

Girlfriends

Lesbian Culture, Politics, and Entertainment

March 2001

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video

Talent Shows

Creative juices flow through these filmed artists' lives.

BY CANDACE MOORE

Female artists tend to be finicky, sensitive souls. Their creative processes are tough to catch onscreen. How do you show a woman thinking? These four movies embrace the peculiarities of their subjects—actresses, dancers, writers—with precision, depth, and grace. Rich with rat-a-tat-tat repartee and quirky camera moves, they broach the quandary of how to be a woman, a human, and an artist.

Isadora

(MCA Home Video, 1968)

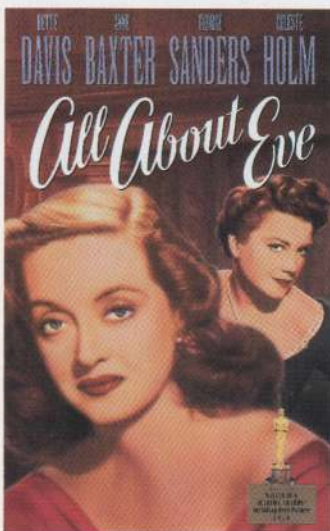
"Like all artists, we're revolutionaries. I don't know anything about politics. I don't think a revolution should be political," spouts Isadora Duncan (Vanessa Redgrave) in this film born of her Rousseau-inspired *My Life* (1927). Some would say the Mother of Modern Dance's public assertion of her own will was plenty political. Newly married to a Russian poet, with the 1917 Revolution still a fresh sore, she performs in a massive scarlet wrap to the boos of her homeland's reactionaries, feverishly flashing breasts. This consummate aesthete and proto-feminist is seen to be alternately mystical, tipsy, naïve, witty, flirty, grieving, absurd, and flawless. Redgrave, a legendary maverick herself, is ravishingly worthy of playing Duncan. Director Karel "French Lieutenant's Woman" Reisz has confected a kaleidoscopic *homage* to a complex personality. Dance sequences pay tribute to Duncan's sensual break from classical ballet. Grade: **A+**

Waiting for the Moon

(Skouras Pictures, 1985)

This American Playhouse film of the renowned love relationship of modernist icon Gertrude Stein and her constant companion and muse Alice B. Toklas feels like a stage play. Sound and sense predominate as screenwriter Mark Magill co-opts Stein's wordplay and circular, questioning nuances. Linda Bassett, as the overconfident Stein, and Linda Hunt, as the endearing Alice, evoke their staunchly different characters. Hunt particularly shines as a solid, supportive woman who refuses to give in to every one of the seemingly self-absorbed writer's idiosyncracies. Loosely based on Stein's experimental novel *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), this vibrant film delicately presents the difficulties and perks of eccentric domesticity. For all of Alice's glum looks and short-fused snaps, and Gertrude's crowning herself the family genius, the two emerge as settled, deeply intertwined lovers. Gertrude cradles Alice ever so protectively after a

nightmare, and when Gertrude begins an inquiry, Alice warmly responds, before hearing the question, "The answer is yes." Grade: **A+**



Diva Davis and bitch Baxter

All About Eve

(Twentieth Century Fox, 1950)

When theater diva Margo (Bette Davis) lets rainslickered starworshipper Eve (Anne Baxter) in from the wings, she doesn't figure the flawless-youth for a usurper. Joseph L. Mankiewicz wrote and directed this flashback-framed Oscar-magnet with a sable brush. Self-reflexive and snappily writ, *All About Eve* is more ticking time bomb than simpering classic, serving up a deadpan deepdish of Broadway backstabbing wherein Marilyn Monroe comes as a doe-eyed grad of the Copacabana School of Dramatic Arts. Ridiculing the star game, this flick dissects both the aging ego and the

ingénue who's invented herself as a figment of everyone's imagination. George Sanders plays the cruelly sly critic Addison De Witt, tugging behind-the-scenes at Eve's marionette strings. Thelma Ritter is hilarious as Birdie, Margo's faithful assistant, a tough broad who's the first to smell a rat. Grade: **A+**

An Angel at My Table

(Fine Line Features, 1990)

Jane Campion, who shot to Hollywood directorial stardom with *The Piano* (1993) and continued in big-budget mode with *Portrait of a Lady* (1996), started raising eyebrows earlier with the offbeat *Sweetie* (1989) and this passionate portrait of Janet Frame, a New Zealand prodigy. Born into a haplessly poor family, young Janet (Karen Fergusson/Alexia Keogh) is an eccentric-yet-sincere poetess whose talent for wordsmithing carries her through unimaginable hardships. Her two closest sisters drown; her teeth turn cheese-yellow, rotting in her mouth; and, when a pet prof decides she's mentally unstable, Janet endures psychiatric treatments, aka torture, barely escaping a lobotomy for nonexistent schizophrenia. But the whole time, Janet is heroically writing and, as an adult (Kerry Fox), achieves publication, awards, and acceptance. Breathtakingly shot in blue and sepia, *An Angel at My Table* traces the fine lines between outcast, nut, and genius—and the difficulty society has telling the difference. Grade: **A+**

Candace Moore, coeditor of the small press *Runcible Spoon*, lives in Los Angeles.



Me (center, mouth open) presiding over a staff meeting

We're in the money.

At least that's what our publisher told us after closing our books for the year 2000. According to her year-end profit and loss report, *Girlfriends'* parent company, HAF Enterprises—for the first time in its six-year history—finished the year in the black. Although not an enormous sum, this is a huge symbolic stride for the magazine, the equivalent of a baby taking her first step without Mom holding on. *Girlfriends* has proved its viability as a lesbian business serving a lesbian market.

After you read the story told by Kathleen Wilkinson in "The Closing of the Lesbian Press" (page 30), *Girlfriends'* profit may have even more resonance. As our company was stretching to cross its fiscal finishing line, more and more lesbian literary concerns—Firebrand, Naiad, *Feminist Bookstore News*—were being forced to throw in the towel. As Wilkinson sees it, if the seventies gave birth to a thriving industry of lesbian books and feminist booksellers, the nineties saw their decline and fall. In these days of chain bookstores and Time Warner-AOL mergers, there doesn't seem to be enough support and opportunity for lesbian books, magazines, and retailers. And with civil unions on *Will and Grace*, there may appear to be less need for specialty publishers to furnish lesbians with the inside line.

Indeed, our new visibility and assimilation is a double-edged sword. Thank god the Tammy Baldwins, Jeanette Wintersons, and Ellen DeGenereses of this world now supplement junior-high gym teachers as possible role models. But in the meantime, our community heroines—including pioneering publishers Barbara Grier and Nancy Bereano—are fading into herstory. To me, this is a great loss. Although it may seem that we don't need them and their presses anymore, we do.

Let me share my reaction to what may have been the biggest gay media event of Y2K: *Queer As Folk*. Like many of you, I watched the first three episodes of Showtime's series, the first TV drama ever dedicated wholly to gay characters and themes, in awe. I couldn't believe I was seeing this many homosexuals—not to mention this much homosex, on the boob tube. Or rather, the lube tube, since we're squarely in Boystown here. I kept thinking, *We have arrived*.

But how strange to have landed on planet Out and yet find oneself, once again, an alien. In *Queer As Folk's* world of designer drugs, washboard abdomens, and executive-level paychecks, lesbians—all two of them—hold brunches and newborns. Michael and his cadre get to experience sexual desire; Melanie gets to change the diaper. Although Brian's posse finds "liberation" in the throbbing gay male ghetto, their suffocating isolation from Normal, U.S.A., allows them to descend into hate-filled condescension toward everybody else. After the fourth or fifth reference to *munchers* and the evils of licking pussy, the wife and I picked our jaws up off the floor and changed the channel.

Queer As Folk reminded me that, especially when dykes aren't writing the script, gay visibility does not necessarily spell lesbian freedom. We can't trust Showtime, Borders, or Simon & Schuster to provide us with the stories that will set us free. That was the job of Firebrand and Naiad, and it will be the job of their survivors, lesbian media companies like Felice Newman's Cleis Press. And *Girlfriends*.

Thank you for supporting our mission to tell our stories.

Heather Findlay, Editor in Chief

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