

DOING DINAH: OUR TIPS FOR 'LESBIAN SPRING BREAK'

the word on lesbian lifestyle

# girls friends

Special Issue

'The L Word'  
Countdown to SEASON 3

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LESSONS

We Learned  
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and Crew

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One and Two

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THE NEW

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Throw  
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Hawai'i • 'Roller Girls' • Beth Ditto  
Tyra Banks • 'Imagine Me and You'



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Illustration by  
Courtney Blazon

Two critics explore different sides of the great love/hate debate over our favorite controversial show.

by Candace Moore

## I Love *The L Word*

That *The L Word* represents a landmark in lesbian representation is rather non-negotiable. As to whether *The L Word* is politically positive, or just another queerly cloaked tentacle of conglomerate capitalism? (Showtime is owned by Viacom, after all.) Well, that's another matter... While *The L Word* isn't perfect, the engrossing cable series is a sly critique of patriarchal, heterosexist society. The show offers multiple visions of what it means to be a queer woman, and its portrayals have become more varied and accurate as the show has had time to develop.

Following *The L Word*'s narrative arc from pilot episode to second season finale, we see a portrait of a lesbian community expanding, becoming increasingly populated with difference rather than sameness. Viewers—straight and gay—witness more diversity of sexuality on this, the first lesbian show, than they've arguably ever been offered before on national television. Stylish and topical, *The L Word* strives to maintain both quality and relevance, and its world is inhabited by many different kinds of women—femmes, butches, inbetweeners, drag kings, women of color, heterosexuals, and bisexuals.

*continued on page 39*

by Judith Halberstam

## I Love *The L Word* Not

First things first: who doesn't love to watch gorgeous women in skimpy clothing making out? Men don't have a monopoly after all on hetero-pornographic desires, and, for the record, I am as happy as the next person to watch Jennifer Beals, Rachel Shelley, or Sarah Shahi (but especially Jennifer Beals) get naked and get down. I am also quite happy to spin through the revolving door of soap opera drama and can weather the ups and downs of frequent crises, desperate sexual entanglements, and comedy about everyday realities. I am even willing to indulge in the fantasy that many of the *L Word* ladies actually may fit some very loose definition of "lesbian."

What I am not so excited about in this queer drama is the development of highly unlikely couplings between characters with little or no gender dynamics whatsoever. I am also unhappy about the show's centering of the never-ending and rather tedious dramas of the rather lame heterosexual-turned-bisexual Jenny, who can only find destructive ways to deal with her childhood sexual abuse and getting in touch with her Jewish heritage. Finally, I am really irritated by the show's deliberate erasure of genderqueer sex and genderqueer characters. And so my two big questions for season three are: can the producers of this wildly successful lesbian soap venture into the uncharted territory of butch-femme erotics and transgender identity and can Jenny get over herself long enough to give up center stage?

*continued on page 40*



# I Love

*The L Word*

## Better Fashion-Plate Than Invisible

Critics of Showtime's class-specific, Beverly Hills 90210-esque portrayal of the West Hollywood scene blamed *The L Word*'s producers for depicting the lesbian community as if it were made up entirely of girly fashion-plates. Yes, there's a predominance of feminine fashion victims on *The L Word*, but as the show racks up air time, it increasingly includes more representations of female masculinity, through recurring characters (Shane, Ivan, and soon,

We see a portrait of a lesbian community expanding, becoming increasingly populated with difference rather than sameness

Moira) and other ladies on the scene.

Shane's androgynous style and boyish mannerisms aren't old school butch, but they do represent a masculine sensibility, increasingly highlighted in season two. At the same time Shane flexes her masculine side, she simultaneously becomes more deeply emotional as a character and confronts her fears of intimacy. In this regard, the show smartly offers viewers a multi-layered, sensitive depiction of female masculinity that is harmonious with femininity.

Admittedly, *The L Word*'s confounded transgender representation (Ivan) was a grave failure (as an essay I've written with Kristen Schilt in the book *Reading*

*The L Word*' argues). In season two, genderqueer character Ivan morphs into a male-identifying misogynist, surely a troubling depiction to most non-misogynistic FTM members of the transgender community. However, we must remember that Ivan did break new ground as a representation with potential. With the introduction of new character Moira (Daniela Sea) in season three, described in gossip about the show as either a highly butch character and/or a female-bodied character who considers transitioning to male, producers have the

chance to demonstrate that they are patching up past holes and errors. If Moira is an FTM character open about his transition (unlike Ivan), then *The L Word* will break yet more ground.

*The L Word* includes a wide variety of representations of queer women through depictions of large-scale community "events" such as the Dinah Shore weekend, Pride, and an Olivia cruise. Smaller scale events, such as drag shows and performances at the Planet, are similarly peopled with butches and femmes alike.


Let's also not forget that lesbian sex is portrayed by *The L Word* as a playground full of possibilities. Through images of sex

toy play, BDSM, dialogues which portray negotiation of sex acts and pleasure, and the portrayal of mutual oral sex and manual stimulation as extremely orgasmic endeavors, *The L Word* directly attacks the cultural hierarchy that crowns penis-vagina intercourse as the best and only kind of sex. Penis-vagina sex is revealed as a limited way to think about sexual range for straight-girls too, as Jenny finds out.

## Jenny, Oh Jenny!

While Mia Kirshner's eccentric character Jenny dumps her fiancé in order to pursue her Sapphic side, and potentially has the *worst* "poetic" voiceovers ever to belabor pay cable, she's gotten a lot more flack than she should. Jenny is an important, if greasy axle that *The L Word*'s stories spin around. Plus, she looks much cuter in season two (I'm a post haircut fan) and has good taste in room decorations.

If we separate the character's plot functionality from whether or not we like her, we'll see that while Jenny's bi-curious floundering in season one might be annoying to those of us who earned our stripes at puberty, it is offered as a direct *critique* of her character's inability to accept herself for who she is. Beyond that, Jenny's particular combination of insecurity, self-destructivity, and self-absorbed ego strike me as a rather realistic portrayal of a young person who has yet to feel comfortable in her skin and in her queerness.



Jenny's season two haircut represents a rite of passage, part of the character's journey toward self-realization and comfort with her queer identity. With the snipping of Shane's scissors, levels of priss also seem to fall away. One of the best moves producers made in the second season was having down-to-earth Shane befriend her new roommate Jenny. We are allowed to watch her play and have a little much-needed fun after all of her melodrama. Of course, as season two progresses, Jenny dons her serious side again and begins dealing with sexual abuse issues, which compound her lack of self-confidence. While her amateur strip show goes over the top, signaling the start of yet another spin out of control, her creative confrontation of Mark, is frankly, kickass.

Additionally, it is mainly through Jenny that the show openly critiques heteronormativity, since as a transitional character, her "inbetweenness" allows her to dialogue with straight male characters Tim in season one, and Mark in season two. While earlier, Jenny's character functions as a bridge to the "straight" world, she is shown to be queer and *quite proud of it* by the season two finale.

### The Queer Revolution Is Being Televised

Creator and executive producer Ilene Chaiken told the *New York Times* that her show does not have a political agenda in mind; lesbian representation simply makes good TV: "I rail against the idea that pop television is a political medium... I am political in my life. But I am making a serialized melodrama. I'm not a cultural missionary."

While Chaiken refuses to let her show shoulder the full responsibility of a representational political fight for queer women, *The L Word* has found a soap box in the soap, and it certainly uses it, incorporating a mostly liberal, sex positive, pro-queer, and pro-female political stance into its weekly fare.

Aware of the likelihood that members of its straight male viewership are tuning in to catch hot lesbian action, *The L Word* has used Mark's reprehensible surveillance of his lesbian roommates in season two to admonish the male voyeur. The show is often self-reflexive, and through its season two plot, addresses and redresses criticisms that the show's sex scenes were especially crafted to attract and please straight male viewers for ratings reasons. *The L Word* does have a hankering for doting on its warmly lit "T and A" scenes. Although, let's be honest, gals; we don't hate ogling

naked girls, do we? If *The L Word* were prudishly devout, we'd be singing another tune about how TV won't show lesbian sex. What's revolutionary is the fact that it shows as much as it does.


With Pam Grier, Ossie Davis, and Gloria Steinem gracing its scenes as cast members and guests, important civil rights figures add a punch of history to the show. Season two's season finale features Gloria Steinem holding court with the show's fictional main characters and making a concert hall speech intended to rouse the political agitators and free thinkers of the new millennium. Steinem's speech has an extra-textual feel to it, as if it was meant to directly address the TV audience. Her speech serves as a rupture, where the fictional concerns of *The L Word* are suddenly trumped by the urgency of speaking out about real contemporary political, cultural, and social concerns. Whether Chaiken intends to be a missionary or not, the show she created is affecting viewers, and potentially, change.

*continued from page 38*

## I Love The L Word Not

### Who's Afraid of the Big, Bad Butch?

The first season of *The L Word* was positively phobic about butchness in its zeal to put positive and non-stereotyping images of lesbians on TV; but at the same time, the Casanova and heartthrob of the series, Shane, depends heavily upon butch coding and butch narrative devices (she gets mistaken for a guy, goes out with straight women, acts tough and invulnerable, etc.). In season two, Shane's butchness is given a little more play, her hair a little less gel, and the show even loosens up on its insistent and irritating habit of framing all sex scenes between women in relation to a voyeuristic man. However, we still have yet to see a true gender variant on *The L Word*, and, the voyeuristic framing continues in season two, when roommate Mark surreptitiously films Jenny and Shane's sexual exploits and provides the viewer, once again, with a male surrogate through whom to watch hot women getting it on. That said, season two was a definite improvement



over season one and based upon rumor and advertising, season three may even be better; there are even rumors that some episodes will actually use real live transgender characters.

The high points of seasons one and two have to do with predatory butches and the sexual dynamics they engender—the lawyer who makes her move on Tina, Shane's scenes with Cheri, Marina's seduction of the hapless Jenny, Sandra Bernhard's sadistic writing teacher who gives us a vicarious thrill by tearing up Jenny's crappy writing, the whole prison scene... Indeed, when *The L Word* builds upon the long history of dyke representation (prisons, girl schools, sports), it dips into a

walked into the fantasy of his life but quickly realizes that the lovely ladies who have brought him home only want his sperm. This precipitates a ludicrous scene of recriminations in which the stud feels used and delivers one of the more political speeches of the series about sexual integrity. *The L Word* in season one gave up far too much time to this kind of male rage and in its deliberate bid for the hearts and minds of a young male viewership, it ignored its own queer spectators.

Marga Gomez famously wrote that the predominance of "hot" and feminine women on *The L Word* is not an aesthetic problem—they look good and are fun to watch—it is more, for her, a question of "dyke feng shui." As she puts it, "you only see plain dykes in the background when the hotties go to a dance." In other words, we want to see a bit of balance—a hot lady with her plain, butch/androgynous/slightly less feminine but equally hot counterpart. On a heterosexual soap, you get bitches, virgins, ingénues, adulterers, cads, nice guys, sensitive men, and assertive women—a range of characters, in a range of gender roles, hooking up in a

I am really irritated by the show's deliberate erasure of genderqueer sex and genderqueer characters.

rich archive of queer imagery and, while it may not be realistic (but then realism is not the strong suit of the soap opera), it is at least fun, sexy, and recognizable as "lesbian" or queer representation.

### The Lowest of the Low

While we wait with bated breath for the secrets of season three to be resolved—will Jenny get over her past abuse? Will Bette dump the whiny Tina and maybe go back to prison, where she previously had her hottest sex scene? Will Dana actually begin to look like a real athlete and develop a muscle or two? Will the show use some good music finally and dump Betty in favor of Le Tigre? Will Alice get a plot? Will Shane get her hair cut?—let's review some of the low points of seasons one and two. For me they are those relentless triangulations with male viewers and the absolute lowest of the low is the memorable scene when Tina and Bette pick up a lucky stud. He thinks he

variety of combinations. *The L Word*, in its rather blatant attempt to give the stereotype of the dowdy dyke a very wide berth, tries to give us one airbrushed and properly feminine look and in the process it underestimates its very sophisticated and, by now, very committed queer fans.

In the end, I don't hate *The L Word*. I even enjoy watching it when I stop worrying about its off-key moments and its clumsy attempts to mesh the "fluidity of desire" with a need to build credible characters into a fuzzy thesis. Rather surprisingly, *The L Word* has become an international phenomenon and you can now see ads for the show on the streets of Stockholm, Berlin, and Milan. And, as *The L Word* blows up abroad and continues to find a willing audience at home, we can only hope that at some point the show will turn away from its lousy yuppie premise and exploit its own rich terrain of love, lust, loneliness, and lingerie as it relates to politics, passion, and potlucks. **gf**

# GIRL GUIDE

## FILM AND DVD

### IMAGINE ME AND YOU

Dir. Ol Parker

(Fox Searchlight Pictures, 93 minutes)

Ol Parker's first film marks the latest phase of gay-friendly overtures by the mass media. Now big studios like Fox are distributing fairly predictable, reasonably cute, romantic comedies about two adorable women falling breathlessly for each other at first sight. Hallelujah! We must be making representational progress; we now have our own pleasantly hokey, over-produced love stories.

Piper Perabo, the heartbreaking ladyhawk from *Lost and Delirious*, stars as comparatively tame and lovely Rachel who locks hypnotic gazes with lipstick lesbian Luce (Lena Headey) on her wedding day. Rachel still marries the bloke (this isn't *Runaway Bride*). (Her man Heck, played by Matthew Goode, is incidentally the most complexly drawn and loveable character in the film.) But poor upper-middle-class Rachel can't get Luce out of her mind, especially in scenes where the quirky, sexy flower arranger offers her a sweater in the cold or joins her in the stands to curse at footballers.

*Imagine Me and You* isn't quite *When Harry Met Sally* for dykes. Being British, it's a bit more like Hugh Grant fare (*Four Weddings and a Funeral*, *Notting Hill*, etc.), except the guy doesn't get the girl. The film's steamy kissing scenes are balanced by the comic relief of idiosyncratic friends and bum jokes (humor about bottoms, rather than humor about the homeless). Rachel's old-timer parents are sprightly, supportive, and surprisingly understanding about all matters involving the birds, and, in this case, the other birds. *Buffy*'s Giles (Anthony Head) plays Rachel's droll dad.

Targeted, perhaps, toward the lesbian contingent of the Oxygen market, this is high-end fluff. Devour it along with your pre-menstrual chocolate overdose, and scowl at the salon-primped hair on the leads as they take a walk through the park in sweaters. **B**—Candace Moore

It's Raining Men.

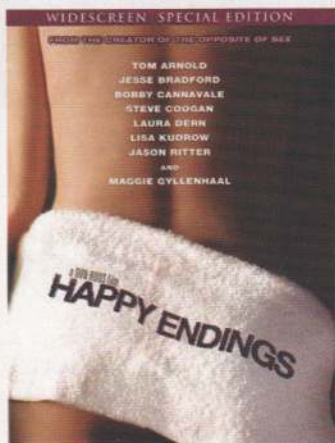
Oliver Upton

Lena Headey and Piper Perabo  
*Imagine* life with each other.

REVIEW

**HAPPY ENDINGS**

(Lions Gate Films, \$27.98)

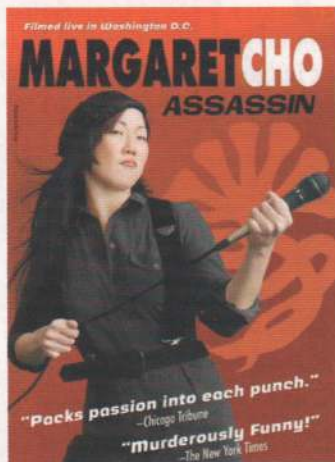


This ensemble drama by Don Roos (*The Opposite of Sex*) is playful, coy, and contemporary. Roos uses witty onscreen text instead of a voice-over to narrate an adult story about jadedness, insecurities, and ambivalence. Mamie (Lisa Kudrow) helps a wannabe filmmaker (Jesse Bradford) make a documentary about her boyfriend's massage practice, in exchange for information about the child she gave up for adoption. Mamie's stepbrother (the mystery kid's dad) Charley (Steve Coogan) is embroiled in his own sleuth-fest, convinced that his lesbian friends (Laura Dern and Sarah Clarke) used his boyfriend's sperm to make their newborn. Maggie Gyllenhaal plays a crafty vixen with a molten voice. **A-** —Candace Moore

**MARGARET CHO: ASSASSIN**

(Koch Vision Entertainment, \$19.98)

In her latest stand-up film *Assassin*, Margaret Cho takes aim at the Bush Administration and all things ideologically conservative with spot-on precision. Indeed, she blows them apart with her wicked perversity. Less bawdy than her last few films, *Assassin* combines political critique with Cho's brand of toilet humor. She's at



her best when speculating about the taste of Laura and Barbara's bushes, or drawing out the similarities between Reagan's funeral and the 1980s movie *Weekend at Bernie's*. Although *Assassin's* sound mix leaves much to be desired (the audience's laughter sounds canned at points), the DVD's extra features make up for it, particularly Margaret Cho's Belly Dancing Segment. **A-** —Alison Hoffman

**BRUSHFIRES**

(Ariztical Entertainment, \$29.95)

At first, the underfunded look of this low-budget feature—it borders on home video, actually—creates a sick start of pity in the viewer, like antacid gone down wrong. Mercifully,



then, one notices a vulnerable look overtaking the face of an actor. Then, perhaps, a crisp zing of color. Then, some cool art-film timing and an unconventional lack of crap. It's as if the film's writers intuitively sensed they were still growing, and treaded lightly instead of with thuds. As a result, despite weak dialogue and unpredictable sound, *Brushfires'* off-beat, lesbian-centered plot glistens. This mélange has multiple directors and a DIY eccentricity reminiscent of Miranda July's early works. **B+** —Candace Moore

**Bang 4 the Buck**

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 Volunteers and raffle prizes needed!  
 Send email to [support@bang4thebuck.org](mailto:support@bang4thebuck.org).

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## GIRL GUIDE

FILM AND DVD

### PROFILE

*Girlfriends* chats with out director Jan Dunn about her first feature, *Gypo* (a derogatory term for gypsy). The first UK-made Dogme95 film (the Danish-born filmmaking manifesto forbids artifice in lighting, sound, etc.), it's an inter-generational lesbian love story that tackles nationalism and racism while adhering to Dogme's strict rules of filmic chastity.

*Gypo* unfolds in three parts, but only certain elements of the plot are revealed in each. How did you craft this complex narrative into a script?

I never wrote it chronologically, but had the whole order in my head. I knew what I was going to reveal in each section. In each story you do see something that's slightly a crossover. It may be as simple as a walk into a room. What the film is really about is not judging people, unless you have the big picture.

Everything is interpretation.

Absolutely. For instance, in Helen's story, Tasha brings her a plate of food, but in Paul's story, that doesn't happen. He's the kind of man who wouldn't notice that somebody brought food to his wife. In Paul's story I have toys strewn around the place. It would be part of his irritation. I cleared them out for Helen's story.

How long did you work on this project?

It was shot in thirteen days, just eight weeks after it had been conceived. I met Elaine Wicker, the producer, on a weekend trip. She said, "Why don't we make a feature on a very low budget, just using our credit cards. But you have to shoot it in Kent, because I live there." I had to incorporate the asylum seeking issue, because Kent's where the channel train and the ferries come in. We have a generation of people who were alive during the British Empire; some are still fearful of refugees coming in. I wanted to express this mad kind of bigotry coming from Paul and question that thinking.



c/o Frameline

Jan Dunn directs Tasmin Dunstone (pictured) without frills in a great new film about British social and sexual tensions.

How did the lesbian storyline come about?

I always wanted to create something about a much older woman with a younger woman. That's been done in heterosexual film, but I had never seen anything like that about two women before. Helen's twenty-five years older than her lover in the film.

When did the decision to make a Dogme film come into the process?

Immediately. It was a creative decision having nothing to do with the budget, although low budget filmmaking lends itself to the Dogme rules quite easily. As soon as I realized that I was addressing the asylum seeking issue and an inter-generational relationship, I knew that I was going to shoot social realism. I wanted it to feel real, almost pseudo-documentary style. We took the Dogme rules very seriously and even flew out to Copenhagen.

You have these amazing cuts of the two women kissing, which heightens the sense of urgency.

I always saw those cuts in my head. I wanted the fumbling and passion—it goes on for quite a while—clothes being lifted and zips being undone.

It's not like it's on a bed and there's soft music like some Hollywood movie...

[It's] a Dogme love scene, with the caravan light on.



# FIFES

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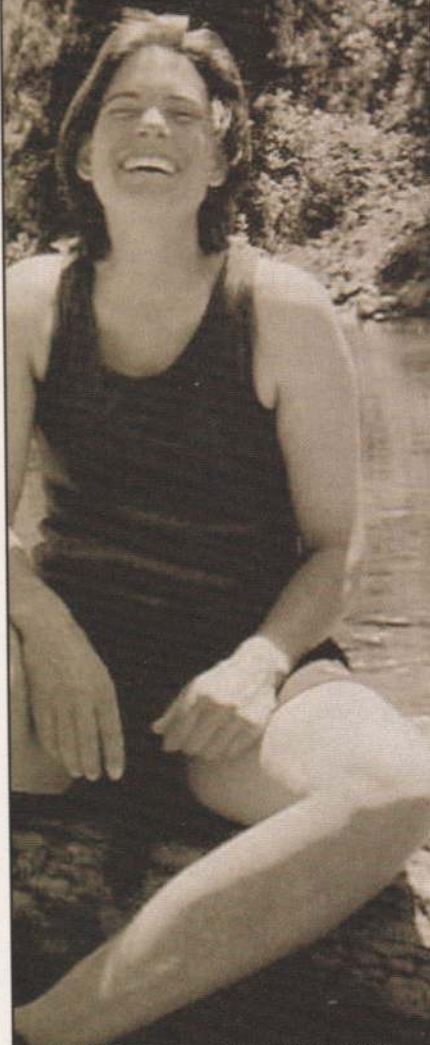
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### INSIDE GIRLFRIENDS



Assistant editor Stefani Barber enjoying our promotion at a summer street fair; just one of the ways we bide the time 'til season three of *The L Word*.

*The L Word* makes me proud to be an American. No, really. However oppressive our political climate has been during the past five years, I'm thrilled to the tip of my extra-long ring finger that I can punch my TV remote and see dykes chillin' at the Planet. It gives me hope. It reminds me that the culture responsible for *The Passion of the Christ* can also take credit for "nipple confidence." It helps me imagine that some day we can look back and say, yeah, the Bush years blew. But Shane and Carmen really got it on.

Even if you're not an *L Word* junkie, you've been affected by Showtime's groundbreaking series. I see it all the time at *Girlfriends*, especially in the sales department. Mainstream advertisers who had no idea about our readership (or worse, had terrible stereotypes about us) suddenly "get" it. We're not all man-hating, jobless anarchists with bad haircuts. Just like everybody else, we've got careers, families, relationships, mortgages, and cat-killing girlfriends. (Kidding.) And even if you do have a mullet, there's always Ivan, just one part of *The L Word's* effort, which Candace Moore describes on page 38, to represent you as part of a diverse world of lesbian expression.

Never before has *Girlfriends* organized a whole issue around a TV show. But it's undeniable: It's time. Enjoy. 

# girlfriends

the word on lesbian lifestyle

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