

Channel 15 to air documentary on black gays



TOM DORSEY
TV-RADIO
CRITIC

More than half of the PBS stations in the nation, including KET, are refusing to air this week's edition of "P.O.V." on black gays. Louisville's WKPC-15 is broadcasting the controversial documentary.

The controversy centers on the constant use of obscenities, some blurred male frontal nudity and a sequence in which two men kiss in an apparent prelude to lovemaking.

That was enough for 174 of the 284 PBS stations and state networks to dump it. KET is one of the eight state systems rejecting "Tongues Untied," scheduled to air nationwide tomorrow night.

WKPC-15 will show the program at 11. It will be preceded by a taped warning from John Curtin, station general manager. He'll tell people not to watch if they will be offended by the subject matter.

"The easiest thing to do would be to not air it," says Curtin. Channel 15 could just point to the others pre-empting the episode and say they were going with the trend, but Curtin feels the program has artistic merit and something to say.

Some of what it says comes in the form of obscenities. "The language is very strong... very much the language of the street and the people involved," Curtin acknowledges.



Marlon Riggs, front in black hat, and friends are in Riggs' "Tongues Untied," a controversial "P.O.V." segment on black homosexuals.

It's that language that prompted KET to drop the show.

"The staff was pretty unanimous that the stream of obscenities was just too offensive... and didn't add anything to the social or interpretative value of the program," says O. Leonard Press, KET executive director.

Press said KET was under no external pressure to cancel the show. But other state PBS systems concede that they would take a lot of heat from legislators, who hold their purse strings, if they aired this program.

"We debated it," says Curtin, "and decided that it was important for us to air it. We have always felt that when something is right on the

line, it's better to err on the side of airing it than not."

Press said he applied the yardstick he believes most newspapers in this area would follow. "If a newspaper would print (what is said and shown), then we would play it," he said.

It's safe to say no community newspaper would dare to print the obscenities uttered throughout the show, nor to picture the controversial scenes. However, television regularly details much more explicit subject matter than newspapers.

The male nudity isn't much of an issue. Few viewers would know the men were naked unless told in advance. The offensive language is largely confined to one four-letter

word, which is used almost as a punctuation.

Curtin and Press think the word was used liberally to get attention, and it obviously has. The lovemaking sequence is mild, but the male kissing scene might shock many viewers. Many viewers are still uncomfortable with explicit heterosexual lovemaking on television and aren't ready for this.

More stations in the South and Midwest are pre-empting "Tongues Untied" than in other areas of the nation. All the PBS stations in the nation's 20 largest metropolitan areas are carrying it. Curtin, far from criticizing KET for dropping it, said he might have done the same thing if he were in Press' position.

"Different alternative lifestyles are more open and accepted in cities than in rural areas and small towns," Curtin said. "Stations should make their decision based on community standards."

"Many of these productions are made in New York City or Los Angeles, which have very different cultures from Iowa," Press said.

Both managers agree that the program is well-produced and has some redeeming social value. "It is in many ways a very sensitive work," said Press. "I really feel it shows the struggle of people in our society, especially blacks and gays," Curtin added.

Press is right when he says the obscenities aren't necessary to make a point, even though, as Curtin points out, they do get your attention.

The unfortunate thing is that "Tongues Untied" does have some thing to say to the gay and straight community that both should hear. It's unfortunate that it's packaged in a gaudy wrapping that will turn many off before they discover what's inside.