

# The rise and fall of an exhibitionist

A new biographical documentary, *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* (Cinemax, Tuesday November 28 at 8.30pm ET), has as its subject a woman so exhibitionistic that it requires two sets of narrators: the famous drag queen RuPaul, and two cheaply made hand puppets speaking in falsetto unison.

Resembling a cross between an Oprah segment and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*, the highly camp film chronicles the rise and fall of Tammy Faye Bakker Messner, the much put-upon former doyenne of what was once the world's largest evangelical media empire.

From RuPaul and the puppets we learn that Tammy and former husband Jim's PTL (Praise the Lord) ministries encompassed 2,500 television and radio stations.

They held scandalous tele-

thons to build Heritage USA, a Christian theme park that, according to this documentary, had the highest attendance of any non-Disney theme park in the US.

Tammy also reveals her little-known legacy: she credits herself with being the first televangelist to champion the Aids cause, which made her an improbable minor gay icon.

One of her admirers says: "After the [apocalypse], there'll just be roaches, Tammy Faye and Cher."

In 1987, charges of embezzlement forced the couple to resign from the network.

Jim was sentenced to 45 years in prison, and Tammy's mascara-clotted, tear-streaked face became one of the most reproduced media images of the late 1980s.

Her Baby Jane make-up is a recurring theme in this

documentary: when preparing for a photo shoot, the dresser asks her to wipe off some of her lipstick. "The lip liner and eyebrows are [tattooed permanently]," explains Tammy, which must save her a lot of time in the morning.

Everything about this documentary has been authorised by Tammy. I found this hard to believe until it became apparent that she has no shame.

In one scene, the documentarian's camera follows Tammy to a meeting with an executive at the USA Network. She is there to pitch her ideas for new talk shows, one of which she wants to call "Medicine Today with Tammy Faye", in which she proposes to "sit with Alzheimer's patients and let them explain Alzheimer's".

The unflappable executive cups his mouth in his hand, and clicks his ballpoint pen rhythmically as she is speaking, then he says cautiously: "I'm going to go out on a limb here and say that you seem to want to be in front of the camera." There you have it.

As part of the "Where are they now?" upbeat segment of this documentary we see Tammy running her own small ministry.

At one such meeting she tells the crowd: "In ancient civilisations, you know what they used to do if you murdered someone? They made you carry [your victim] on your back. It would smell."

Then she started singing. At this point, my cat stood on his hind legs and pawed at the VCR, trying to eject the videotape.

■ Speaking of ejection, please let there be no more fictionalised films about citizens of communist countries defecting to the US. Hollywood simply cannot get this genre right, even though this is the sort of easy-tears plot at which they normally excel.

Films such as *White Nights* (1985) and *Moscow on the Hudson* (1986) hoped to benefit from the reflected glow of patriotic good feelings. But in the process of creating such films, the cast and crew seem to get completely high on themselves.

HBO's contribution to the genre is *For Love or Country*, a made-for-TV dramatic film about the Cuban émigré jazz trumpeter Arturo Sandoval



Her way: Tammy Bakker in her authorised documentary

(HBO, Saturday November 18 at 9pm ET).

What makes this film different from its forbears is that it has muted the usual patriotic tenor, instead of going to the opposite extreme: the US officials who process Sandoval's asylum application are made to look complete imbeciles. One of them asks the Cuban native: "Why did you join the Communist party?"

This film does have its sweet moments, such as a scene in which Dizzy Gillespie (played by Charles S. Dutton) spies Sandoval playing in a club in Havana, and orders his assistant: "Give me my horn." It's a romantic portrayal of the jazz world, in which strangers jump on stage and jam together, united by the sheer strength of their talent.

If only that scene had con-

tinued for another hour. As the film's title suggests, however, this is not only a defection film and a music film, but also a *cherchez-la-femme* film.

Sandoval's initial attempt to flee Cuba was thwarted when he met his wife, a party hard-liner. She explains the origins of her devotion to Castro: "I saw him riding in that jeep, that beard, that smile, he was like a saint."

When Sandoval discovers his bride-to-be has hired a spy to dig up information on his past, he tells her: "You could send 100 guys to follow me, all they're gonna find out is, I love you."

Castro, jazz, boy-meets-girl, what's the difference? It's funny how disparate events in a film can be united by the commonality of babbling incoherence.

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