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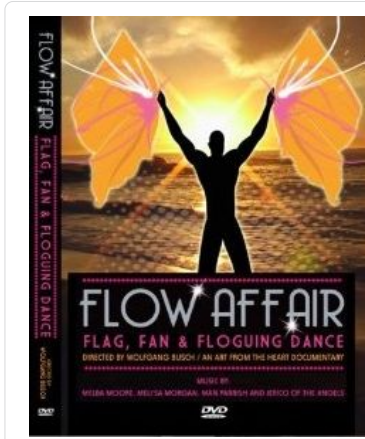
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Flow Affair

by Steve Weinstein

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There's something especially wonderful about a documentary that takes a subject that has been in front of your face for years and profoundly deepens your understanding and appreciation of it.

Wolfgang Busch's labor of love, **Flow Affair**, is a full-length documentary film about the culture, history, ethos, personalities and, above all, the art of flagging and fanning. Anyone who has been to a Circuit party has seen them: Men and women swirling large swatches of color around in elegant, rhythmic patterns in response to the music.

Often, they are given a place of their own, somewhere where they can perform without hitting people on the dance floor. Many promoters like to spotlight them, because they add so much color, flavor and nuance to a night of dancing.

Busch spent 10 years putting together this film, and he deserves the highest praise for preserving a part of our gay culture. He interviewed several people on both coasts (nearly all San Francisco and New York).

He shows flags being made. He also brings in a Chinese-American fanning group to show how club fanning (which is like flagging, but with fans) traces its roots to ancient Chinese culture -- and how the gay clubs, in turn, are informing this treasured Chinese art form.

He also gives an indication of how flagging is giving birth to new art forms by giving us some "floggers," ballroom voguers who have incorporated flags into their floor style. Mikel, a well-known gay singer on the New York scene, shows how he and a partner integrated flagging into a performance.

I should add that I would have liked to have seen one other extension of flagging, into contemporary dance. Choreographers like Hernando Cortez and Patrick Corbin -- both of whom are no strangers to nightclub dancing -- have incorporated flagging and fanning into some of their pieces. I can't place it now, but I swear I have even seen more established choreographers like Twyla Tharp or Paul Taylor take tentative steps toward incorporating flagging moves.

Busch brilliantly interweaves personal stories of flaggers with the history and peculiarities of the flagging world, which tends to be intensely insular. (I'm not surprised Candida Scott Piels, the godmother of flagging in New York, wasn't interviewed; she considers flagging to be esoteric and closed to outsiders.)

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Flagging began, I believe, in the post-Stonewall gay male dance clubs of Downtown Manhattan in the '70s like 12 West and Flamingo. Men would take their shirts off, and many would twirl them around in simple patterns. (Busch emphasizes leather clubs, which I'm not so sure about.)

One of the aspects of flagging that I wish Busch had discussed is the kind of music that flaggers prefer. One talking head mentions Warren Gluck, Robbie Leslie and Susan Morabito, but that was the only reference I caught. Morabito's parties are always flag-fests; conversely, you won't see many flaggers at a party DJed by hard-driving tribalists like Victor Calderone or Peter Rauhofer. I also wished that he had found someone who would have touched on the turf wars that sometimes occur between dancers and flaggers.

Flaggers traditionally hand down their craft from person to person. In both New York and San Francisco, the flagging world is close, though the presentation here is that San Francisco presents more of a cohesive flagging community. There are flaggers all over the United States and in several foreign countries, of course, but these two cities are the predominate centers.

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Busch gets in a nice cross-section of people, including a 12-year-old who has learned it from his lesbian mom, and at least one straight woman. He also includes some of the current movers and shakers in the flagging world, although it would have been interesting to hear from Larry Reigel, probably the premier flag maker on the East Coast.

At the end of "Flow Affair," I was only sorry that it had to end. The individual stories, the overall arch of the film, and its scope make it a film that will fascinate not only people who go to gay clubs and dance events, but anthropologists, choreographers and anyone else who wants insight into a little-known but difficult art form.

Trust me on this one. I own several sets of flags, and I'm still terrible, despite many, many attempts. Above all else, you'll be impressed at the casual artistry of these weekend performers.

Go to the film's website for information or to purchase a copy. Trust me, you'll want to see it more than once and show it to your friends.

EDGE Editor-in-Chief Steve Weinstein has been a regular correspondent for the International Herald Tribune, the Advocate, the Village Voice and Out. He has been covering the AIDS crisis since the early '80s, when he began his career. He is the author of "The Q Guide to Fire Island" (Alyson, 2007).

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