-



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culture but with an increasingly diverse economy. If only that diversity had been maintained, Martelle writes, the city's story might have been a happier one.

By the 1920s, automobile manufacturing was making Detroit boom. Powerful unions vaulted auto workers into the middle class. But the dependence on one industry — one that was cyclical, shortsighted and eager to relocate to the suburbs — eventually helped doom the city.

The devastating 1943 and 1967 race riots; the conjoined plagues of crime and drugs and failing schools, and the city's often inept political leadership combined to make matters worse.

To fill out the picture, Martelle offers vivid portraits of a handful of Detroiters. Among others, he tells the stories of a struggling black single mother, an entrepreneurial bar owner, and a couple of urban pioneers who unaccountably paid \$300,000 for a two-bedroom

condo in the once-elegant, half-deserted neighborhood of Brush Park. (The condo is now worth considerably less, he reports.)

I briefly entered the story Martelle tells in the late 1970s, when I lived in Waterford Township, about an hour north of the city. The riverfront Renaissance Center — the RenCen, Detroit's big bet on revival — had just been built, but it was still mostly empty, a fortress-like structure in the midst of desolation. I recall visiting the Detroit Institute of Arts, seeing "Saturday Night Fever" in a downtown movie theater, dining in Greektown, and driving to a popular jazz club where the music was reputed to start only after midnight. The city, even then, seemed an eerie place.

Years later, I met Camilo José Vergara, a sociologist (and MacArthur Foundation fellow) who traveled the country photographing the distinctive architecture of the ghetto and its gradual decay into pastoral landscape. Vergara had outraged Detroiters by proposing that the crumbling skyscrapers of downtown be preserved as iconic ruins, as what he called "a memorial to our throwaway cities."

Martelle, who remarks on Pittsburgh's successful reinvention after the decline of the steel industry, suggests a (slightly) more hopeful ending. Citing the region's surprising optimism and a few positive economic developments, he suggests that Detroit's best move would be to collapse into a smaller geographic footprint and relocate some of its population. The aim, he writes, would be to "build a critical mass of people in the new areas that could ... coalesce into pockets of vitality."

"Detroit: A Biography" isn't the last word on the city's promise and problems, but it offers an engaging, provocative introduction.

Klein is a cultural reporter and critic and a contributing editor at Columbia Journalism Review.

'Original Cast 3' to benefit AIDS Project Los Angeles

Len Cariou, Carol Lawrence, John Lloyd Young, Bonnie Franklin and Donna McKechnie are among the celebrities who will perform songs from Broadway musicals in which they appeared in "Original Cast 3," a benefit for AIDS Project Los Angeles taking place at 7:30 p.m. Saturday at the Saban Theatre in Beverly Hills.

Others scheduled to sing

in the 28th annual Southland Theatre Artists Goodwill Event include Shirley Jones, Patrick Cassidy, Andrea McArdle, Anna Maria Alberghetti, Loretta Devine, Lillias White, Sally Struthers, Rex Smith and Adrienne Barbeau.

Tickets range from \$40 to \$220. Info: www.apla.org/stage or www.sabantheatre.org.

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▼ MARLEY (NR) (1:00, 4:05) 7:10, 10:15	
▼ THE LUCKY ONE (PG-13) (12:20, 2:45, 5:10) 7:35, 9:55	OPENING TOMORROW: BERNIE THE FIVE-YEAR ENGAGEMENT HEADHUNTERS SOUND OF MY VOICE
THE HUNGER GAMES (PG-13) (1:15, 4:15) 7:15, 10:15	
▼ MONSIEUR LAZAR (PG-13) (12:30, 2:50, 5:10) 7:30, 9:45	WESTWOOD REGENT THEATRE 1045 Buxton Ave • (310) 281-8233
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JIRO DREAMS OF SUSHI (PG) (11:30, 1:30, 3:35, 5:40) 7:45, 9:45	Reel Talk with Stephen Farber Bonus Screening Today at 7pm!
Ends Tonight! BULLY (PG-13) (12:10, 2:35, 5:00) 7:25, 9:45	WEST L.A. NUART THEATRE 1122 Santa Monica Blvd • (310) 281-8233
Ends Tonight! WE HAVE A POPE (NR) (12:15, 4:45) 9:15	Ends Tonight! "Weaves Together Big Ideas in a Crisp, Coherent Fashion!" -Dennis Harvey, VARIETY
Ends Tonight! THE KID WITH A BIKE (PG) (2:40) 7:10	SURVIVING PROGRESS (NR) (5:15) 7:30, 9:45
Ends Tonight! The Screening Lounge DAMSELS IN DISTRESS (PG-13) (12:25, 2:50, 5:15) 7:40, 9:55	Friday Midnight Kurt Russell in John Carpenter's BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA

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