

**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 video 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-hatred fed by bigots and homophobes, to his search for self-image in the faces of white men on 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 BGM coming of age in the '70s.

Many of us have known for some time that everything dope originates in the Black gay community. *Tongues Untied* chronicles house music, voguing and a particularly feisty style of performance poetry, capturing for posterity the richness of a unique culture.

The film features the work of Essex Hemphill, perhaps the most prolific and certainly the most well-known Black gay writer and performance artist. Hemphill's work is so much more accessible here than in last year's *Looking for Langston*. Though there are some double plus good uses of poetry in that ethereal film by British cinematographer Isaac Julian, the overlay of Hemphill's very contemporary, very visceral work seems forced at times. In *Tongues Untied*, Hemphill's work is used to its best advantage, painting a stolidly honest portrait of Black men loving, fighting, dying and living on in spite of.

Bella Napoli, a black gay bar in Oakland, creates a perfect setting for the crisp Haiku of Alan Miller. Here Riggs uses a technique called video solarization which groups color ranges together in an image, effectively rendering the screen a high-tech oil painting. Inclusion of selected work by poets Donald Woods, Craig Harris, Steve Langley and Reggie Jackson (Master Snap! Grand Diva) makes the film a wonderful portfolio of some of our most talented wordsmiths.

*Tongues Untied* is funny. Riggs spins us off into a hilarious vignette on *Snappology*. (Snapping is an important and powerful

phenomena of Black gay life — ask playwright George Wolf.) 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 films. In *Tongues Untied* we take form before our very eyes and we like what we see.

If Ntzoake Shange be credited with popularizing the term choreopoem, we should thank Marlon Riggs for the first true *choreofilm*. 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 her blues and Essex Hemphill tells us that this "grief is a wig that does not rest gently on [her] head." We are invited to dance a sinister cha-cha with Hemphill and his frequent partner Wayson Jones: "Anger unvented 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 moments.

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 was a phase through which he passed? 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.

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.)