

Deputy to the King



Bayard Rustin (right) was a key player backing Martin Luther King.

A powerful new documentary examines the gay man who was the linchpin of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s crusade for civil rights **By David Ehrenstein**

Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin ■ Directed by Nancy Kates and Bennett Singer ■ PBS ■ January 20 (Check local listings)

Bayard Rustin—a key ally of Martin Luther King's and the major architect behind the 1963 march on Washington—was gay, openly so, decades before the Stonewall uprising or even the semiclandestine Mattachine and Daughters of Bilitis movements of the early '50s. And, as revealed by the startling new documentary *Brother Outsider: The Life of Bayard Rustin*, airing January 20, he triumphed, even if the mainstream history books have up until now given him a minor role in the key political struggle of the last century. But as filmmakers Nancy Kates and

Bennett Singer demonstrate, Rustin was absolutely central. He *was* the civil rights movement.

Bayard Rustin protested segregation in West Chester, Pa., public accommodations long before Rosa Parks's fabled Montgomery, Ala., bus ride. Raised by a fiercely political-minded Quaker grandmother, who never objected to his sexuality, Rustin was a strikingly charismatic figure from the first. Tall, handsome, well-spoken, and possessed of a beautiful singing voice, he could have pursued a career with musician Josh White's quartet. But Rustin's true career was in activism.

Refusing to be inducted for World War II, Rustin urged others to burn their draft cards and served three years in prison for it. He was arrested again after the war in Chapel Hill, N.C., for

the crime of "sitting with a white man on a public bus" and was sentenced to 22 days on a chain gang. His most significant conviction, however, came in 1953 in Pasadena, Calif., where he was charged with "lewd vagrancy" in a public park—a George Michael moment that haunted the rest of his life.

When he went to Montgomery in 1956 to advise a political novice named Martin Luther King, the radical Rustin was quickly spotted as a threat to the movement by influential Democrat Lyndon Baines Johnson, who encouraged leading black politico Adam Clayton Powell to attack Rustin, citing the Pasadena arrest. Because of this, Rustin was forced to resign from King's organization. But he returned in triumph in 1963 for the march on Washington.

The success of the march led Rustin to an alliance with his former enemy Johnson, who, after assuming the presidency, pushed forward civil rights legislation that had lain dormant for years. This alliance in turn found Rustin reluctant to protest the Vietnam War. Yet he was engaged in that same period in intense verbal battles with leaders of the then-rising Black Power movement. Rustin felt a joining of civil rights and labor held the key to the future, which is why he encouraged King to come to Memphis to support a sanitation workers' strike—the scene of King's assassination. Yet as always with Rustin, he managed to rise above hardship and continue his work protesting injustice throughout the world on many fronts. In the film's last scenes he's seen at a gay and lesbian march, declaring that the community had become "the barometer for human rights." Were he alive today, there's no doubt Rustin would be on the front lines for same-sex marriage. As for gays in the military—well, that's a matter about which he would doubtless beg to differ. ■

Ehrenstein is the author of Open Secret: Gay Hollywood 1928–2000.