Tongues Untied. A film by Marlon Riggs. With Essex Hemphill, Craig Harris, Steve Langley and others.

By Cary Alan Johnson

The truth isn’t always pretty, but it sure does free the soul. Tongues Untied, a new project and film exploring African American gay life, is likely to make you cry and make you laugh. It may just make you put two fingers together for the friction of a snap. Filmmaker Marlon Riggs is convinced that the silence of Black gay men is our undoing. In Tongues Untied he inspires us to break that silence by loosening a few of his own knots.

This is the film we’ve been waiting for, the Black Gay Official Story. It’s a work which should be screened in Sexuality 101 classes: an early ’90s show and tell. It’s the film you’d show to any straight person you wanted to understand you. It presents our lives not through any rose-colored vision of ourselves as ever-masculine, always healthy, and forever connected in loving couples. It shows us as we are: often angry, sometimes confused but always persevering. Tongues Untied is a picture we can live with.

Riggs takes us on a cinematic voyage, the journey of his personal development and quest for self-acceptance. From a childhood rife with confusion and a self-hated fed by bigots and homophobes, to his search for self-acceptance in the arms of Christopher, Castro, and Spruce, the avenues of urban gay America. And ultimately to self-affirmation through the creation and embracing of a Black gay community. Not an unusual journey for a community as whole. Footage of mid-’60s civil rights movement, of the Black gay community is also explored. The scenes of say Day, the journey back to love Black men is truly revolutionary. Despite his obvious talent and the “positive” spin he brings to his film, one can’t help but ask, does he really believe any of this? If Black men loving Black men is truly “the revolutionary act” as he states at the film’s conclusion, then why isn’t he acting? And why are we led to believe that his fixation with white men is what was missing for him? Of course, there are many different ways to love Black men, but “coming home,” as it is presented in the film, features our primary intimate couplings with other Black men. Clearly, the journey back to ourselves is a process, not an event.

Nevertheless, Tongues Untied is a Black gay time capsule. It is Marlon Riggs’ gift to our community, and the culture it embodies is our collective gift to the double brothers of tomorrow.

(Tongues Untied premieres in March at the Castro Theater in San Francisco. It will later play at film festivals nationally.)

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Tongues Untied is funny. Riggs spins us off into a hilarious vignette on Snapology. (Snappling is an important and powerful phenomenon of Black gay life — ask playwright George Wolfe.) This instructional, “how-to” sequence introduces us to simple, complex and double-diva snaps. (“A girl’s got to be ambidextrous.”) Complete with graphics and subtitles, this tongue-in-cheek look at the complexity and symbolism of one of the most quotidian of gay mannerisms gives us credit for what we’ve created. While Spike Lee is happy to have his straight characters snapping and calling each other “Miss Thing,” we are culturally invisible, or at best sad misfits, in this brother’s film. In Tongues Untied we take form before our very eyes and we like what we see.

If Ntozake Shange be credited with popularizing the term choreopoem, we should thank Marlon Riggs for the first true choreofil. Music, dance, poetry and the careful composing of visual image are gloriously woven because they are a daily part of our lives. Riggs shows us. We follow the slow falling ashes of an aging drag queen’s cigarette, Nina Simone croons, “Angel unavenged becomes pain...unspoken becomes rage...released becomes violence,” the moving rhythm of the words aided and abetted by the quick sequencing of shots. Riggs skillfully draws the connection between the oppression and anger of African American gay men and that of the Black community as a whole. Footage of mid-’60s civil rights marches is brilliantly spliced with scenes of Black men marching in New York’s Gay Pride Day Parade. We are Black and we are gay. Riggs says there is no prioritizing. Homophobia in the Black community is also explored. The scenes of gay bashing by other Black men, both physical and verbal, constitute the film’s most painful moment.

My discovery after seeing the film that Marlon Riggs has a white lover struck me as ironic and may leave some feeling cheated. I do not fault Riggs here for his choice of a partner, only for what I see as a deception. Despite his obvious talent and the positive vibe of the film, one can’t help but ask, does he really believe any of this? If Black men loving Black men is truly “the revolutionary act” as he states at the film’s conclusion, then why isn’t he acting? And why are we led to believe that his fixation with white men is what was missing for him? Certainly, there are many different ways to love Black men, but “coming home,” as it is presented in the film, features our primary intimate couplings with other Black men. Clearly, the journey back to ourselves is a process, not an event.

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