

28 GUYS ON OUR TEAM: OUR ANNUAL "MEN WE LOVE"

Lesbian Culture, Politics, and Entertainment

August 2003

Girlfriends

ANGELINA JOLIE

and the invasion of
the super-heroines



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Fume and Far Between

An odd Italian tale of lesbian love starts at a gas station.

by Candace Moore

If you find yourself strangely

drawn to the smells of tar or skunk, see this film. I don't mean this as an easy peck at *Gasoline*, an Italian art house flick on heavy rotation at this summer's queer film fests and scheduled for a theater release in September. I mean it as an advisory. There are some viewers who turn up their noses easily; these people shy away from dive bars, dirty downtowns, La Brea. Others, however, find things pungent invigorating. They inhale deeply. *Gasoline* is for them.

Director Monica Stambrini, an American-born filmmaker now living in Italy, has worked with the likes of Bernardo Bertolucci of *Stealing Beauty* and *The Last Emperor*. It shows: her debut effort (based on the magical-realist novel by Elena Stancenelli) is saturated with warm, intense colors. Night-lit and laced with shadow, Stambrini's palette also recalls the lovely, seedy quality of Nan Goldin's heroin-addict photos. The pacing is slow and offbeat; Stambrini builds a sense of nervous tension into constant agitation as her two heroines veer off into a tragicomic journey.

Like the lesbian experimental classic *Butterfly Kiss*, *Gasoline*'s odd road trip begins at a filling station run by girlfriends Stella (Maya Sansa) and Lenni (Regina Orioli). The two horny twenty-somethings live and work together in this country love nest off the highway, pulling shots of espresso, pumping gas, and making

out behind the cash register. That is, until Lenni's homophobic, rich-bitch mommy pays a visit to deliver a hefty inheritance. Catching the gals tonguing, she throws a fit and hurls abuse at her shy, four-eyed daughter. Protective Stella (who's the punk, raven-haired tomboy of the couple) punches Lenni's mother in the jaw, inadvertently killing her. Now the girls are stuck with a dead, high-heeled mom and a purse full of cold, hard cash. Somehow they have to get rid of both. So they set out to dump the matron in the lake and go on vacation.

Neither plan turns out quite right. Lenni's got a belly full of guilt, and Stella's got the jitters, so together they roam Italy's back roads with their headlights off. They end up leaving Lenni's glassy-eyed mom laid out on top of junkyard plastic. But some animation brims just beneath the surface, and her mother's voice continues to haunt Lenni. The lovers throw a dirty mattress over the body and escape, but the corpse keeps chattering. Things get worse when a duo of obnoxious club-hopper boys fixate on Stella and chase her rapaciously.

Throughout, Stambrini stays true to Stancenelli's distinctly Italian, downplayed brand of fabulism: as the

murder victim continues to moan from beyond the grave, the surreal gets dished out with dry sincerity. *Gasoline* adds to the novel's magic formula the nerves of Martin Scorsese's *After Hours* and the humorous quandaries of a Coen Brothers classic like *Blood Simple* or *Raising Arizona*. There are also easy comparisons to be made to lesbian-killer films such as *Bound* or *Heavenly Creatures*. But Stambrini doesn't seem to be a copycat. Just as she focuses for several excruciating minutes on the killers as they sop up blood stains off the floor with napkins, she also lavishes screen time on the lovers' romantic life, giving it a realistic feel. We witness



Gasoline's Italian lovers run on all cylinders.

everything from knowing looks across the front seat to finger-fucking in a bathroom stall—without feeling exploited. The love between the two main characters is the X-factor, the thing that makes the film go boom. In the end, *Gasoline*'s lesbian passion is not just the flavor-of-the-day, not just smoke and mirrors. Grade: **B+**

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

The Man Show

Gay male directors show their queer sensitivity on DVD.

by Candace Moore

Who knew a film about two comatose women

could be so eloquent? Spanish director-screenwriter Pedro Almodóvar (*All About My Mother*) exquisitely fondles his characters as they swallow distinct lonelines in this drama about caring for someone so much, it's taboo. Marco Zuluaga (Dario Grandinetti) is a woeful travel-book



Speechless ladies speak volumes in Almodóvar's latest vid.

Talk to Her

dir. Pedro Almodóvar
Sony Pictures Classics, 112 min.

writer who cries after killing snakes and during operas, and falls deeply in love with a famous female matador, Lydia, who promptly gets herself gored.

Lydia's brain-dead, lying in the hospital bed next to Alicia, a once-ballerina who got in a car accident. Kind-natured male nurse Benigno is the obsessed caretaker who should have been a silent filmmaker. Grade: **A**

Chicago (Miramax Films, 2002)

With a bevy of openly gay men at its helm—director Rob Marshall, screen-scribe Bill Condon, and producers Neil Meron and Craig Zadan—*Chicago* brought all that jazz to 2003's queer-friendlier Oscars. Marshall's cinematic hats off to Ebb and Fosse's lively 1975 Broadway musical, set in a Roaring Twenties women's slammer, stays true to the sleazy, vaudevillian twitter-patter of the original. Renee Zellweger (as tabloid-hungry boyfriend-shooter Roxie Hart), Catherine Zeta-Jones (as a sumptuous double-homicide starlet), and Queen Latifah (as flirty-with-the-gals Illinois jailer "Mama" Morton) are all riveting. Even Richard Gere brings a greasy authenticity to his lawyer slime-ball role. You'll be tapping your feet. Grade: **A-**

Orpheus (Embassy Home Entertainment, 1949)

Jean Cocteau's revamped Orpheus myth takes place in a surrealistic, 1940s realm where trick mirrors melt into the underworld and poets are celebrities. Yeah, we wish. Beautiful beast Jean Marais (Cocteau's real-life boy toy), as Orpheus, is lit like a strong-jawed ingenue. Opiated, artist-writer-filmmaker-eroticist Cocteau was one of the most brilliant visionaries of the twentieth century, and in *Orpheus*, his snappily dressed tragic hero falls in love with Death and tries to rescue stay-at-home wifey Eurydice from the jurisdiction of hell. Nothing is too easy or too realistic—Cocteau makes perception a highly subjective, deadly struggle. Grade: **A**

Fox and His Friends (New Yorker Films, 1975)

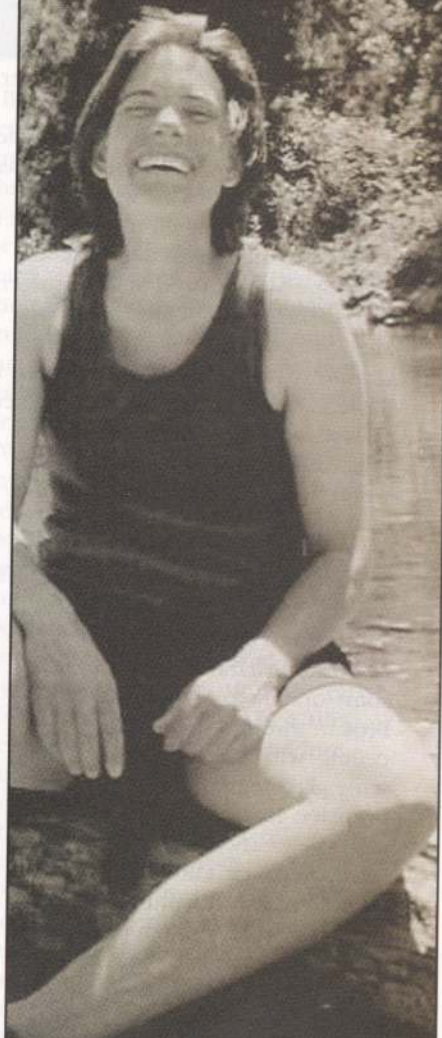
"Fox" Bieberkopf, played by young Rainer Werner himself, is a dour, sexy-in-that-rundown-way, seventies clown—a sideshow "talking head" who wins the lotto. The blue-collar cipher naively inherits a gaggle of uptown poofs who buzz around his money like aphids to a green leaf. Plus, there's yuppie boyfriend, Eugen, whom Fox haplessly loves even as the elite jerk yolks his fortune (and more). One of Fassbinder's few films (of the brilliant dozens he mass-produced) to focus specifically on gay male relationships, *Fox* seems an art house self-portrait—a diary exposing achy feelings of not belonging. Grade: **A**

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MIGUEL BRACHO

Gotta Love 'Em

When I first revealed to my mother that I was seeing a woman, she went through all the classic homophobic responses. "It's my fault," she said. "I made you wait until you were thirteen to wear makeup." "Are you sure it's not just a phase?" And of course, "Have you given men enough of a chance?"

The ideology underpinning my mother's plea is clear: women become lesbians because they give up on men. Never mind that I told her I was in love with a *woman* who was tall, bright, funny, and—well, I didn't go into that thing she did with her hands. No, I was a lesbian because I decided, without due diligence, that I didn't like men.

Mom got that rubbish out of her system in about ten minutes and became a model of acceptance. But the stereotype lives on.

Debunking the bogie of man-hating lesbians isn't the only reason *Girlfriends* publishes our annual "Men We Love" feature. Some individuals



Loveable Contributing Editor Patrick Califia and yours truly

of the male persuasion made news in the last twelve months because they helped advance the political and cultural status of gay women. For example, John Gonzalez has created a sperm bank specifically for lesbians in the U.K., while Howard Dean is running for president with a civil unions plank in his platform.

As for Patrick Califia, our advice columnist since we launched *Girlfriends* nine years ago, he qualified for "Men We Love" in 2000 when he let us know that he's transgendered. He asked if we were going to dump him. Absolutely not, we said, and despite a reader uproar *Girlfriends* has remained committed to LGBT diversity. Besides, nobody sets us straight, or bent, like Patrick.

Finally, I'd like to call to your attention "Exes and Oh's" by Florence King on page 48. I've loved King's writing since I guffawed over *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady*. I even read her columns for the arch-conservative publication *The National Review*, because I find King's politics an intelligent and (in contrast to Camille Paglia's) drolly articulated alternative to the liberal-democratic gay rank and file. For years I begged King to write for *Girlfriends*, and just as I'd given up, she sent me an e-mail. Let's hope she's hung her hat to stay.

Heather Findlay, Editor in Chief

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