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Lesbian Culture, Politics, and Entertainment

March 2002

Girlfriends

THE LITTLE CHARITY THAT COULD

Astraea's Struggle To
Keep Lesbian Art Alive

ALL-GIRL SPOKEN WORD

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LIPSTICK THESPIANS

*Kissing Jessica
Stein Reviewed*



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breaks free

Ndegeocello Finds
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Sex and the Single Bi Girl

Jessica Stein has the set-up, but not the charm, of *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

by Candace Moore

The plight of the single working girl, sad as it might be, is perhaps not the major social travesty it seems to nervy Jessica Stein (Jennifer Westfeldt), who encounters more freaky faux-pas and substandard word-usage from the slew of weird guys she blind-dates than the lonely New York copy editor can handle. Luckily, a quote from Rainer Maria Rilke in an enigmatic *Women Seeking*

Kissing Jessica Stein

Charles Herman-Wurmfeld
Fox Searchlight Pictures, 96 min.

Women personal ad stirs Stein's bi-curiosity and embarks her somewhat beyond her intentions into an awkward, charming drink-date with hiply dressed, independent thinker Helen Cooper (Heather Juergensen). The two banter cutely, click, and kiss before the night ends, leaving a conflicted Stein to address the feasibility of a relationship with a woman.

Kissing Jessica Stein plays a lot like a bisexual *Bridget Jones's Diary* with fewer bum jokes. Stein, like Jones, is equipped with a cocksure editorial boss, Josh Myers (Scott Cohen), who affectionately calls her by her last name. Director Charles Herman-Wurmfeld, a veteran of theatrical direction, handles his first full-length cinematic feature well. The picture is colorful, well-paced (through the first two-thirds, anyway), and fully emulates the offbeat, down-to-earth scenic feel of the straight pics it seems modeled after: *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *When Harry Met Sally*, and *You've Got Mail*.

Collaboratively written by its two starring actresses in a workshop for the stage, this neurotic/romantic comedy wins by its grasp of dramatic

humor and its performances rather than by its pure human insight. Formerly entitled *Lipschtick*, the film depicts Jessica and Helen flirting while namedropping designer lipsticks in a cab with zealous delight—a slightly laughable over-literization of the term “lipstick lesbians.” (“I blend,” Helen saucily admits.) For a sticky moment, the two seem to be more suited as co-workers at a Clinique counter than as lovers.

The writers explain: “The movie started as an idea for a skit—two Laura Ashley-clad ‘girly-girls’ meet at a day spa to negotiate how to become lesbians. But the more we explored the idea, the more we began to shed the spoof and investigate the deeper underlying truth of our story.”

The day spa scenario may have been nixed, but the bonding between the two women is still a difficult negotiation of the place where identity labels and sexual attraction coincide—and what happens when they don't quite match up. Jessica and Helen's connection is so over-rationalized it becomes ludicrous. In fact, when the characters finally start making out on a regular basis, the series of portraits of them slowly learning how to touch each other on a couch is artfully blended to appear as one long groping session; only wardrobe changes signal the passage of not hours, not days, but weeks until Jessica is comfortable kissing her girl.

Jessica's guilt, reservations, and inability to acknowledge her feelings

for another woman is too exaggerated to be fun to watch. Juergensen's Helen deserves better. The sweet, funny assistant art gallery director is portrayed as completely comfortable with her sexual cravings, whether they be for the passing male delivery boy or the scrumptious gowned girl across the room. Helen is constantly challenging Jessica and forcing her up to the plate, practically to the point of exhaustion.



Westfeldt and Juergensen swap lipstick lore.

Tovah Feldshuh also brings sensitivity, subtlety, and laughs to her edging-on-stereotypical role as Stein's consummate Jewish mother.

Unfortunately, the introspective, more serious side of the movie flops emotionally as it leads the characters into a much-too-quick wrap-up. When the film rises above the drama by making light camp out of its comedy of errors, it actually works. Grade **B-**

Candace Moore, co-editor of the small press *Runcible Spoon*, lives in L.A.

Thick Plots

Wartime perversely lends itself to some good government conspiracy videos.

by Candace Moore

Crooked world-domination

films seem fitting fare lately. Based on the Archie comic book featuring three girl-

rocker crime-fighters, this peppy farce about a titan record company's exploitation comes off surprisingly well. Megarecords, in cahoots with the government, blends subliminal tracks coercing conformist consumerism (via the voice of Mr. Moviephone) into The



Pussycats versus Big Brother

Josie and the Pussycats

Deborah Kaplan,
Harry Elfont
Universal Studios
Home Video, 2000

Pussycats' puff-pop. With teen-sheep the world over proclaiming "orange is the new pink," does anybody worry for the misdirected fate of Rachael Leigh Cook's goody-two-shoes, bland-as-paste Josie or her tagalong friends? Nah. Because the villains are funnier: Parker Posey as the froofily frocked, megalomaniacal tycoon Fiona, and Alan Cumming as her schemey, lapcat agent snap the flashy, somewhat failing comedy into quality camp. Grade: **B+**

Apocalypse Now Redux (Miramax Films, 2001)

One of the greatest Vietnam War movies ever made, *Apocalypse Now* was released in 1979 with a sense of reckless confusion and morale-gone-empty, shared by its director, Francis Ford Coppola, who went way over budget and behind schedule to release a masterly cut piece that could address the United States' sickening, unspeakable war. More than twenty years later Coppola has returned to the editing table to re-establish forty-nine minutes of originally cut footage. Available on DVD, it's easy to see where the extra inserted scenes fill in and deepen the picture, most significantly the French plantation scene. Grade: **A**

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington (Columbia Pictures, 1939)

Real-life dyke Jean Arthur plays razor-sharp Clarissa Saunders, the facetious but dedicated right-hand aide who teaches honest-Abe Jefferson Smith (Jimmy Stewart) how to play senator in this Frank Capra classic. The naïve, noble-minded "Boy Rangers" President Smith is nominated as a ploy to have a controllable dummy in the seat, but when he discovers that a rogue businessman with politicians in his pocket is pushing a bill for personal profit, the upstanding citizen fights the power. With semi-feminist subtext, the film depicts Arthur's character as perhaps more capable than Smith to hold office. Grade: **A-**

Wag the Dog (New Line Cinema, 1997)

Here's a political satire so snaky it may be official required viewing. When the president's sex-life threatens his re-election, his P.R. manager Conrad Brean (Robert de Niro) and assistant Winifred Ames (Anne Heche, in her best role pre-Ellen and "Celestia") hire a Hollywood producer (Dustin Hoffman) to engineer an imaginary war with Albania (replete with footage of peasant girls fleeing through war-torn rubble and heart-warming, patriotic songs) to distract the American people and (does this sound spookily familiar?) encourage them to "stand behind" the president. Directed by Barry Levinson, *Wag the Dog* puts media coverage in perspective if not in utter paradigm shift. Grade: **A**

Searching for love and family...

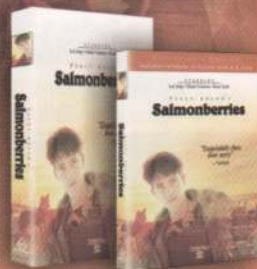
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UNIVERSAL STUDIOS

Art vs. Money

There's a deep irony behind our cover story this month. Just as we were going to press, Meshell Ndegeocello's label, Maverick Records (founded, as you will remember, by Madonna), sent Meshell's new CD, *Cookie*, back to the artist for some rewriting. Meshell's people told us *Cookie*'s release date had been pushed back as far as mid-May. Déjà-vu, I thought. Her last effort,

Bitter, met the same fate when Maverick bounced it back, demanding that the neo-soul, unabashedly bisexual bassist make some songs more radio friendly. So much for Meshell Breaks Free. More like, Meshell Caught While Trying To Escape.

We panicked a bit, fearing the worst: would our cover story, timed to coincide with the album's original release date of March fifteenth, be irrelevant by the time the album was finally released?

Because we were so far into production, there wasn't much we could do. I trusted, in any case, that Elissa Perry's story (page 18) about Meshell's outsider status in the music industry, her unconventional views on the economics of terrorism, and her love affair with Alice Walker's daughter would be of interest to you.

This isn't the first time that Ndegeocello has run afoul of the law of commerce. It isn't the first time, either, that she's run afoul of the lesbians. First there was the deep-voiced, tomboyish musician's refusal to tell the *Advocate* in 1993 that she was queer. Then she quipped to *Vibe* in 1999 that "nine out of

ten black lesbians concur that every now and then, they need to get poked!" As for the lesbian community, in Meshell's oft-voiced opinion, it's white, separatist, and bourgeois. In the past two years, she has cancelled at the last minute two performances at San Francisco's Pride and she was a no-show at *Girlfriends*' pricey photo shoot—and two subsequent retakes.

In light of Meshell Ndegeocello's powerful music and radical politics, however, *Girlfriends* was eager to put her on the cover. Her tunes may not be commercial, white racism may piss her off, and her inner diva may not give a flip about our production schedule. More power to her. (But if she holds any tighter to her principles, she may need the help of the lesbian arts foundation Astraea, profiled so inspiringly by Tara Lohan on page 32.) Enjoy the whole issue!



Some lesbian artists do it for themselves: me at our local gay Theater Rhino

Heather Findlay, Editor in Chief

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