

# Gays Set the Record Straight

by Tom Waugh  
and Joyce Rock



● Seeing it one way, filmmakers of *Sharing the Secret*, Rose and John Kastner

Montreal gay activists Joyce Rock, co-director of *A Wives Tale*, and Thomas Waugh, film professor at Concordia University, dedicate this review to the 286 men arrested by Toronto police in gay saunas on February 5, 1981, 25 days after the broadcasting of *Sharing the Secret*.

**Voice-over A:** This review contains powerful subject matter, including rare and rarely-glimpsed aspects of the lives of documentary filmmakers... The review contains material which some readers may find disturbing. Children with parents are urged to exercise discretion.

**Voice-over B:** Let's just get to the point. Capsule summary: *Sharing the Secret* is a televised feature documentary in which mother-and-son filmmaking team, Rose and John Kastner, present portraits of several (male) members of the Toronto gay community, and of the parents of one of them, as well as glimpses of more general aspects of that city's "homosexual subculture."

**A:** You mean shots of men dancing together? How disgusting.

**B:** Even worse. Actually kissing. No wonder the CBC didn't want children watching. How are lesbians and gay men reacting to the film?

**A:** With uncontrollable anger, at least everyone I've met. Of course the CBC is claiming that some of us liked it - not without some evidence.

**B:** What does that prove? I know women who liked *Dressed to Kill*.

**A:** Let's start by looking at what the Kastners were trying to do. Suppose for a minute we blame the format and context of the program on the CBC brass, and give the Kastners the benefit of the doubt. John Kastner seems sincere and

well intentioned, really concerned about avoiding the errors of what he called the CBS "hatchet-job."

**B:** CBS?

**A:** You know, the film on San Francisco last year that was even condemned by the American Press Council.

**B:** I remember. After it was shown in Montreal, a woman phoned a call-in show complaining about the imminent prospect of nude gay men prancing through the streets of Montreal. Well, Kastner's good intentions are not enough.

**A:** I know. But didn't you at least like the part showing the Vancouver parents struggling with their homophobia after their son came out? The Kastners obviously had a certain rapport with that couple and did a good job in showing how the mother in particular succeeded in changing. In fact, wouldn't the subject of parents of gays have been a good subject in itself for the Kastners; something they could identify with as straights and really get close to? They gave the last word to the mother anyway.

**B:** I don't agree. The filmmakers were just as prurient with the parents as they were with everyone else. The camera was two inches away from the poor woman's nose during her whole interview, trying to soak up every tremor of her pain and every glint of her tears. I'm sure glad I didn't see their documentaries on cancer. And they were manipulative: Kastner asked the father if he'd ever want to see his son kissing his lover. There might as well have been a cue card. How else could a middle-aged middle-class parent have reacted to such a leading, simplistic question?

**A:** Well it was a sensible idea, wasn't it, to try to get to know seven people in 90 minutes, instead of trying to cover the

whole subject? And they did improve on CBS by showing the ever present threat of violence against us, and by trying to suggest our diversity, didn't they? The sequence with the deaf gays wasn't bad.

**B:** Keep trying.

**A:** The Kastners were really intent on challenging the traditional limp-wristed stereotype still apparently held by straights. Most of the wrists were terribly stiff, weren't they?

**B:** All the Kastners have done is confirm a new stereotype that's even more dangerous: the image of the well-educated, urban young clone with lots of free time and disposable income - the sexual consumer. If they wanted to challenge stereotypes, why didn't they show a few lesbians?

**A:** Kastner says they tried to edit lesbian material into a two-hour format but that it just didn't work because of the difference in the two lifestyles.

**B:** But it worked beautifully in *Word is Out*. Portraits of women and men were intermixed on completely compatible and equal terms.

**A:** That's because *Word is Out* was made by a collective of lesbians and gay men. You can be sure the CBC never considered the revolutionary idea of letting gay filmmakers have a crack at this subject. It's too obvious. But they wouldn't dare produce a major film about Québécois by English-Canadians.

**B:** Well, maybe the CBC thinks that lesbian and gay filmmakers don't exist.

**A:** Are you kidding? The CBC cafeteria is cruiser than the Place Bonaventure toilets. Well anyway, some lesbians are just as glad to have escaped unscathed.

**B:** They spoke too soon. The Kastners are considering a sequel on lesbians.

**A:** Groan. So what else did Kastner say?

**B:** They didn't like *Word is Out* because it didn't show our "problems". Do you know gay activists present too positive an image of gay life?

**A:** No, but is the tune something like, "Feminists don't have a sense of humour?"

**B:** That's right, and the second verse goes, "Gay activists have already had too much media attention."

**A:** Kastner said that? What did he mean?

**B:** Something about some programming on gay Christians on *Man Alive*, and a local Toronto show on gay businessmen.

**A:** With activists like those...

**B:** Be careful. The third verse is "The gay community is so factional that their complaints about inadequate representation can be disregarded."

**A:** Am I dreaming? We've struggled for ten years to get normal coverage of our community on the TV network we are paying for; we finally get 90 measly minutes and they refuse to present our spokespeople; something they'd automatically do if it came to any other minority.

**B:** It might make some sense if only the CBC had been living up to its responsibilities to gay taxpayers over the years in everyday programming, showing us as we are on sitcoms, talk-shows and newscasts. All we get is Christian Lalancette, the vicious caricature of the *tapette* hairdresser on the French network's *Chez Denise*.

**A:** As the lady says, "Enough is enough." Ask me a tough question.

**B:** Why do you think the narrator repeated so many times that one of their subjects, the "sexual extremist," is the son of an Anglican minister?

photo: Claude Lacasse



● Begging to differ, critics Tom Waugh and Joyce Rock

**A:** I don't know. She got her script mixed up?

**B:** Wrong. It's because that's hot television. They promised something "stunning and amazing," discovered ordinary people, and had to soup it up to deliver. **A:** So that's why Kastner asked him what his price used to be when he was a hustler. I thought maybe he was trying to set something up.

**B:** And that's the rationale behind the choice of their five main subjects. Two of them seemed happy and well-adjusted enough (we'll let it pass that the happily monogamous student was into role-playing with his lover, and that the camera just happened to catch him doing the housework). The other well-adjusted one, an older businessman just out of the closet, apparently turned out so boring that they practically cut him out of the picture. Misery and excess are so much more telegenic.

**A:** I get it. So for the other three subjects, they had to pick some real juicy ones.

**B:** Right. Out of their hundreds of interviews they managed to put together a narcissist who spends four hours a day before the mirror, a lonely French Canadian Catholic who provides gory details of his adolescent suffering (now there's a stereotype I bet you thought had gone out with the Quiet Revolution), and finally, our friend the hustler "sexual extremist."

**A:** Oh, *The Minister's Son Who Has Two Music Degrees* from University of Toronto. What a Contrast! I actually found him sort of pleasant, except that his complicity with the filmmakers is somewhat suspect. He indulges their voyeurism in a way that seems exhibitionist, taking them on a tour of a cruising park and a Homosexual Steam bath.

**B:** Is that a steam bath who loves an-

other steam bath? Sorry. Maybe he's always wanted to act in movies.

**A:** Well, he got his wish. In fact, the whole film is full of acting. It's the most fictionalized documentary I've seen since *Mondo Cane*. Haven't they heard of cinéma direct.

**B:** I thought the topper came when the Québécois guy was talking on the soundtrack about how he'd desperately tried to be interested in girls as a teenager. At that moment, you get to see leering young women passing the camera on the street, practically flirting with the lens. The Charms Our Hero Would Never Know.

**A:** I preferred the dinner scene where the Vancouver parents meet their son's lover for the first time. Marx brothers meet *Interiors*. I thought the lover's goatee was going to fall off into the soup: no wonder the parents looked at him funny.

**B:** You mean he was wearing a disguise?

**A:** That's right. And all the characters had fake names.

**B:** I thought the film was supposed to be about the closet.

**A:** Was it ever. The Kastners were right in recognizing the closet as a continuing major problem for us, but in encouraging this anonymity game they contribute to the oppression that keeps us there.

**B:** It reminds me of the American network show in the late sixties where they interviewed a *homosexual* and not only put him in silhouette, back to the camera, but hid him behind a studio palm tree. **A:** You're exaggerating. Anyway, what makes you sure that the Kastners aren't gay themselves?

**B:** I don't know about Rose, but the CBC publicity certainly was very clear that John is not one himself, but that some of his best friends are...

**A:** There's no doubt why *he* had to share *his* secret. Well, at least he didn't show off his wife and kids the way Michael Caine did in every interview he did after he played the gay man in *California Suite*.

**B:** What did he show off after playing the transsexual in *Dressed to Kill*?

**A:** That's not funny. Please concentrate. I hear the Kastners were upset that some potential subjects wanted final control of the way in which their images were used.

**B:** That seems reasonable, especially after the CBS debacle. The CBC has never given us any reason to trust them: they still refuse, for example, to accept announcements from gay community groups for the AM bulletin boards across the country.

**A:** But I wonder why the principle of subject approval is so threatening. It's a fairly common method among responsible filmmakers working with disenfranchised groups victimized by the media, isn't it? Haven't the Kastners heard of Challenge for Change? Seriously. **B:** Not a chance. By all appearances, the last NFB documentary they've seen is the 1942 *Mask of Nippon* with Lorne Greene booming away at the mike.

**A:** Not back to the voice-over again. What exactly was wrong with Margaret Pacsu's voice?

**B:** It's hard to say. Something about the apologetic, cosy, fake-intimacy. It's great for the late-night, light-classical FM slot, but for slipping in statistics about gay men's promiscuity when no one's listening...? Anyway, it's the principle of having an anonymous, unseen, voice-of-goddess telling us how to react in such a disarming way that we don't know we're being manipulated. Besides, if the Kastners like feminine voices so much they

should have interviewed a few lesbians.

**A:** Why did she have to repeat so many times that the film was not meant to give a representative picture of gay life.

**B:** It's a trick they've learned from William Friedkin. I'll never understand straights: they think you can make all the distorted generalizations you like as long as you run a disclaimer afterwards. The Flimsy Report says that 94% of all straight filmmakers pick their noses; the foregoing statements are not intended to be representative of straight filmmaker life.

**A:** Someday I'm going to make a movie called *Sharing the Secret* about heterosexuals, which will concentrate completely on male menopause and body-rub parlors. Do you think the title's already been used? Can you imagine the CBC running a prying intimate expose of the rarely glimpsed straight male sexual underworld?

**B:** Can I help you with your movie? I'm fantastic with goatees.

**A:** Do you think anyone actually saw *Sharing the Secret*?

**B:** Of course. Everyone's parents. Sunday evening is parent time. Didn't I tell you about my friend whose mother phoned from Alberta to tell him that the show had confirmed how miserable she'd always thought he was?

**A:** Is your friend miserable?

**B:** Not at all. He's really very happy. That's not very sporting is it?

**Sharing the Secret: Selected Gay Stories**

p./d. John Kastner assoc. p. Rose Kastner sc. John Kastner. Rose Kastner host Margaret Pacsu ed. Don Evraire d.o.p. Vic Sarin exec. p. Paul Wright