



Queery

John Greyson's *Zero Patience*, a follow-up to his 1991 short, *The Making of Monsters*, offers a racy, post modern *mélange* of camp, politics and (whew, even) cultural theory. *Monsters* was a searing musical romp on anti-gay violence. This time Greyson ups the stakes and delivers a spirited musical mediation on—of all topics—AIDS. He reflects on its ill-considered scientific reception and, most signifi-

cantly, its false media representation. Although, the word “on” is somewhat of a misnomer, as Greyson has tended to sidle up to an issue or an accepted truism, then circle back to playfully illustrate its tenuous foundations, questioning the certainty of “knowing” in the first place.

No armchair activist, Greyson adopts deconstructive wit as a weapon against the commonplace, homophobia and policing of gay sexuality in particular, regulation and oppression in general. *Zero Patience* offers a filmic take on how

the AIDS crisis has precipitated what has been deftly named an “epidemic of signification.” Yet Greyson’s style—comic irreverence laced with political savvy and methodological smarts—serves his subject well. The film’s range, its rapid shifts of tone from one discrete element to another, and its genre-busting pace (from musical to love story to lessons on bad science) suggests a unique talent.

To mainstream audiences, *Zero Patience* could be labelled perverse, risqué, perhaps even outrageous or



TWO FROM ONTARIO

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John Greyson's Zero Patience

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By Kass Banning

unprecedented. Not so. John Greyson is a household name in both Toronto's video art and in its gay activist scenes, an *enfant terrible* whose earlier tapes and films include *Moscow Does Not Believe in Queers*, *The AIDS Epidemic*, and his first feature, *Urinal*, which premiered at the 1988 Festival of Festivals and went on to critical acclaim at the 1989 Berlin Film Festival. He has written for *Fuse*, *Jump Cut*, and has helped shape Canada's version of what has come to be known as Queer cinema, exemplified by the recent success of Tom Kalin and Todd Haynes

in the United States. His body of work is reminiscent of the pervasive rigour of England's late Stuart Marshall, while decidedly informed by the gay camp of Toronto's General Idea and video artist Colin Campbell. This eighties video bad boy has crossed over to feature-length cinema with his moxie intact, while maintaining a definitive nod to popular culture.

Driven by provocation more than dramatic convention, *Zero Patience* neatly falls under the rubric of "the cinema of ideas," heavy on the side of counter cine-



ma. Intentionally didactic, yet it is neither impenetrable nor interminable. Long on spectacle, short on narrative drive and character identification, it is replete with implied meanings. Its cheeky disregard for the ABC's of plot would explode any script writing software program, sending Syd Field-types

ly holds on to this myth. Greyson uses the story of Patient Zero to explore the epidemic of blame that has been unleashed by the AIDS crisis.

Zero returns from the dead to put an end to the nonsense and lies, and clear his name. Nonsense is exemplified in the second major character with an extended lifespan—Sir Richard Burton, a notorious Victorian adventurer, explorer, sexologist and Orientalist. Burton's accomplishments in earlier life include the first uncensored English translation of *The*

Arabian Nights. He was the first non-Muslim to enter the holy city of Mecca and the first European to discover the source of the Nile. Burton also promoted the theory that warmer climates produce homosexual behaviour, whereas colder climates, such as Northern Europe and England in particular, do not encourage sodomy. (This theory can perhaps account for the Victorian rush to exotic, tropical locales.)

Greyson portrays Burton as part dandy, part amateur scientist, with a decided tendency toward the verbose, who performs taxidermist duties at the Museum of Contagions by day, while dabbling in bad science and sleuthing by night. When a rat plague exhibit is cancelled because of budget cuts, he seizes upon opportunity to feature Patient



Zero instead. The sensationalist appeal of this most immediate epidemic is not lost to Burton.

George, a black schoolteacher and former buddy of Zero, is the film's central PWA (person living with AIDS). He adds a human touch (and tear) and provides the flip side to the fantasy and fun. George's daily struggle with contradictions and false information offers an all-too-real element to the film. The tension, however, exceeds the fixity of a crude binary. George is no victim—

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running for cover. Its excesses, its conceits, its flagrant absurdities, however, are its strength. Thought-provoking, but hardly a treatise, *Zero Patience* is smart fun.

However, before considering the film's excesses, a synopsis is in order. The title, *Zero Patience*, cleverly plays on the real Patient Zero. Inverting the appellation for an Air Canada flight attendant, a gay man who ostensibly brought the epidemic to North America from Africa in the sixties (who died of AIDS in 1984), he was singled out and made a scapegoat by the scientific establishment on the lookout for origin and someone to blame. His story was uncovered by the tabloid press in 1987, and although the truth of this "case" has been conclusively refuted, the popular imagination dogged-

All photos from *Zero Patience*





gets to sing. Pharmaceutical companies and AIDS activism meet his scrutinizing gaze. Such an auto-critique is indeed courageous, and one of the film's greatest strengths.

Sir Richard sets off on a fact-finding mission, meets with Zero's mother, steals his diary, and begins his quest. With camcorder in hand, he blazes his way into Zero's life: the friends, the lovers, ACT UP meetings, and the bath houses. Zero agrees to assist him with his quest, and Burton gradually reassesses centuries

of bias. On the way, Burton not only receives an AIDS education, but learns about human frailty and courage.

The host of stock characters are entertainingly informative, but hardly fleshed out—lots of glorious moments, but few lives. Is this a problem? For those brought up on Jean-Luc Godard or Jean-Marie Straub, and with a penchant for Bertolt Brecht, the answer is one resounding “no.” (I am *almost* nostalgic for the sixties when film directors were critics and satirists as much as filmmakers, before the current trend to mindless anti-intellectualism which has taken its steely hold, before our present soundbite, pc mentality.) Like the virus itself, *Zero Patience* transforms itself so often that the pace and structure prohibits attachment to any particular character.

In characteristic style, Greyson takes his pick from the past, many of the players are shadowy historical figures. Sidestepping the chore of creating characters from scratch, real personages are simply put back to work. Embodying ideas, these “readymades” speak and/or sing, in this case, a plethora of discourses: medical, scientific, romantic. Yet, in spite of this level of artifice, we are, surprisingly, still drawn in. A constant play with different levels of identification takes place. Tearing pleasure out of identification, *Zero Patience* offers a different form of pleasure, visual sumptuousness mixed with fodder for the brain, lots to watch and ponder—in different

ways. Some may call it encyclopedic auto-didacticism, others may label it a form of insider's trivial pursuit, a “who's who” of gay history. Historical figures familiar to the gay lexicon populate Greyson's film—André Gide, Jean Genet, Oscar Wilde. These personages shift in and out of the *mise-en-scène*, never one-dimensional, always spewing out in various directions. Linearity is imposed by music and voice-over narration. Characters never say something when, instead, they can sing it.

At times *Zero Patience* threatens to veer off into a lecture about camp aesthetics, which critic Susan Sontag has described as “a certain way of seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon, not in terms of beauty, but in terms of degree of artifice, of stylization.” Gender referents are suppressed, or slip into one another, and metaphors substitute for literal descriptions. The film carries the heavy weight of symbolic baggage, which, on the whole, it carries off with superb art direction and flashes of directorial brilliance. Ironic, biting funny, visually stunning, sometimes obscene, but never boring (although certainly not to everyone's taste), *Zero Patience* deliberately undermines traditional Hollywood structures and conventions. It is a film of desire and dialogue, rather than a commodity for economic exchange. With humour and perceptive analysis, Greyson has managed to create a passionate, definitive film about AIDS •

