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Crossing Over

A well-done Taiwanese film paints its coming-out story in blue.

by **Candace Moore**

Aren't we all haunted by our

first loves to some degree? It has less to do with the loss of virginity than with the blind faith we place in another human being, the putting of our hearts on the line. Ultimately, whatever happens, first love helps us grow. It is this touching subject that director Chih-Yen Yee tackles in the Taiwanese coming-of-age story, *Blue Gate Crossing*. Young love takes center stage as this film (in Mandarin with English subtitles) takes on a subject that few Chinese films before it have explored: teenage lesbianism.

Described as "hard" by her mother, seventeen-year-old Meng Kerou (Lun-Mei Guey) is coming apart inside. But this brave Fu-Jong High School student is determined to

handle her frustration without crying or letting on. Slight of build, resembling a tiny stalk in baggy pants with short black wisps of hair atop her

head, tomboyish Meng is refreshingly blunt and deliberate. What comes out of her mouth is so unconventionally honest that she usually has to repeat herself: people just can't believe what they hear.

Despite attempting to train herself to prefer men, Meng's firmly in love with Lin Yuezhen (Shu-Hui Liang), her effusive best-girlfriend, who is, in turn, obsessively crushed-out on Zhang Shihao (Bo-Lin Chen), a spiky-haired, good-natured swim jock. Willing to do anything for Lin, she acts as her go-between with Zhang, who, of course, falls for Meng instead. Zhang is a dolt, but a sweet one; Meng actually calls him

"uncomplicated" as a backhanded compliment. He keeps pompously reiterating the mantra "I'm a Scorpio, guitar club, swimming team. I'm hot bad!" But Meng will have none of that hot-badness—besides, she loves girls, a fact she must spell out for Zhang just as she's beginning to swallow the concept herself.

Unlike cute teenybopper flicks such as *But I'm a Cheerleader*, *Blue Gate Crossing* doesn't melt into happy-go-lucky love scenes; instead, its three characters all struggle with longings that never quite get quenched. Funny, but a bit sad too. There is something about the process of coming into one's sexuality as an adolescent that is painful, no doubt, but also character-building; what you go through as a teenager can set the tone for your life in adulthood.

Meng's slow, treacherous, and lonely process of self-discovery isn't granted a Cinderella-meets-her-Princess twist. Attempted kisses are stiff, awkward, and unrequited. In one bedroom scene, Lin permits Meng to embrace her in an intimate slow dance, but only with a blown-up, life-sized picture of Zhang's goofy face taped to her head. When Meng finally kisses Lin, it's a quick peck on the track field, delivered almost as an attack, as Lin babbles on about a fantasy date with Zhang. Anger always seems close at hand beneath these young people's squelched desires. Rebuked by her crush, Lin burns an odd collection of Zhang's belongings that she has

either stolen or dug up from the trash. At the climax of the film, Meng and Zhang get in a full-blown shoving fight in an auditorium at night, pushing each other into metal foldout chairs. Trying to assert his physical primacy, Zhang ends the match in a display of rejected male arrogance, throwing Meng to the floor.

Director Yee is immeasurably helped by cinematographer Hsiang Chienn, who brings an open, spacious feel to daytime scenes set in the school's classroom and gymnasium, full of the light from many windows. In contrast, the streets of Taipei, nearly always portrayed at twilight or at night, are cast respectively in light and dark blues.



Teen love gets twisted in *Blue Gate Crossing*.

If *Blue Gate Crossing* were a painting, it would be by Picasso during his blue period, and Meng Kerou would be the portrait's subject: a sad, dejected clown. Miserable after Lin flees from her lips, Meng lies curled in bed with her mother. She asks mom how she lived on after her father left them, how one goes on after heartbreak. "You just survive," her mom says simply. Meng lies woefully in the dark, waiting for it to start. Grade: **B**

Candace Moore recently edited the book *Revolutions of the Mind*.

Blue Gate Crossing

dir. Chih-Yen Yee
Stand Releasing, 85 min.

video & dvd

Sing Out Strong

These DVDs showcase queer musical acts.

by Candace Moore

Gosh, can the Camp Ovation kids ever sing! Director

Todd Graff's *Fame*-informed film, which focuses on a bunch of musical theatre "freaks" (as they call themselves) at a summertime Julliard-Lite, registers 5.5 on the Cute Richter scale. You can't

help but be tickled, shook, and rumbled when the young actors bust out, performing seventies and eighties Broadway stage hits like pros. Michael (Robin de Jesus) is the zitty drag queen who's goo-goo over guitar-strumming golden boy Vlad (Daniel Letterle).

This feel-good's all about love power—gay and straight—with a cameo from Stephen Sondheim. Serve with cake and ice cream—and dance on the couch as the credits roll. Grade: **B+**



Young divas show their stuff in *Camp*.

Camp

dirs. Todd Graff
IFC Films, 114 min.

Tipping the Velvet (BBC, 2002)

Drag king crooner Kitty Butler (Keeley Hawes) steals the heart of a small-town oyster shucker, Nancy Astley (Rachael Stirling), in the music halls of 1890s Britain. Nan ditches fishy-smelling dresses for tux trousers, hacks her locks off, and joins the show. For a good long run, the two male-impersonating sweeties rule London's primo theatre-houses and muss up the sheets. That is, until business-minded Kitty marries a beard, sending Nan, lovesick, to the streets. This BBC three-part series based on Sarah Waters's novel offers an exquisite, sexually explicit send-up of the Victorian lesbian underground, complete with turn-of-the-century dildos. Grade: **A-**

Yentl (MGM, 1983)

Barbra Streisand directs herself in this moving, albeit melodramatic, musical rendition of Isaac Bashevis Singer's novel *Yentl the Yeshiva Boy*. In early twentieth-century Eastern Europe, when women weren't permitted out of the kitchen long enough to engage in texts headier than picture books, Yentl (Streisand), the daughter of a Jewish scholar, studies the Talmud with the drapes shut. She cuts off her hair, dons orthodox dress, and, passing as a beardless boy, Anshel, enters a Yeshiva to pursue her forbidden passion: knowledge. When she falls in love with a fellow student Avigdor (Mandy Patinkin) and his fiancée, Hadass (Amy Irving), the stunt proves harder to keep up. Grade: **B**

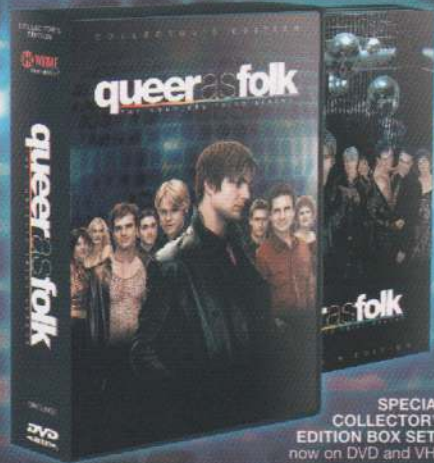
8 Femmes (Focus Features, 2002)

The cast list is too lengthy and star-studded with superb (not to mention beautiful) French actresses to read in one sitting. Just remember Deneuve and Huppert and know that this is the tip of the iceberg. François Ozon's nod to the sixties mod musical is like a whiff of light, fruity perfume on a woman's neck. Of course, in this campy, playful murder mystery, the perfumed one may very well be the murderer! Between chipper songs, the money-hungry ladies of a French manor fumble around ridiculously, flirting, fighting, and accusing each other of stabbing the dead man upstairs, although they spend more time making out in four-inch heels than grieving. Grade: **A-**

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Our "L" Beat

When *Girlfriends* read the news that Showtime had

green-lighted a second season of the pioneering *The L Word*, we were ecstatic. Most of us watch every Sunday, and even those of us who don't are thrilled that TV's first lesbian series broke records by becoming the fastest-ever show to be re-commissioned on the premium cable channel. As we count the days until May 17, when we'll be able to marry legally in Massachusetts, it just shows what strides our community is taking.

Since we first got wind of director Irene Chaiken's pilot a couple of years ago—when it was called *Earthlings*—*Girlfriends* has been following, covering, and supporting it. Actresses Katherine Moennig and Leisha Hailey (pictured on this page) graced our December 2003 cover, and we've been giving updates in our "Check It Out" section nearly every issue.



Shane and Alice see lots of L-words in *Girlfriends*. The women and men of *The L Word* have returned the favor. The characters on the show read *Girlfriends*, discuss it, and have it lying around—just like real lesbians. If you caught the episode where the

gals take a road trip to Palm Springs for the Dinah Shore Women's Weekend, you may have noticed that they shopped at *Girlfriends'* booth for T-shirts and back issues.

Music has been a big part of *The L Word* experience, with contributions from Melissa Etheridge to Lucinda Williams. We know that music is also a big part of *your* L-word experience; that's why we publish our annual music issue. Happily, the release of the Indigo Girls' new CD *All That We Let In* coincides with this year's; the Girls granted an interview to us just in time to put the activist-musician-lesbian love objects on our cover. Be sure to read the part where Saliers gives us her gut take on *The L Word*.

Another must-read in this issue is "A Chorus of Angels." If you thought your local queer chorus was nerdy, apolitical, and male-dominated, prepare to have your consciousness raised. My other favorite is this month's soapbox, Jenny Egan's "*Rolling Stone* Gathers no Women," about why women don't show up on the mainstream music press's "Top Musicians" lists. (She also offers her own list as an antidote.) And don't forget to check out our fun portraits of up-and-coming gay-friendly musicians on page 34.

Rock on.

Heather Findlay, Editor in Chief

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