

How America fought sin — and lost

By TOM JACOBS
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"Heavy Petting" is an entertaining film and a fascinating social document. It's a look at how a "free" society attempts to control the behavior of its citizenry — in this case, its sexual behavior.

REVIEW Specifically, it explores what American teen-agers of the 1950s were taught about the birds and the bees, and how little attention most of them paid to that teaching. By alternating between period film clips and interviews with men and women who came of age during those years, it paints a picture of a society desperately trying — and largely failing — to keep a lid on an issue it did not know how to deal with.

The film — which took nearly a decade to complete — was directed by Obie Benz and Josh Waletzky, who were both involved in the making of "The Atomic Cafe." Like that documentary, which explored the '50s fear of the atom bomb, "Heavy Petting" is full of film clips that seem laughably ridiculous today. One of the best is a lecture by veteran L.A. anchorman George Puttnam, who rages on about promiscuity and how it keeps our minds off important things like fighting the communist menace.

We see clips from films on how to ask for a date, how to tell a boy when to stop, and (for males only, of course) how to use a condom. We also see images from the teen-oriented feature films of the day — most notably characters

THE FACTS

■ **The film:** "Heavy Petting" (NR; mature).

■ **Behind the scenes:** Directed by Obie Benz and Josh Waletzky, from a concept by Pierce Rafferty. Produced by Obie Benz. Distributed by Skouras Pictures.

■ **Running time:** 80 minutes.

■ **Playing:** Nuart Theatre, West Los Angeles; tonight and Saturday only.

■ **Our rating:** ★★★

★★★★ — don't miss it; ★★★ — worth your while; ★★ — has its moments; ★ — if you must; ○ — don't bother.

who represented the archetypical "bad girl" (i.e., the girl who would have sex).

Without being preachy, "Heavy Petting" points out how the bad-girl figure was used as a negative role model. Do it, films warned, and you'll be isolated and ostracized. Resist, and you'll have a happy life.

The simplicity of thinking evidenced in these films is mind-boggling. Just as we could survive an atomic-bomb blast by the "duck and cover" method — a technique we learned in "Atomic Cafe" — the message in these films was we could avoid the problems of teen-age pregnancy by simply saying no.

The minimal impact of this propaganda is made clear in the interviews, which include a cross-section of celebrities and unknowns. (One of the most touching of these features Abbie Hoffman, whose laughter seems eerily self-conscious and unconvincing.) Their comments suggest

they were influenced by the images they saw — how could they not be? — but, however terrified, most of them explored the world of sex, nonetheless.

While the comments of such people as David Byrne and Spalding Gray are amusing and insightful, the creators of this film might have worked harder to find more average people. The heavy emphasis on artistic types skews the sample; it figures that these budding writers and actors would be more apt to resist the norm than the average kid. Thus, it's hard to judge from their answers just how successful this propaganda was.

Still, "Heavy Petting" doesn't produce the sort of smugness that viewers felt at the end of "Atomic Cafe." The issue the film shows society trying to grapple with — how to channel the natural teen-age sex drive into harmless forms until they are old enough to take responsibility for their actions — is one even our more enlightened age has failed to find an answer to.

The ghettos — and, to some extent, the suburbs — are filled with babies having babies, teen-age girls who are bearing children though they aren't emotionally or economically ready for motherhood. Presumably, we realize today that "Just say no" isn't a good-enough answer. But, even with the advent of birth control, we still haven't come up with a solution.

One wonders if today's anti-drug campaign will seem just as silly in 30 years.