

Hanging back

These two Kinney Brothers films play elaborate variations on the theme of the closet

by Tom Sartini

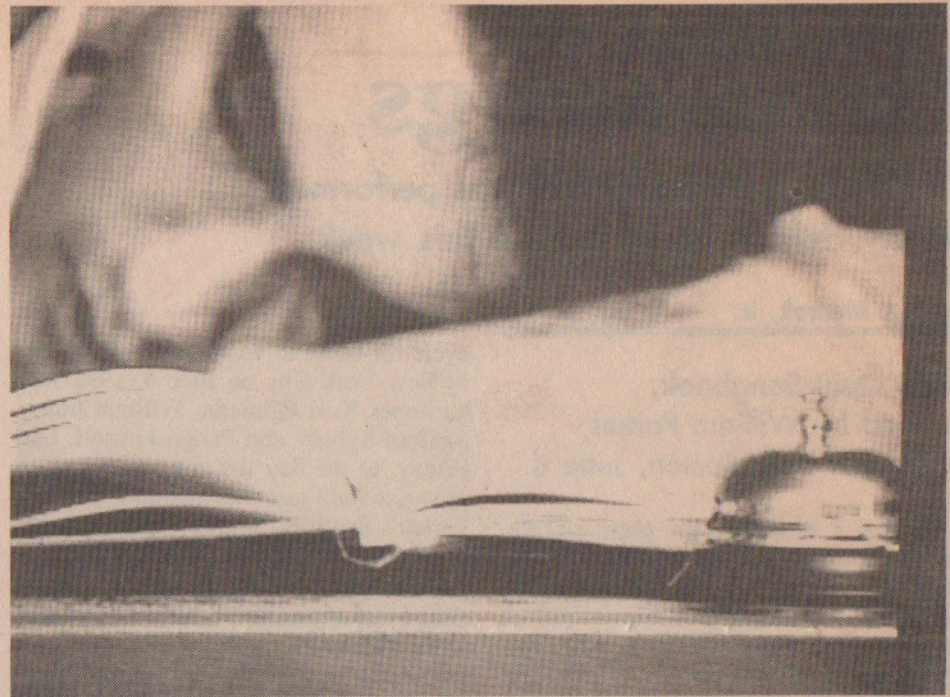
Agora, a film by the Kinney Brothers, **June 11 (7:30 pm) and June 12 (9:30 pm)**, at Harvard Film Archive, in 9th annual G/L F/V Festival.

The Maids, a film by the Kinney Brothers, **June 13 (2 pm)**, Harvard Film Archive, in 9th annual G/L F/V Festival.

Making a life for oneself as a gay man or lesbian in the rural parts of the Midwest is probably easier than it was, say, 20 years ago, but that doesn't mean that it's still not difficult. For gay-ghettoized Easterners, many of whom hail from the small towns and hamlets of the heartland, that part of America represents a childhood from which they couldn't wait to escape, a closet more stultifying than comforting as perceptions about one's sexuality begin to manifest themselves in adolescence and young adulthood. Of course, there's a pretty valid argument that gay men and lesbians tend to exchange the closet of youth and isolation for the closet of urban anonymity, resulting in an agoraphobia no less inhibiting despite the person's ability to set the rules of the closet and make it more comfortable. The insularity of many

gay and lesbian lives, and the claustrophobia resulting from such strict limitations on personal space and identity, are examined in two interesting and clever, if ultimately uneven works by Donald and Robert Kinney. *Agora* (1992) and *The Maids* (1990), both showing this weekend at the Boston Gay and Lesbian Film and Video Festival, delve into the lives and conflicts of people defined by their own inability to shake off the institution of the closet, regardless of how they define it for themselves, and their resentments in regard to the rigid, consumerist society that, they believe, forces them to stay inside.

Set in the Kinney's home state of Iowa, *Agora* begins in the middle of a cornfield, with a scene of a foreman explaining the process of de-tasseling corn to a group of workers. In order to breed hybrid seed corn, the male tassels must be removed from a designated number of plants in order to make them female and allow pollenization to occur. While the symbolism is pretty obvious, the solemn manner in which the foreman addresses the workers with the seriousness of the task is pretty amusing. The video quickly moves to an introduction of the main characters: Swallow (Donald Kinney), a convict on the run from authorities, his lover Jack (Randy Rovang), Katch (Kerry Snyder), discharged from the army (and her home) for being a lesbian, and her lover, Joy (Tammy Hopkins). Both couples are on the run, and each pair ends up in adjacent



CHARLES LOUIS is Crab, in the Kinney Brothers' *Agora*. Photo: Ted Hardin

rooms at a small, roadside motel. The other main character, Crab (Charles Louis), the desk clerk at the motel, suffers from agoraphobia, is completely powerless within his family and can barely make it out of his bedroom, much less to work, without using alcohol to numb the constant anxiety attacks common to his condition.

A store in the story

Integral to the story, and to the characters' lives, is the proximity of the Family Food Store, an average-looking supermarket managed and run with almost Stepford-like enthusiasm and zeal, a stark contrast to the almost uniformly sour and unhappy customers. This agora (the Greek term for marketplace) may supply people with the products they feel will make their lives

more fulfilling, or at least easier, but for the main characters, it's just another opportunity for conflict and anxiety. Crab, especially, finds it painful to shop there, and tends to hallucinate in the aisles, spurred on by images of products on the shelves. The visions wend their way into his dreams, especially in a dark but funny scene where Crab is stalked and raped by Joe Camel, of Camel cigarettes fame.

The first half of the film focuses mainly on establishing the relationships of the two couples. And while they're neighbors, and have something in common (homosexuality), it doesn't mean they're going to be friends. Indeed, the first meeting between the couples, as Katch is trying to fix her car when Jack walks by and asks if he can help, illus-

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trates the distrust gay men and lesbians, or men and women for that matter, can have toward each other. Katch calls Jack and Sparrow "fags" under her breath, and Sparrow can't resist spitting out "dyke" when he returns to his room. Each couple, however, have their own notion of the closet they have to deal with, and in the stuffy, claustrophobic atmosphere of their respective motel rooms, rooms they can't afford, they try to figure out what to do next. Joy wants to move to a big city, where she believes there will be more opportunities for work, but Katch resists the notion, saying she doesn't want to deal with the risks associated with such a move. Sparrow, of course, is on the run from the law, and claims he wants to stay out of jail, but when he robs the Family Food store, Jack begins to wonder how much Sparrow really wants to remain free.

A chance for freedom

The first section of the film may seem a bit slow-going, but the narrative picks up considerable steam in the second half, as Crab's hallucinations and passivity increase, the women open up about their childhoods (especially interesting was Katch's recollection that she used to be an Avon girl), and they discover that Swallow is an escaped criminal. Swallow's robbery of the store also set things in

motion for him and Jack, culminating in a shocking, melodramatic climax between the two couples, allowing them all to make their escape. Crab also takes his first steps toward freedom, as the stultifying atmosphere of both his home and the motel finally become too much for him. *Agora* may start out slowly, and occasionally lapse into murky symbolism, but the issues the Kinneys address are bound to provoke discussion.

Based on the play by Jean Genet, *The Maids* alternates moments of sheer camp and insight with stretches of almost numbing ennui. The Kinneys themselves play the two French servant girls, Solange and Claire, costumed in various incarnations of female attire, hamming up Genet's text with a faux grandeur culled from both the films of Douglas Sirk (*Imitation of Life*, *Written on the Wind*) and soap opera. Indeed, the garish color and swelling background music are lifted directly from soaps of the '60s like "The Secret Storm" and "Search for Tomorrow."

As the girls plot the death of their mistress, the two maids attempt to play mind games with each other, upping the power ante and brutally underlining the theme of domination and submission central to this play and to the plots of Genet's other works. The preening and posturing wears thin after a while, however, and not even a film clip of Linda Evans for *Ultress Hair Color*, ostensibly the Madame the two girls want to kill (and an amusing comment about the maids' obsession with beauty and youth), manages to liven things up. The production is idea-heavy, which certainly is not a bad accusation to make of a production, but the monotony of the presentation numbs the viewer into disinterest. Of course, maybe that's what the Kinneys wanted to do, express the banality of the struggle between the two women, and the claustrophobia inherent in such self-obsession; in that case they've succeeded admirably. ▼