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the word on lesbian lifestyle

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GIRL GUIDE

film and dvd

FRENCH CUT

FILM REVIEW

by Candace Moore

The state-side release of *High Tension* offers a fresh, hot angle on the terror genre.

High Tension
dir. Alexandre Aja
(Lions Gate Films, 85 minutes)

This French thriller tracks a young woman as she journeys with her best friend to the countryside and experiences some queer stirrings for her cottage-mate. Sound idyllic? Well, the quaint setting contains enough hacked-to-bits bodies to have attracted an NC-17 rating for its U.S. release. Lions Gate Films shaved a full minute of hard-core gore off Alexandre Aja's film before they resubmitted the English language version to garner an R—for language, terror, sexual content, and "graphic bloody killings." The result is an un-ironic homage to the seventies slasher genre, chock full of: Graphic. Bloody. Killings.

Two college students, Marie (Cecile de France, *Around the World in 80 Days*) and Alex (Maiwenn Le Besco) must study, not party, like they've been doing too much lately. Slightly hung-over and singing to French techno, they drive through cornfields to Alex's family rural home, where "rednecks" are the only neighbors. Their plan is to stay the weekend and crack open the International Law books bright and early. Marie is beautiful and slightly gender ambiguous, blond hair shorn Joan-of-Arc short, dew-eyed in a grey hoodie. She's a gorgeous cross between Jean Seburg's adorable-chic in Godard's *Breathless* and early Angelina Jolie's lippy toughness.



Cecile de France defends herself.

While Alex readies for bed, Marie, restless in Alex's family's dark wood home full of creaks, shadows, parakeets, and porcelain dolls with missing eyes, wanders outside to smoke amongst the swaying corn husks. From outside, she catches sight of her friend showering and watches in long-shot, unseen, as Alex washes her hair and breasts. Marie goes up to bed, puts some Reggae on her headphones to blast out the cacophony of crickets, and promptly masturbates. Meanwhile a killer enters the house, cuts up the Hendrix the bloodhound and beheads Alex's dad, the start to a killing spree from which Marie spends the rest of the film trying to escape. What keeps her coming back towards the killer is her obsession with Alex, who's been captured and chained up, an obsession that unfolds along with the storyline.

Not for the squeamish (if you hide your eyes during all the violence, you'll end up seeing very little film), this horror flick is remarkable for what *is* seen. *High Tension* is not like those thrillers that, a la *Psycho*, function through a kind of connect-the-dots, allowing the viewer's imagination to ultimately commit the brutality. But it's also unlike other hack-and-slash flicks like *Halloween*. Here you're privy to the killer's facial features throughout. Here you can feast on the sick-fuck psycho's muttong mug, hear his bourbon-curdled voice, and see the A through Z of his disgusting acts.

What causes tension then—even the *high* variety—if everything is visible? If we know exactly what the killer looks like, doesn't that rob him of some existential demon-godliness?

What propels *High Tension*'s exquisite discomforts are the reaction shots of Cecile de France, who proves herself again and again to be anything but helpless. Cecile de France provides an intricate lexicon of expressions of longing, disgust, fear, guilt, and intelligence under pressure. Marie must remain utterly silent, literally holding in her air so that the killer—always near—can't detect her smallest exhale, even when the most scream-inducing acts are before her eyes. All the way until the film's curveball ending, we are constantly reading Marie's face both empathetically and sympathetically, unable to assist her, and we begin to understand that the real spectacle is not the killing, but Marie's complex continuum of terror.

Grade: **B+**

GIRL PLAY

Dir. Lee Friedlander
(Wolfe, 2004, 90 minutes)

Actress-comedians Lacie Harmon and Robin Greenspan star as themselves in this film based on their theatrical production, *Real Girls*, about falling hard for each other while cast as lovers in a play. Robin must either suppress her burgeoning crush for Lacie or extricate herself from a six-year long relationship. For her part, Lacie must hang up her leather jacket and her penchant for taking home drunk ladies from bars. *Girl Play* is layered with self-consciousness and starry-eyed speeches on true love.

Lee Friedlander's feature sold out to audiences at LA's 2004 Outfest and won Outstanding Lesbian Narrative Feature Film. But truthfully the comedy is dulled by having theater actors performing monologues directly to the camera, a practice which hardly ever translates well to celluloid, especially if most shots are of a blank, dark stage.

Once you give yourself over to the spoken wordiness of *Girl Play*, though, you realize that it's not cheesy writing causing you to slowly slouch into your seat with embarrassment. On the contrary, *Girl Play*'s tales of lesbian bed death, breakup sex, bulk toilet-paper buying, and stormy cabin getaways—all told by overly-groomed Los Angelenos—are laced with healthy amounts of smart self-deprecation, vulnerability, and humor.

It's the direction that's the problem. Some of the slow-mo feels overdone, as if by adding camera tricks to what is essentially a stage piece with a few flashbacks, Friedlander hopes to stamp *Girl Play* as film. The flashbacks themselves are pleasurable to watch, especially the ones camped-up by Dom DeLuise and Mink Stole. And despite the literally staged quality of this film's delivery, an authenticity shines through. These two real-life long-term partners share successfully their odd bit of struck lightning, and celebrate that awkward chain of events that caused them to take a leap of faith.

Grade: **B** —Candace Moore



Robin (left) and Lacie on stage.

WOLFE VIDEO

REEL LOVES

by Candace Moore

Karen Everett's *Women in Love* follows her posse through some high-volume intimacy.

Director Karen Everett's third documentary in a trilogy about lesbian sex investigates polyamory from a very intimate place: her own life. The director behind 1996's *Framing Lesbian Fashion* talks candidly about *Women in Love*, screening now at all the major queer film fests.

Did you start filming *Women in Love* with polyamory in mind?

I found myself at age forty falling in love for the sixth time; as an artist my way of exploring my fascination with relationships was to pick up a camera, so I started filming [my lover] Erin and my circle of friends. There was no destination in mind. But when Erin started acting on our discussions about polyamory, I was curious to know if it was actually a strategy for maintaining a long-term relationship.

At one point, your friends told you, "this is too much, you're obsessed with constantly filming."

After two years, I found myself experiencing life more intensely through the camera than in the moment. The most extreme example is the scene where I'm telling Erin I want to have a commitment ceremony, and she says, "I'm shy about commitment." If the camera wasn't in my life, I would have just taken her answer like, "Okay, this isn't some-



PHYLLIS CHRISTOPHER

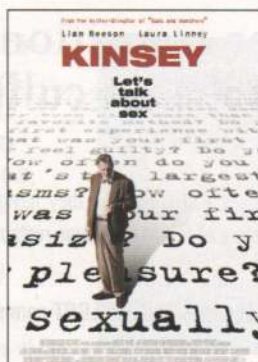
Two hot topics in Everett's new doc on polyamory

DVD REVIEWS

KINSEY

Dir. Bill Condon
(Fox Searchlight
Pictures, 2005)

You can take Liam Neeson out of Ireland, but it seems you can't take the Irish out of the lad, even as he plays sex researcher Alfred Kinsey. Neeson's American accent sounds mysteriously like he swallowed rocks. Despite this distraction, this biopic by *Gods and Monsters* writer-director Bill Condon is an entertaining and intelligent peek into the burning scientific curiosity of the biology professor who awakened America to the complexities of sexuality. Condon also depicts conservative backlash against Kinsey as he conducts research during puritanical fifties America that proved homosexuality is common (paving the road for the gay rights movement) and debunked myths about the female orgasm. The double-disk DVD set includes a "making of" documentary that includes interviews with cast members about their own sex histories. Grade: **A-** —Candace Moore



thing she's wanting right now," but instead I pushed it because I wanted an ending for the film.

Still, there were these *very* genuine moments. Everyone had her own relationship with the camera. Jackie and Shar—they're hams. [My best friend] Phyllis would only let me film her when she was ready.

How did she feel about you using some of the footage of her emotional breakdowns?

She loves me, she's proud of the film, but she can't watch it. She saw the whole film once and had nightmares. As a photographer, she's the kind of person who's more comfortable being an observer than being observed.

I found myself rooting for you to get back together with Phyllis.

A lot of people had that reaction. I'm not quite sure what to make of it. I wonder if part of it is a monogamous mindset. From my point of view, Phyllis and I are together. We co-own a house, we plan our lives together, and she's a deep friend. I think that's the spirit of polyamory in the larger sense: recognizing the primacy of other relationships in our lives.

PRODUCING ADULTS

Dir. Aleksi Salmenperä
(Wolfe Video,
2004)

In this Finnish film from director Aleksi Salmenperä, psychologist Venla (Haapkyllä Minna) desperately wants a child. Her speed-skater boyfriend, with his eye on the Olympic Gold, would rather plant his seeds in an herb garden. As luck (or plot contrivances) would have it, Venla works at a fertility clinic, where the storeroom beckons with both frozen sperm and the possibility of meeting cute lady doctor Satu (Mustakallio Minttu). Soon the two discover just how negligible a warm male body has become. But, by making its men such cold fish, *Producing Adults* douses its own considerable charms in the process. Surrounded by manipulative, downright-creepy guys, the slow-burning romance between these luminous women is enjoyable, but takes implausibly long to heat up. Grade: **B+** —Maria San Filippo



MARGARET CHO COLLECTION

Dir. Lorene Machado
(Wellspring, 2005)

During one point of her filmed stand-up comedy concert *I'm the One that I Want* (2000), Margaret Cho recounts her first lesbian sexual encounter. As it took place on an all-lady cruise ship, Cho puns on the "wetness" of it all. This experience ultimately leads Cho to the sublime revelation that she's not gay or straight, "just slutty." Cho's trio of stand-up films showcases her awe-inspiring ability to channel such indiscriminate into radical, political revolution. With wanton tongue, she interrogates Bush's policies as easily as she speaks of bodily fluids, toxic media, racism, family, and the "sexy butches resembling John Goodman" she'd like to sleep with. Loaded with hilarious extras, this collector's box set is a must-have for those who can never get enough Cho. Grade: **A+** —Alison Hoffman



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INSIDE GIRLFRIENDS

RACHELLE LEE SMITH



Our associate publisher Ralph and I horsed around with former Canadian prime minister Jean Chretien's Mounties before he spoke at Philadelphia's Equality Forum.

Sexy Ladies

No contest: our annual sex issue is my favorite. That's because each one—and this will be *Girlfriends'* seventh—reminds me of how much I love lesbian sex. I don't mean just the act (though certainly there's never enough of that!), but the concept of lesbian sex, its history, its grace under the fire of prejudice. I love how, in the face of so much distortion (Howard Stern's girl-on-girl fantasies, although at least he's honest about them) and ignorance (Queen Victoria: "England doesn't need a law against it. Women would never do that!"), passionate sexual love between women has persevered and flourished. In some cases, it's been something to die for.

This year the new face of lesbian sex is called *The L Word*, a fact reflected by the number of L actresses on our list of "Sexiest Women of the Year": Leisha Hailey (Alice) for her openness, Sarah Shahi (Carmen) for her deep sensuality, and Guin Turner who played Gabby and has writing credits for both seasons, for her smart plot-smithing (well, okay, that hair...). For the list, we solicited names from *Girlfriends'* most passionate contributors and printed their love letters to their nominees. You'll love it.

As we were putting together this issue, ironically the famous anti-pornography activist Andrea Dworkin died. I was saddened: Dworkin had a powerful intellect, and it's my theory that as a lesbian who life-partnered with a gay man, she must have been a little more adventurous than she let on. But I rejoiced that, in the end, her neo-puritanical views lost out to the sex-positive views of the feminists who believed that women, including lesbians, had the right to enjoy sexual materials—and that they may even be empowered by them. The bold, liberationist philosophy that prevailed over Dworkin's rants also inspired the editors of our "naughty little sister" publication, *On Our Backs*. Part of the spoils of our victory in the so-called sex wars is *Girlfriends'* sex issue, so enjoy.

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the word on lesbian lifestyle

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