

FILM REVIEW

The Man Who Saved Ben-Hur

He Sat on Caesar's Throne

(But Only for a Minute).

By Hilary MacGregor

Joe Forte's documentary film, "The Man Who Saved Ben-Hur," is a provocative, visual musing on the meaning of life that will leave you hungry to talk about your own, and have you carefully re-examining the stories you tell yourself as you create your own master narrative.

The film stars Forte's second cousin, Johnny Alarimo., but this is not the stereotypical documentary of a famous person who happens to be the filmmaker's relative. This is the surprising tale of the distant relative you never knew, who had a crazy, fascinating life no one ever told you about.

Forte, a Hollywood veteran himself, did not know his cousin growing up. He met him as a child at a funeral. But Johnny became a legendary figure in his imagination because he had lived in Rome during the Glory Days of Italian Cinema, and worked on the Hollywood epic, Ben-Hur. When Forte moved to Hollywood they got to know each other, but though they lived only a few blocks from each other, Johnny kept Forte at a distance and never invited him into his apartment.

Still, the fantastical tales continued—of working with and vacationing with Rock Hudson, Gore Vidal, Mae West and Elizabeth Taylor—to name a few. Forte noticed, though, that the stories, endlessly retold, had a carefully curated, "directed" quality, and that they formed a kind of mask that kept him from knowing anything more about his cousin. And were they even true?



John Alarimo on the set of the cinema classic Ben-Hur during the hey-day of Hollywood in Rome.

COURTESY THE JOHN ALARIMO JR. ARCHIVE.

Forte doesn't know. But as his cousin nears the end of his life, and his health begins to deteriorate, Forte proposes to do a film about him. He spends a year filming, and two years editing. What he finds shocks him -- and the viewer is along for the ride.

Inside the apartment are hundreds of unopened boxes. As Johnny's life blossoms before Forte's camera he begins to feel like the Forrest Gump of the Golden Days of Hollywood. There are letters and gifts from dozens of film stars, photographs and ephemera. But as Johnny gives a guided tour of his favorite mementos, the viewer slowly learns about another side of Johnny—the beautiful gay man who never came out of the closet, and has never given voice publicly to the great love of his life.

The boxes and closed apartment become a powerful metaphor for a man who has lived a long, rich, outwardly enviable life, but kept it hidden away from everyone—perhaps even himself. It is a treasure trove of photos of the great icons of the 20th century—but also a meticulously preserved photographic record of a man who had a penchant for taking Selfies before Selfies were in style, all of it labeled.

It seems no accident that Johnny has chosen to live abroad among film stars whose –

profession requires them to cultivate a glamorous image, while keeping their true selves hidden away. It is as if he chose to learn the craft of hiding oneself from the true masters of Image Control.

Johnny has mingled, loved, and socialized with the greatest stars of our time. And yet he lives alone, growing old and sick, among the piles of unopened boxes that are evidence of his fabulous life. He spent a life constructing a mask, and now he seems trapped behind it—lonely and forgotten until Forte charms his way into his apartment with a camera.

The attention, and the chance to be on film as the star himself, bring a new sparkle to Johnny's eyes. Is this what we all crave, no matter how much we put ourselves into boxes? To be seen? To be the star? To be loved?

Interestingly, Johnny makes NOT seeing the final film the one stipulation of the film. He has remained true to his word. In the end, it appears, just being filmed, being treated like a star, is to him, more important than seeing the outcome.

There is a simplicity, a rawness, and a clarity to this sumptuous film that sneaks up on you and will leave you thinking about it for days afterward.