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Gladstone Rocks The Hot Docs

As I waited in line for *Last Call At The Gladstone Hotel* Saturday afternoon, bartenders from the Gladstone Hotel were behind me. "It makes us look bad, I hear," they were saying. "Like, not us personally, but the hotel. Real bad."

If you are a recent transplant to Toronto, or just barely over the drinking age, then you probably had no idea that the Gladstone was once a cockroach infested, drug-addled, festering slum that was inches away from delapidation. In the documentary, filmmakers Derreck Roemer and Neil Graham follow the Gladstone from disgusting to decadence in just over an hour. Or is it the other way around?



With its slimy floors and peeling paint, the Gladstone was almost unrecognizable as Roemer and Graham start this film. Soon you were falling in love with the regular tenants such as Marianne (pictured above), an adorable hunched old lady who spends more than her monthly pension on rent, and consequentially has to eat out of the garbage. We also meet charming housekeeper Marilyn, who dipped into her own pockets to buy new drapery and vanilla-scented garbage bags for the weekly tenants. The building is a filthy mess, but it's shelter to those who need it and the Melody bar provides a nice, quiet place to drown your sorrows on any given evening.

Enter new owners Micheal and Anne Tippin of Tippin Corporation, and their partners Margie and Christina Zeidler. They had visions of restoring the hotel to an artistic haven while still allowing residents to stay put. At first, it was off to a good start. They opened up the Art Bar downstairs, and flocks of young people came to dance the night away. When you see Marianne shuffling through the crowd of drunken twenty somethings and their loud techno music follows her upstairs, you realise that this movie isn't about the building, it's about the people who get lost in the renovations.

Things start to go downhill as the Tippins and Zeidlers start to disagree. Soon, the bills remain unpaid and tenants face eviction because of lack of insurance. The Zeidlers step in as the sole owners, and things still don't get better. We see the filmmakers helping Marianne move her belongings out of the building after she is evicted. We see rain pouring in through the ceilings and mould eating away at the walls. Finally, the boiler bursts, and everyone has to leave—for good. Next time the doors open, room prices have increased from \$49.95 a night up to \$375 a night, and the Gladstone is looked up to as a chic Toronto hotspot.



We all know how this story ends. The Gladstone is now a beacon of the gentrification that West Queen West has been fighting for years. Many left the movie theatre grumbling about how unfair it was to kick out the poor and underprivileged just so that we can have a place to sing out-of-tune Bon Jovi songs on karaoke night. But at the same time, the filmmakers remind you that the Gladstone was a mouldy drug den, in need of serious renovations in order to stay standing. It was "gut-wrenching" to have to evict all of the tenants, and to their credit, the Zeidlers found everyone affordable housing and paid—and continue to pay—some of their rents.

The movie was a fantastic, well-researched piece that delved deep into the history of the Gladstone and provided a poignant look at how quickly things can change. It didn't necessarily make the hotel itself look bad, dear bartenders, but it did make the point

that when urban renewal occurs, there's always someone lost in the shuffle.