

A Sexplanation

Not rated. Running time: 1 hour 16 minutes. Rent or buy on Apple TV, Amazon and other streaming platforms and pay-TV operators.



The debate around American sex education doesn't get much more personal than "A Sexplanation," an insightful documentary in which the director Alex Liu explores the politics and culture of sex ed in the United States while confronting his own shame around sexuality that stems back to his adolescence.

As far as its approach to the topic, "A Sexplanation," available on demand, is hardly reinventing the wheel. Liu, who identifies as gay and previously wrote for the PBS educational program "Nova ScienceNow," is not shy in expressing his preference for comprehensive sex education over abstinence-only curriculums. He travels around the country and to Canada to interview a variety of sexual health experts, researchers and educators who dish out common talking points on the topic of reform: Shame-based programming doesn't work; lessons should incorporate discussion about consent and cover L.G.B.T.Q.-inclusive experiences; conversations about pornography can help teenagers decipher between reality and fantasy and gain more realistic ideas about sex and relationships. On the other side of the debate, Liu interviews Todd Weiler, a Republican member of the Utah State Senate

who has lobbied to mandate pornography filters on the internet, and speaks with several anti-abortion campaigners outside the San Francisco Women's March.

Liu's cheekiness occasionally leads him to some "Supersize Me"-esque stunts, like when he masturbates in an M.R.I. machine as part of a comprehensive scientific study on how orgasms affect brain activity. But he's equally willing to bare his whole emotional self, like when he speaks to a particularly open-minded Catholic priest on the nature of sex and intimacy or has an awkward yet sweet heart-to-heart with his own parents about sex. Liu lends a frankness and sensitivity to the topic that would make "A Sexplanation" suitable to be shown in a classroom, which was perhaps his intention all along.

CLAIRE SHAFFER

Being BeBe

Not rated. Running time: 1 hour 33 minutes. Rent or buy on Amazon, Apple TV and other streaming platforms and pay-TV operators.



In the perspicacious documentary "Being BeBe," the director Emily Branham seems to have taken a page from Janet Malcolm. Within her profile of Marshall Ngwa, who performs drag as BeBe Zahara Benet, Branham tucks lucid insights about the codes, ethics and art of cinematic biography.

Branham, who gathered



GIANT PICTURES

The drag performer BeBe Zahara Benet in "Being BeBe," a documentary directed by Emily Branham.

footage of Ngwa over 15 years and became his dear friend, frames the movie as a reminiscence. It opens in 2020 in Ngwa's Minneapolis home, where he watches clips that Branham captured years earlier and reacts to the scenes in real time. These segments intermix with an overview of Ngwa's life and his campaign for drag superstardom. Special attention is paid to his affection for his family, and the grace with which he navigated their shifting feelings about his embodying BeBe.

In a sea of glossy celebrity bio-docs, "Being BeBe" is a breath of fresh air. It observes its subject with a clear eye, and does not shy away from positioning

Ngwa's triumphs, such as his exciting win on the first season of "RuPaul's Drag Race," within a context of artistic, financial and social struggle.

Perhaps most powerful of all is Branham's intermittent presence in the film. Sometimes she queries Ngwa from behind her grainy video camera, or he addresses her. In other moments, she interrupts her representation of Ngwa to stage a broader survey of homophobia in Cameroon. With her feature debut, Branham exposes her hand as filmmaker, and reminds us that "Being BeBe" is only a snapshot of Ngwa's persona; the real thing is so much richer.

NATALIA WINKELMAN

The Janes

Not rated. Running time: 1 hour 41 minutes. On HBO platforms.

"The Janes" is a straightforward, talking-heads documentary from HBO that provides a brief history of the Jane Collective, a clandestine abortion group working out of Chicago in the late 1960s and early 70s.

Roe v. Wade, the 1973 Supreme Court decision that protected a women's right to an abortion, had not yet been handed down, meaning the procedure was illegal in most states, forcing women with unwanted pregnancies to turn to exploitative abortion providers

(like the Mafia) or resort to dangerous methods to self-induce an abortion.

This situation — and the can-do spirit of the times, cultivated by the civil rights and women's liberation movements — sparked the members of Jane into action.

The documentary, directed by Tia Lessin and Emma Pildes, relies primarily on testimonies from the Jane Collective's women volunteers, tracing their efforts from the beginning, when the group was merely a referral service, to their final days contending with law enforcement.

Ultimately, the Jane Collective provided close to 11,000 abortions by the time Roe v. Wade came into effect, at which point the group ceased its activities. (Though the renewed push for restrictive abortion laws today, and reports of the present Supreme Court's ruling on a case that could overturn Roe, casts a sense of bleak uncertainty over the film's otherwise triumphant conclusion.)

Cookie-cutter though it is, "The Janes" does have something going for it: the former Janes, the interview subjects, who all speak about their beliefs and shared past with striking clarity. They remind us that their work — their commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being of other women — was not really all that radical, but a measured, intelligent response to the inadequacies of a system that refused to fend for its own.

BEATRICE LOAYZA