

Handbag:

the untold story of the

FAG HAG

Handbag is a film about an unusual kind of friendship - the relationship between gay men and straight women, as told by Monica Davidson, a self-declared “fag hag” (aka an array of names, including ‘handbag’). It appears fag-hag-ness may be in the blood, as her grandmother was a ‘beard’, her mother a disco diva and AIDS volunteer, and her three kids are all part of the GLBTQI rainbow.

Monica is fascinated by the largely unsung history of the ‘fag hag’, even though straight women have been allies and protectors for their gay friends for generations. The friendship itself is simultaneously renowned in pop culture and yet often misunderstood in real life, even through the hideous use of the term ‘hag’. Monica dives into academic research to find out the roots of the ‘fag hag’ friendship, and interviews people on the street about the stereotype of the fat and sexless hanger-on. She even speculates about FagHagZilla, a mythological monster that destroys gay men with a single stomp.

Monica decides to embark on a personal crusade to find out more about the women who have always stood beside their gay friends through thick, thin and sequins. During a visit to the USA and the San Francisco Pride festival, she meets more unacknowledged straight heroines of the gay community, quietly providing love, support and allegiance without any expectation of recognition or reward. On her return to Australia, Monica and her posse carve out a moment in the spotlight by creating a giant moving Handbag float for the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade.



Monica and the Handbag Float at Mardi Gras

The Narrative

Monica starts by looking at the beginnings in her own community. She thinks about herself as the quintessential 'fag hag', who even as a child befriended the effeminate little boy in her class who had no male friends of his own. As a tomboy she and her fellow gender renegade became fast friends, and yes – he did turn out to be gay. She looks around her adult life, and talks to her posse of gay best friends about her role in the gay community. She learns that she has been more of a support than she even realised. Even a selection of fag/hag couples at the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Fair Day confirm that this is a special friendship, unique for its intimacy and complete lack of conditions.

The interviews also uncover a dark side to the 'fag hag' stereotype – that of a woman who takes the best of the social life that gay men offer without understanding the true struggles of the queer community. She then introduces her mother Pat, and mum's best friend Bobby. He would come for visits to the house every now and then, but once in a special while he would bring Monica to parties. He gave Monica her first pair of disco roller skates at a drag queen party. Now Bobby has gone missing, possibly lost to the AIDS pandemic. Monica talks about her friend Peter, also lost to suicide, and the endless concern that comes with wondering if gay friends are well and safe.

Monica turns to popular culture – *Will and Grace*, *Cabaret*, *Fame*, *Sex and the City* – and wonders why there is a disconnect between the stereotype of the fag hag and the fabulousness of straight women as gay icons. She imagines herself in the roles of Liza Minnelli from *Cabaret*, or Jane Russell in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. She speculates about the past, and a time when being gay was a crime. She introduces her grandmother Dorothy, and find out more about her role as a 'beard' (or pretend girlfriend) for her dear friend Keithy, an openly gay man who needed his straight friend to protect him from arrest or violence. Monica introduces the Great Beards of History and celebrates their role as protector and ally. She even speculates that, if a gay man was once referred to as a 'friend of Dorothy', if perhaps Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz was in fact the first fag hag of our times.

Monica's research then takes her beyond her own family and friends to the USA, where she meets even more remarkable women who have done their part for their community without any reward or commemoration. She interviews prominent activists, academics and authors who have investigated the unsung woman behind the gay man, and talks to fags and hags across the USA as summer and Pride roll across the country. Despite so much love and support, Monica wonders why there is no open acknowledgement of the work that these women have so lovingly undertaken to support a community that still refers to them as 'hags'. She worries that the 'fag hag' might slip from embarrassing side note in gay history to complete invisibility without anyone ever celebrating their extraordinary contribution to gay men's lives. There is so much to celebrate, as the role of women as straight allies has helped change the world inestimably for the gay community at large, and Monica comes home determined to shine a spotlight on the women who have been overlooked for too long.

Along with her family and friends Monica and Pat create the ultimate moving tribute to their lifelong contribution to the gay community – a float for the famous Sydney Gay Mardi Gras parade, the first fag hag float in the event's long history. The team decide on a new term to describe the 'fag hag', and decide on the word Handbag, the best representation of the equal and glamorous role that men and women play in each other's lives. The film tracks the design, the drama and the tears as the group construct a massive mobile pink handbag that symbolises the symbiotic relationship.

Using history, dance sequences, pathos and a huge helping of humour, *Handbag* explains the remarkable women who have stood side-by-side with their gay friends, often ignored and even shamed by the community they support, still staunch devotees to the end.



Getting Seen

The primary gay and female skewed audience for *Handbag* can be accessed in several ways. The most obvious is the queer film festival circuit. It would be ideal for *Handbag* to feature in queer film festivals, such as Queer Screen in Sydney as this coincides with Mardi Gras each year. Local theatrical release would be limited, of course, but perfect for an exhibitor such as Dendy or Palace Cinemas. We will develop innovative pathways to audiences including host-a-screening events and tie in with significant calendar dates (such as Wear It Purple Day), and find ways to make the film available via digital download for people living in countries where being gay is still a criminal offence.

For local broadcast, the ABC is the primary choice for first-run television screening of *Handbag*. The film is partly shot in the USA and Women Make Movies (NYC) have expressed interest in representing the project in America and helping to get the film into festivals and classrooms, as well as exploring broadcast options. We will also actively seek presale for digital screening and download. The film is completed to a fine cut and now needs post production funds to complete and market.

We just need a little bit more money to get it finished, and get it out there.
Would you like to watch the finished fine cut and find out for yourself if the film is any good?
Visit <https://vimeo.com/182200983> Password is FagHag2016



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All Women, All the Time

Handbag has been almost exclusively created by women, in front of and behind the scene. All the key “characters” in the film are women, most notable our charming and irreverent host Monica and her sweet, sharp-tongued mother Pat.



The key creative team behind *Handbag* are also all female.

Producer – Phoebe Hart
Writer and Director – Monica Davidson
Co-writers – Naomi Doyle, Phoebe Hart
Editor – Claire Fletcher
Director of Photography – Velinda Wardell
Score – Pru Montin



Visual Approach

The style of the documentary is that of glamorous home movie. The film is a combination of interviews, observational footage, video diary, glamorous Hollywood-style dance sequences, licensed footage, archival home movie, animation and first person roving reporting. It is a dynamic and eclectic mix of styles to create a fun visual aesthetic. Monica and her family have been filmed speaking to camera in their homes, having drinks with friends, working and playing together. Home movies and photographs that depict the handbag relationship through the decades round out the personal story, as do interviews of the various featured characters. Interviews and footage of experts such as authors, pop culture gurus and academics giving their opinion about the wider meanings and interpretations of the 'fag hag' friendship add weight to the purely personal narrative. Animations of some of the concepts behind the narrative (including FagHagZilla) and campy dance-dream sequences round out the madcap approach.



Historical Background

Handbag will explore the dual histories of the gay liberation and the women's movement from the 1950s to now. In the 1950s, the time of Keithy and Dorothy, homosexuality was a crime. Straight women were often used as 'beards' for gay men, a pretend girlfriend or date that would protect the man and shield him from unwanted attention or social awkwardness. In the 1970s, feminism and gay rights crashed head on, and straight women were often ignored, pitied or maligned by gay men. Later, those same straight women, like Pat, helped lovers and families through the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and onwards. Now, openly heterosexual politicians and straight people from the community march side by side with their gay comrades for marriage equality, yet to be achieved in Australia. Even so, the role of the fag hag is not over yet, as there are more than 68 countries in the world where being gay is still a punishable offence, and women as allies are more important than ever.

One of the most important themes of *Handbag* is the breaking down of stereotypes and the inclusion of diversity. The handbag friendship is a loving example of how misfits and oddballs find each other, and the film is full of diversity – overweight leading ladies, hairy gay men, dancing boys of all ages and sizes confident in their gold pants, the elderly and the overlooked. This is not a documentary about poofers and their sad hangers-on - this is a film about women and how friendship can instigate change.



Find out more at www.handbagthemovie.com