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Indie diva  
Lili Taylor  
joins an  
all-star cast of  
genderbenders.

# God's Chosen Gay People

A documentary reveals queers at odds with Orthodox Jewish tradition.

by Judith Halberstam

**Shot over a period** of five years in Brooklyn, Jerusalem, Los Angeles, London, Miami, and San Francisco, *Trembling Before G-d* is a moving and complex account of the lesbians and gay men who live at odds with their Orthodox and Hasidic Jewish families and communities. Since few subjects are comfortable showing their faces to the world, Sandi Simcha DuBowski deploys a variety of dramatic methods for masking their identities. The young New Yorker even filmed some scenes—including an Orthodox mother lighting Shabbat candles and an Orthodox wedding—through a sheet, to create a shadow play he calls “a beautiful combination of live shadow puppetry and stained glass.”

**Trembling Before G-d**  
Sandi Simcha DuBowski  
New Yorker Films, 94 min.

In one extraordinary sequence, DuBowski follows Michelle into a children's carnival during Passover. Michelle's being the only woman in the film to show her face suggests both the high price of queer visibility and the low profile Orthodox women must maintain. Michelle, the daughter of a renowned cantor, grew up Hasidic in Brooklyn's Boro Park. Disowned by her family seven years earlier, Michelle goes back to the neighborhood where her family still lives, with DuBowski in tow. Here, she unexpectedly runs into her uncle and other relatives. The scene ends with her standing just inside the entrance to the Passover carnival trying to decide whether to join in the festivities or stay on the margins. In this sequence, we sense what's at stake for Orthodox and Hasidic lesbians and gays who come out. The

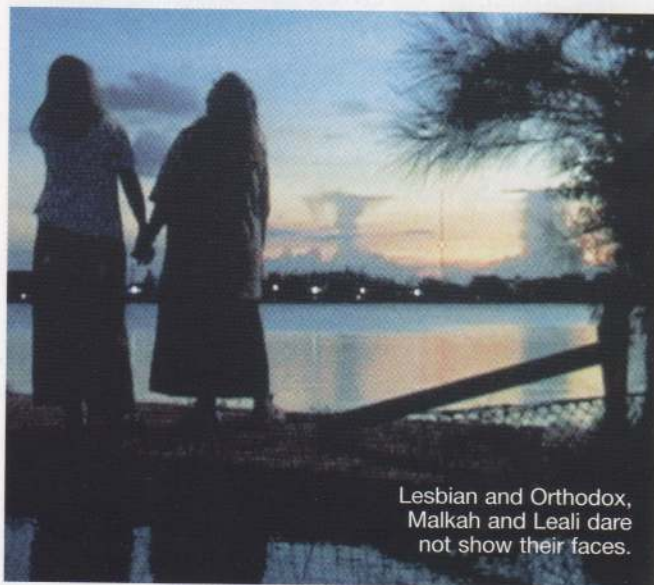
choice between religious community and sexuality haunts each of the film's subjects.

David, an Orthodox gay man living in Los Angeles, articulates his desire to maintain a disciplined relationship with God, while being gay—despite the Torah's apparent prohibitions on homosexuality. We watch David practicing his faith at home and journeying to San Francisco to meet with the rabbi to whom he'd first come out twenty years earlier. Over and over, David and other gay men in the film profess their desire for the religious community they grew up with while simultaneously articulating sadness and outrage that their faith is not enough to permit them access.

Rabbi Steven Greenberg, the world's first openly gay Orthodox rabbi, makes the convincing argument for being Orthodox and gay: despite Biblical prohibitions, the Torah can be interpreted as permitting every Jew, gay or straight, a relationship with God. Arguments about exclusion, sin, and rejection, he implies, are human rather than divine.

The pleasure of religious practice is conveyed by an HIV-positive man whose ultra-Orthodox family subjected him to medical treatments and even shipped him off to Israel, in an effort to quash his sexual tendencies. Ironically, in Israel Mark finds a gay community. His pleasure in singing, dancing, and praying conveys a powerful sense of spiritual uplift.

No such rewards await Orthodox women. Gay men in the film struggle with their relationships to their fathers, rabbis, and each other, while enjoying the intense homoeroticism of the yeshiva. Women, inside and outside Orthodox life, seem relegated to the role of helpmate. While the men debate the meaning of the Torah, the lesbians cook, clean, and counsel one



Lesbian and Orthodox, Malkah and Leali dare not show their faces.

another in heated phone calls. But none of them seems deeply engaged with the spiritual issues that cause gay men to pine for the religious communities they've lost.

Nevertheless, the film shows the fault lines between sexuality and religion, as well as those between modernity and the traditions not quite left behind.

UC San Diego professor Judith Halberstam wrote *Female Masculinity* (Duke).

# Femme Noir

Jeanne Moreau's sexy deadpan melts the screen.

by **Candace Moore**

**Jeanne Moreau in** queer classic *Querelle* plays a tawdry, man-eating d-i-v-a. The sole feline in a sea of sailor dogs, the French New Wave fave brings iconic value to the role of

**Querelle**

Rainer Werner Fassbinder  
Columbia Pictures, 1983

seedy bar-owner Lysiane, alternately dive-dumpy and caustically gorgeous. Rainer Werner Fassbinder's last film

before he croaked from too much coke is mostly a gay cock-tease. The German director's existential aesthetics overindulge source-author Jean Genet's deviant lyricism, fashioning an absurd, colorful epic with masturbation as the operative gesture. Columbia's DVD re-release offers the film dubbed in either English or French, with subtitle options of French, English, or Spanish. Grade: **B-**



**Elevator to the Gallows** (New Yorker Video, 1957)

Society wife Florence Carala (Moreau) comes unhinged in this Hitchcock-type thriller, recklessly wandering about town in search of love-object Julien Tavernier (Maurice Ronet). Her hair unfurls, welled eyes harden from the anxiousness of awaiting sure doom. She beats on a metal security door like a hell-bent mental patient while, inside, Tavernier—having murdered her husband (his boss) not-quite-perfectly—is stuck in an elevator. First-time director Louis Malle's innovative New Wave gaze beautifies each character in a film that's all about the isolation of subjectivities. Miles Davis's jazz score further twists the nerves. Grade: **A+**

**The Bride Wore Black** (MGM, 1968)

Patty Smith once described Moreau as "a chaste schoolteacher superficially, but inside like a barbed wire fence on fire." New Wave auteur François Truffaut capitalizes on Moreau's contradictory faces in this portrayal of a homicidal Diana-the-Huntress out to systematically seduce and slaughter five men unluckily present at her groom's killing. The murders are almost funny—each more drawn-out and inspired than the last—in this adaptation of Cornell Woolrich's same-titled 1940 novel. We can't help developing a quasi-affection for the befuddled males teased into the web of this outwardly benign avenger. And yet, Moreau's beguiling cool inspires ultimate detachment. Grade: **A**

**The Diary of a Chambermaid** (Cinemathèque, 1964)

This quirky whodunit by surrealist Luis Buñuel wears its anti-fascism with a difference. Not knowing who raped and butchered a young girl feels strangely enticing as an entire community appears both erotically charged and derisively blasé. Celestine (Moreau), the new chambermaid in a provincial French household, is everyone's servant: the elderly shoe fetishist, the rube-throwing neighbors, the control-freak wife, the skirt-chasing husband (Michel Piccoli), and the torture-happy handyman. Here, oddity is bliss. Grade: **B**

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

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# Circulation Logic

When we founded this magazine in 1994, we had no idea how complex publishing *Girlfriends* would turn out to be. Good thing I didn't know some of the scarier statistics—like, nine out of ten magazine startups fail within the first year—or today I'd probably be teaching Shakespeare, my academic curriculum interruptum. I'm really glad to be writing to you instead.

Because I'm a writer, not a salesperson, the part of *Girlfriends* I underestimated most was circulation. Turns out, the most difficult aspect of this magazine isn't creating it but getting it to the newsstand—so that everyone else can see, flip through, and buy it every month. Not just because *Girlfriends* is a lesbian magazine, but because we're small and operate in a "mature" market with plenty of competition and not much margin for profit.

*Girlfriends* vies for attention in a world where a handful of magazine distributors and wholesalers supply most of the magazines you'll see at a store like Walmart. These middlemen (and I assure you, they are men) provide top-of-the-line service to *Cosmo*, *Playboy*, and *People*, but *Girlfriends'* presence on a local Borders' "must

order" list constitutes a major victory. And if *Girlfriends* sells out, the retailer likely won't order more, opting instead to use our precious spot on the newsstand for a slower moving contender.

Times are tough even for the big publishers—many of whom actually lose money on the newsstand, but make it up in ad sales. More than half of all magazine publishers expect declining or leveled circulations for 2001. Fifty-six percent reported slumps in the past twelve months. On top of all this, wholesalers are threatening to hit publishers with gasoline surcharges, thus biting further into our profits.

Enter Adriana Gordon and Jill Federico, our new circulation team. Circulation director Adriana works with our national distributor to get *Girlfriends* into as many bookstores as possible, and hook up new retailers with accounts. In the next few months, she'll be designing and sending out over 75,000 subscription brochures to lesbians across the continent. Circulation assistant Jill troubleshoots when glitches come between you and your *Girlfriends*. Wish them well!

If you surf, you'll notice we redesigned our online store at <http://stores.yahoo.com/girlfriends>. So drop by and pick up some *Girlfriends*!



Heather Findlay, Editor in Chief



Jill Federico, me, and Adriana Gordon are learning to circulate.

# Girlfriends

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