



CURED Written and Directed by Patrick Sammon and Bennett Singer Story Center Films and Singer & Deschamps Productions, 2020 80 Minutes

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About a third of the way into *Cured*, I said, “Oh, wow.” Until then, much of the first half hour of Patrick Sammon and Bennett Singer’s documentary about the movement to declassify homosexuality as a mental disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders of the American Psychiatry Association was familiar: Footage of the repressive America of the 1950s and early 1960s, descriptions of the often horrifying methods psychiatrists were then regularly using in their attempts to cure homosexuality, interviews with organizers of the early gay and lesbians rights groups like the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society, clips from the iconically homophobic news coverage of homosexuality before and after the Stonewall Riots of 1969. This would be novel, interesting, and possibly shocking to new students of the history of what we now call the LGBT rights movement, but it is also covered in, among other essential documentaries, *Before Stonewall* (1984) and *The Word is Out* (1977). (And some of the footage is actually taken from those two films.)

But after that set up, Sammon and Singer do what none of those other documentaries have done. They dig into the specifics of how the small group of brainy activists led by Barbara Gittings and Frank Kameny managed to force a paradigm shift in psychiatric medicine. Not only did most people at the time, including their allies, think such a change impossible, they did it in less than four years from their first “zaps” at APA meetings in 1970.

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I had never seen the film of the APA meeting in Los Angeles in October 1970 at which UCLA graduate student and gay activist Don Kilhefner grabbed the microphone during a panel on electroshock aversion therapy for homosexuality. In response to jeers from the audience, he raises his voice and declares, “We’re going to be talking about what you are going to do to clear up your own fucked minds.” A third of audience of the packed room leave in disgust, and I assumed the sequence would end there. Instead, I watched Kilhefner (who went on to found what is now called the Los Angeles LGBT Center) and his compatriots succeed in breaking the audience into small discussion groups. Gay people are the experts in being gay, they said, not the psychiatrists. Those at the conference “had never sat down and talked with gay people where the psychologists weren’t in charge,” Kilhefner says in an interview for the film. The footage in *Cured* showed the psychiatrists who stayed in that ballroom were listening, even nodding. It’s extraordinary footage of affective and intellectual change. Thus: “Wow.”

Over the next four years, Gittings, Kameny, and others methodically collected allies in the psychiatric community—some straight like Dr. Richard Green and some gay and closeted like Dr. Lawrence Hartmann—who helped them transition from conference interlopers to conference panelists, their ideas from deviant ramblings into legitimized scientific arguments. In addition to great archival footage, Sammon and Singer have several revealing, emotional, occasionally very funny interviews with key actors of that period, several of whom died before the film was released: Kameny (who died in 2011), Kilhefner, Hartmann, and Green, who died in 2019 and whose 1972 paper on the lack of scientific evidence for classifying homosexuality as an illness was enormously influential. Gittings died in 2007, but Sammon and Singer interviewed Kay Lahunan, Gittings’s partner of 46 years whose photographs of the movement appear throughout the film. She died in May 2021. One of her most famous photos was of a masked psychiatrist addressing the APA in 1972 about his life as a gay man. Dr. John Fryer’s speech is credited by many as a pivotal moment in the movement. He died in 2003, so Sammon and Singer had one of Fryer’s best friends read his journals out loud, a decision much more resonant than having a disconnected narrator do a voice-over.

After a byzantine process of reviews and committee meetings, in 1973 the trustees of the APA agreed to remove homosexuality from the DSM. Dr. Charles Socarides and other advocates for “curing” gay men vehemently opposed the change and successfully petitioned to put the decision up to a vote. But in 1975, 58% of the APA membership voted in favor of the trustees’ decision, having been convinced that homosexuality was not an illness after just five years of direct activism. (Another 40 years would pass before 58% of all Americans believed that gay and lesbian relationships were morally acceptable, according to the Gallup Poll.) Even after his son Richard came out and Hartmann became president of the APA, Socarides never changed his mind. He died in 2005; his son Richard, who eventually became President Clinton’s liaison with the LGBT community, is interviewed for the film.

As paradigm shifts go, the speed of the APA’s turnabout is astonishing. In 80 min, Sammon and Singer show how it was done, and their use of the tools of film expand our understanding of the methods well described in both academic and

popular histories of the early gay rights movement. *Cured* belongs with those essential LGBT documentaries mentioned above, and it will also likely prove to be an excellent tool for teaching the history and philosophies of science.

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