

A long road led to 'Heavy Petting'

by John Hartl
Times film reviewer

"Sexuality is such a soup, such a stew," said Obie Benz. "Sex is one word, but it encompasses everything from the growing body to relationships with parents to socializing and feelings of success and failure."

Seven years ago, the 39-year-old Benz got an OK from producer Norman Lear to create a documentary about sexuality, using sex-education films of the 1940s and 1950s, clips from more famous movies ("Bus Stop," "Rebel Without a Cause"), and hit songs from the 1950s ("Dedicated to the One I Love," "Whole Lotta Shakin' Going On").

But despite his experiences in the documentary field ("The Atomic Cafe," the Oscar-nominated "Americas in Transition"), Benz was stumped. For two years, he didn't work on the project because he couldn't think of a way to make the material hang together as a feature film.

"I put together a 20-minute reel in 1983, but it just proved we didn't have a film," he said during a recent visit to Seattle.

"There was no narrative arc. We could have made a television special out of it, with a host

and everything, but we couldn't get excited about that. We wanted to do a feature film for theaters, something that could compete with dramatic films, and we didn't want to use a narrator."

"Reds," Warren Beatty's 1981 epic about the Russian Revolution, provided the solution. Beatty's reliance on real-life "witnesses" (which Rob Reiner also used recently in "When Harry Met Sally...") gave Benz the structure he needed.

He rounded up David Byrne, Sandra Bernhard, Allen Ginsberg, Spalding Gray, the late Abbie Hoffman and a few friends and neighbors from New York's Soho district to talk about their earliest sexual experiences.

"Witnesses added an element that helped flesh out the material," Benz said. "They brought it into the present. We did about 40 interviews, of which we used 23 (Benz left his own interview on the cutting-room floor). Each witness had to contribute to the structure of the picture."

"Heavy Petting," which Benz calls "a docucomedy," is the result. It had its world premiere in January at the U.S.

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Film Festival in Park City, Utah, and opens Friday in seven cities. The Neptune has booked it here for a weeklong run.

Although most of the witnesses are 1950s survivors, Benz and his co-director, Josh Waletzky (who made the recently telecast documentary, "Partisans of Vina"), were most concerned with the period from 9 to 19 in anyone's life. And they wanted to avoid turning the movie into a collection of raunchy sex jokes.

"We had a major preoccupation with being warm-hearted, with capturing the innocence of that period," he said. "We weren't disposed to being vulgar about it, although humor was important."

"With all the worry about AIDS, we were concerned that by the time the movie came out, sex wouldn't be funny anymore. But restrictions create obsessions. Heavy petting actually seems quite topical and romantic now — not to mention that it's safe sex. Teen-agers seem to have a particularly strong response to the picture." Much of "Heavy Petting"

still consists of film clips and songs, which added about \$300,000 and plenty of hassles to the \$1 million cost of the 80-minute movie. The owners of "Do You Love Me?" wanted \$48,000 for use of the song, until Benz talked them down to \$5,000. A clip from "The Wild One" involved 15 months of negotiations with Marlon Brando's accountant, lawyer, secretary and the daughter of one of his ex-wives.

Benz ended up shooting about 30 hours of interviews, including one daylong session with Ginsberg, who talked a lot about the gay subculture. Benz couldn't find a way of integrating this material, so the movie restricts itself to heterosexual memories, many of them comic only in retrospect.

The experience of putting the film together didn't leave Benz with much nostalgia for the teen years.

"Most people have a pretty traumatic adolescence," he said. "I don't know what percentage of teen-agers have 'happy experiences,' but most of those we talked to didn't. It does seem that a small percentage of attractive kids get all the dates in high school, while the rest watch from the sidelines, feeling insecure."