

# Documentary 'Heavy Petting' a lively true confessions

By Johanna Steinmetz

**T** here probably is not a long line of people breathlessly awaiting confessions of teen sexual habits from the likes of such noted American bohemians as

## MOVIE REVIEW

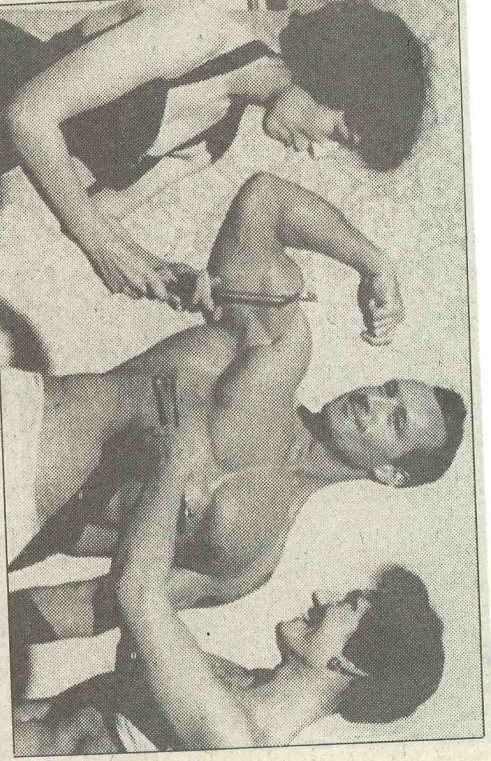
writer William Burroughs, comedian Sandra Bernhard, performance artist Laurie Anderson

and musician David Byrne. It is assumed that bohemians are bohemians because they "did" everything and were always on the radical cultural fringe, unlike the rest of us who struggled out of the sexual inhibitions of

the '50s and '60s. It is assumed wrong. One of the delights of "Heavy Petting," a documentary look at sex and dating in pre-sexual revolution America, is that the experiences cited are so universal, from Sandra Bernhard's reminiscences of playing doctor to Spalding Gray's complaint that the sex manuals he furtively read were too technical. The film inter-splices musings by 23 adults with telling cuts from records, movies, TV and hygiene films of 30 years ago.

As originally conceived by producer/director Obie Benz, "Heavy Petting" was to consist only of a montage of old films and music. Benz had trouble tracking a theme through the material, however, and the project was dropped. Later, he came up with the idea of using interviews to help us connect with the concept, to tell us, in effect, "This is the age from which we came. Remember?"

The technique, a producer's nightmare because of all the nights involved, works wonderfully, if a bit overlong at 70 minutes. (The movie is being shown with the Oscar-winning Steven Wright short, "Appointments of Dennis Jennings.") Each snippet of interview frames cultural artifacts that range from affecting moments with a young Brando in "The Wild One" (or Natalie Wood and James Dean in "Rebel Without a Cause") to more sanitized "Ozzie and Harriet" excerpts, to bits of unintentionally hilarious educational films with titles like "What to Do on a Date," "Molly Grows Up" and "Perversion for Profit." In the latter, an evangelistic announcer tells us with feverish intensity: "We do know that once a person is perverted, it is practi-



A scene from the documentary "Heavy Petting."

### "Heavy Petting"

Directed and produced by Obie Benz; co-directed and edited by Josh Wainzky; edited by Judith Sobol; photographed by Sam Siegel. A Showtime release; opens Sept. 22. The Music Box Theatre. Running time: 1:10. Not rated by the MPAA.

**THE CAST (as themselves):** Sandra Bernhard, Paula Longendyke, William Burroughs, Ann Magnuson, Spalding Gray, Josh Mostel, Elizabeth Layne, Duke, Zoe Tamerlaine, Marshall Turner, Wayne Johnson, Laurie Anderson, Abbie Hoffman, Barry Burkowski, John Oates, Abbie Hoffman, Jim Dyer, Jackie Ocas, Frederic Layne, Frances Fisher and Sando Sissel.

cally impossible for him to return to normal attitudes."

We see TV news footage in which a deadpan Elvis Presley explains why he can't make his pelvis behave onstage. ("When I hear rock 'n' roll, I can't stand still. I've tried it and I can't do it.") We see a VD prevention film in which the spread of syphilis is given the Dagnet treatment. We see Marilyn Monroe at her most vulnerably comelike in "Bus Stop." (Someone could probably make a further documentary about how Monroe's on-screen sexuality, which played smoldering desire off of coy innocence, perfectly suited her era.)

David Byrne, while compelling in his sensitive reflections on the choreography of petting, is not—in this movie, anyway—the only talking head of note. Aging writer Burroughs, appearing on-camera with poet Allen Ginsberg, is as irascible as reputed. ("Do you want to be loved?" Ginsberg asks him. "Mmmmm, not really . . . by my cats, perhaps.") And the late Abbie Hoffman, antic in his descriptions of early masturbatory adventures, is, ironically, the liveliest of all who were interviewed.