

SPIKE LEE'S LEADING LESBIANS

Girlfriend

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sheLOVEhim

KERRY WASHINGTON and **DANIA RAMIREZ** talk about why they put their careers on the line to play gay in the controversial filmmaker Spike Lee's new *She Hate Me*.

interview by **CANDACE MOORE**



Kerry Washington (left) and Dania Ramirez (center) head the Amazonian troop of wanna-be moms in Spike Lee's new film.



journalist for the Associated Press asked Spike Lee recently, "So you're making this new movie, something with lesbians—" to which Lee protested, "No, no, no, no, no." But the truth is yes, lesbian characters are throughout *Sbe Hate Me*—eighteen in all. Perhaps Spike shut the question down because the film concerns itself with more than sexuality. *Sbe Hate Me* feels like at least three movies: a dramatic satire about the state of corporate corruption a la Enron; a racy comedy about a African American "stud" and his insemination business; and an intimate, albeit occasionally problematic, look at alternative family.

The film's hero is Jack Armstrong, the Harvard-bred vice president of a major pharmaceutical corporation. When Jack discovers his company is trying to make a buck by rushing a wonder AIDS drug to market, he squeals, only to be fired and then scapegoated for the scandal in the press. To pay the rent, Jack agrees to help impregnate his ex-girlfriend, Fatima (Kerry Washington) and her new lesbian partner Alex (Dania Ramirez) for \$10,000 each. Thanks to the couple's high-class sapphic social circle, Jack stumbles upon a money-making scheme to keep up his executive lifestyle: to help gaggles of gene-finicky lesbians become moms. He transforms into a Red-Bull-guzzling, Viagra-popping, one-man sperm bank. The no-nonsense Fatima—who orchestrates insemination parties and takes a percentage of the gross—explains he's in such high demand because looking for good sperm in a clinic is like "shopping for Gucci at Walmart."

Like most Spike Lee films to date, *Sbe Hate Me* is sure to provoke controversy. In 1986 Lee was taken to task by the feminist community for his depictions of women in *Sbe's Gotta Have It*, including a pushy, predatory lesbian character, who tries to seduce her friend into bed by any means possible. Given the nature of *Sbe Hate Me's* absurd premise, as well as a smattering of bordering-on-offensive plot choices, the backlash against Lee's new film may again fire up within the gay and lesbian community.

I spoke by phone, separately, with three of *Sbe Hate Me's* ladies: starring actresses Kerry Washington and Dania Ramirez, who played the power-suited lesbian couple at the center of the picture; and author Tristan Taormino, who acted as a lesbian consultant. I asked all three women to unpack for me, from their perspective, the film's representations, while getting the usual behind-the-scenes juice.

Girlfriends: What first captivated your interest in this role?

Kerry Washington: Working with Spike. He's been such an icon for me. I got on a plane to audition for him before even reading this script. Then somewhere in the middle of the country I was like, "Oh My God! What have I gotten myself into?" But I was also fascinated. I used to be a sexuality educator in high schools at the height of the AIDS epidemic and worked with a theater company that did theater around issues of safer sex and sexual identity. I am well versed in the Kinsey scale. I understood where [Fatima] was coming from.

Dania Ramirez: I had worked with Spike before. He sent me the script and I loved it right away. I loved the challenge of it.

Girlfriends: When Fatima decides to have sex with Jack to get pregnant, she takes Alex by surprise. Why do all of the lesbians choose to become pregnant by having sex with a man?

Washington: Let's be really clear. This is a film written by a man about a lesbian experience, so it's one man's interpretation. I was out to dinner with my friend who's a lesbian and as I was telling her about the film, she was getting more and more in shock. I was like, "Pretty fascinating isn't it? We might be criticized by the lesbian community." My concern is that people will have no idea how much work Tristan, Dania, and I did to make the film more open and progressive and realistic. It's definitely the film Spike wanted to make, but he was really careful to take our feedback and honor Tristan's experience and expertise.

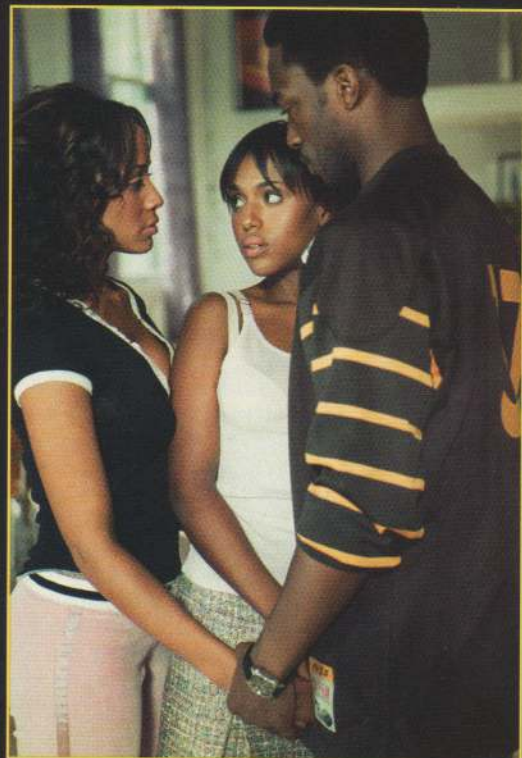
Girlfriends: I thought the fight scene between Fatima and Alex and the make-up scene afterward were handled very well.

Ramirez: I wanted to make sure I portrayed it as realistically as possible.

A lot of the times when I see films with two women in a relationship, being intimate, they seem to kind of soften it a lot. I don't know how they shoot it, but it seems to be more about the fantasy. But that scene is so vital because it's a turning point for my character. She realizes, "This woman really loves me and I might have to make compromises to stay in a relationship with her."

Girlfriends: Which is to deal with her bisexuality?

Ramirez: Exactly. But I think the most important thing for my character is to know whether Fatima loves me or



Lee's new take on race and sexuality puts Jack (Anthony Mackie) between lovers Fatima and Alex.

not. In that scene when I get my answer, it's like making up after a big argument. It's a very passionate thing.

Girlfriends: Makeup-sex is always the best.

Ramirez: Exactly! (Laughs) When you realize that this is the person that you are going to be with, you just want to take them.

Girlfriends: But because they had been through this conflict and reaffirmed their relationship, the kissing scene involving Fatima, Alex, and Jack didn't ring really true to me.



"Working with Spike," she says, is what lured Washington (left) into the lesbian-themed *She Hate Me*.

Ramirez: I hope it comes across: it's something that my character's not exactly sure about.

Girlfriends: Alex does look slightly uncomfortable and there's a sense of "am I forced to be involved in this threesome?"

Ramirez: There is this hesitation there. I think at that part of the movie, I'm a different person because of love and maternity. Now I'm not just thinking of myself, I'm thinking of my family, I'm thinking of my child, I'm thinking

of my girlfriend. That scene was one of the hardest scenes for us to come to agreement on. During the rehearsals Kerry and Spike and I sat down and thought about it. We were really nervous about that scene, because we didn't want it to come across like I'm completely giving up who I am because of a man.

Washington: I felt the scene was very appropriate for my character and for Anthony's character. Fatima thinks there's no reason that she wouldn't be able to get what she wants, and no one should even begin to step in the way of that. For her, that moment

makes so much sense. [But] I had issues with it for Dania's character. First of all, it was written for there to be a lot more than a kiss, so in some ways when I look at that scene, I see it as a victory ... Here's where the politics of filmmaking come in. It is Spike's film, his story. It's not a documentary about lesbian families.

Girlfriends: Fatima sleeps with Jack, but when her lover Alex sleeps with him, she's furious. Even though both of them are presumably just trying to get pregnant.

Washington: There's this idea Fatima has, of "I can do whatever I want. *You* can't." From the very beginning Fatima

is clear that she refuses to identify in one particular way, but that is not at all what Alex has said. I think there's a little bit of betrayal there. Like: "You put yourself in a box and now it's been a lie. I wasn't worried about your infidelity before, because you had defined yourself [exclusively as a lesbian]."

Girlfriends: You were saying earlier that you were very comfortable with the Kinsey scale. Do you mind going on record as to where you fall?

Washington: I believe that all people fall somewhere on the Kinsey scale and very few people are at either polar end. But I am in a very happy, beautiful relationship with a man, who I adore.

Girlfriends: Have you found yourself attracted to a woman in the past?

Washington: Yes. I was going to be evasive and say, "I think women are very attractive," but yes, I have found myself attracted to women in the past.

this is a film written by a man about a lesbian experience, so it's one man's interpretation.

— Kerry Washington

Girlfriends: What was it like working with each other? Because it seems that there's chemistry palpable between the two of you.

Ramirez: Oh, Kerry was such a doll. She's so talented and gives you so much as an actress. I was already cast and read with her on her audition. We had chemistry from the minute she walked in the door. As soon as we were done I went outside with Spike and I said, "I think she's it."

Washington: I have so much respect for Dania as a person. The most important thing when doing anything involving sexuality in a film is that there's a level of trust. We agreed to be really honest with each other. It was such a pleasure to work with her because of that. There wasn't weird tension.

Girlfriends: I know that Tristan did "Lesbianism 101" workshops with the film's actresses for two weeks. Were you a part of those?

Washington: Oh yeah. Lesbian Boot Camp!

Girlfriends: She said that she took you to a lesbian bar—

Washington: And to a lesbian club as well.

Girlfriends: Were women hitting on you?

Washington: They were! It was pretty exciting. I was like, "I still got it!" What was more fun was to tell people at the club that I was there with my girlfriend.

Girlfriends: Oh, so you and Dania were role-playing even then?


Washington: Totally. It was funny because there was a woman there who I know and I knew was a lesbian. I saw her at the club and she was surprised, intrigued, and happy to see me there. I thought, "this would be a really good exercise for me if I wouldn't rush to tell her why I was there."

Girlfriends: Lee says that the film "addresses immorality in the

boardrooms and in the bedrooms." He's not trying to say that Jack inseminating lesbians is necessarily wrong, is he?

Washington: I think what's immoral about it is that it's sex for money. Also, [it's immoral for] a man to engage in sex with all of these women without considering his own responsibility of fatherhood. There is nothing immoral about lesbian sex, lesbian love, and non-traditional families.

Girlfriends: But the film might get flak right off the bat, because it's easy to just say, "What does he think he's doing here?"

Washington: If there are three young women, or older women—lesbian women—who leave the theater so angry that they go make more honest films or fund more honest films, then that would be amazing. 

Schooling Spike

She Hate Me's "lesbian consultant," *Best Lesbian Erotica's* editor Tristan Taormino, talks about her contribution to the film.

Girlfriends: When you saw the script of *She Hate Me*, what did you think?

Tristan Taormino: Wow, there's a lot going on here! But that's what a lot of Spike's films are like: he floors issues that other people don't want to talk about and he does it in a very in-your-face way.

Girlfriends: Tell me about the two weeks of workshops you offered prior to the shooting of the film for the actresses playing lesbian characters.

Taormino: I put together a packet of reading, about 250 pages long, like a college reader. There were photographs, coming out stories. I wanted them to hear the voices of real queer women. I was also conscious that I was talking to a group of women of color and I am a white lesbian. So we had this panel with women of different ethnic identities in different kinds of relationships, with different backgrounds.

Girlfriends: That plays out in the picture. *She Hate Me* doesn't represent lesbians as one uniform group.

Taormino: I think it was a process of Spike working with the actors, too. Spike takes *such* good care of his actors. He has rehearsals and he talks to them before the scene without people trying to fuck with their makeup.

Girlfriends: Do you want to talk about some of the choices that Spike made that were not ones you would have made?

Taormino: In the original script, by the end, it was clear that the three of them were not only parenting the kids together but they were all in a sexual relationship. I thought that was a big red flag and I said to Spike, "this is like every straight man's fantasy. The guy gets the two girls." And he said, "I get that, but I really feel like they

have been through so much and they are united." I have to respect that it's his vision of the film and not mine. In the final cut I felt it was left a little bit ambivalent.

Girlfriends: Was there anything else you wanted to share about your experience on the shoot?

Taormino: The first day I showed up to the set, Dania and Kerry approached me and they presented their hands. They had both gone together and had their nails cut. — **CM**



Lee hired Taormino after a three-hour interview. "He took notes," she says.

Swallowing *Goldfish*

The screen release of this film fest hit will go down easily.

by Candace Moore

If last year's *Love, Actually*

were invigorated by a foamy pint of Irish charm and some realistic queer characters, it still wouldn't be half as darling as director-writer Liz Gill's upbeat brew, *Goldfish Memory*. Set in

Goldfish Memory

Dir. Elizabeth Gill
(Wolfe) 85 min.

contemporary Dublin with a sugary backdrop of vocals by Astrid Gilberto, the bright ensemble piece—which glows in spite of being shot amidst an Irish gloom—takes its title from one character's theory that, like goldfish with their three-second long memories, lovers continually forget pain and forge on anew.

Thanks in part to its quirky authenticity and fresh-faced, pre-commoditized actors, *Goldfish Memory* deservedly snagged the Best Narrative Feature award at Los Angeles's 2003 Outfest. James Joyce would have described this movie's neatly tied-up web of relationships as a "commodius vicus of recirculation." I predict that when it opens in August in theaters, it will illicit more-than-half-hearted declarations of, "That was cute!"

Sean Campion plays Tom, the philandering salt-and-pepper-haired poetry prof who uses Rilke—in German, with facing translation—as an aphrodisiac to snag his young things. Through the course of a self-absorbed mid-life crisis, though, he discovers that not every lady bites his cheesy line, hook, or sinker.

Tom's latest undergraduate conquest, Clara (Fiona O'Shaughnessy), spies him kissing a

naive newbie, Isolde, in an alley, and takes revenge. She calls up Angie (Flora Montgomery), the flirty lesbian newscaster she met at a St. Paddy's Day Parade protest. (Apparently the saint's North African heritage has been whitewashed.) Over a drink at the



The omnisexual Dublinites in *Goldfish Memory*

local ladies-only pub, sparks fly, and the two hit the sack, throwing Clara into actively examining her bisexuality, a bout that leads her to seduce, in turn, Tom's Isolde.

Angie is the fleshed-out, less-flighty character of this piece; she is looking for a woman to settle down with, not just bed. The rift in maturity levels between the two lovers becomes more and more pronounced. Angie beams lovingly at Clara while asking her whether or not she's considered motherhood, to which Clara retorts,

"I'm only twenty-two. Give us a chance." Out at a club, Clara's goofy college-aged male lover, Gonzo, cuts in on the dance floor, and Angie realizes she's through with babysitting—that is, until a tequila-soaked, post-breakup sob session with her best gay mate Red turns affectionate, and it seems a baby might just be in the cards after all.

Red is the movie's breath of fresh air, a good-natured, sarcastic bike messenger who wears a T-shirt with a new iron-on slogan in every scene. Red's busy hitting on a handsome blonde bartender who keeps spilling things on Red's pants. But his crush is not yet out to himself—or his live-in girlfriend, for that matter.

Everyone in a relationship in this picture ends up in a relationship with someone else who was previously in a relationship with someone in that relationship. It's like the reality TV show *Paradise Hotel* only less innately sick. *Goldfish Memory* seems to imply that Dublin is a small, sexually fluid fishbowl indeed.

In the end, the moral of the story is to date within your preference but outside your comfort zone.

Tom finally challenges himself with an over-thirty Semiotics professor who can read between his lines. "Maybe *you're* just a goldfish, Tom," she jokes, debunking the three-second memory theory: "How does one measure the memory of a goldfish?" And Angie too, falls for a woman closer to her age and surer about her preference. (The new girlfriend wins Angie's heart by bringing gifts of aquarium pumps for Angie's fish *Femme*. Butch, sadly, went belly up.) The younger characters continue to swim in their circles of semester-long flings. Ah, to be so amnesiac in love! Not terribly realistic, but quite pleasant to watch from the outside. Grade: B+

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video & dvd

Masculinity, Take Two

These DVDs feature our favorite kind of guy.

by Candace Moore

Gabrielle Baur's documentary on New York City's drag

king scene follows legendary performers, including Diane Torr, Mo B Dick, Dred Gerestant, and Del LaGrace Volcano as they live and perform both on and off the stage. Some of these "venus boyz"—whose sexualities and identifications vary—describe

adopting male characteristics as a way to point out that "masculinity is not sacred." They use dress and gesture to explore how power is wielded (or diluted) through gender performance. For others, who are intersex or taking male

hormones, the gender bending doesn't end at the spotlight's edge. *Female Masculinity* author Judith Halberstam adds thoughtful commentary. Grade: A-

Venus Boyz

Dir. Gabrielle Baur, 104 mins.
(First Run Features, 2004)



This man is from *Venus*.

By Hook or by Crook (Wolfe Video, 2001)

A couple of years ago, the co-founders of San Francisco's Bearded Lady Café set out on a new labor of love; from scratch they wrote, directed, produced, and starred in this quirky butch buddy film. Out-of-town drifter Shy (handsome-as-all-hell Silas Howard, of queercore band Tribe 8) teams up with an off-kilter orphan, Valentine (artist Harry Dodge). Together, the dynamic duo pulls off small time cons, plays with snow globes and toy guns, and charms the pants off lovely ladies. There's no over-explaining both characters' gender ambiguity. When a kid asks Shy "Are you a boy or a girl?" she simply says "Both." Artfully, plot concerns do tend to head out the window. B-

Southern Comfort (Docudrama, 2003)

Kate Davis directed this intimate portrait of Robert Eads, a fifty-two-year-old cowboy-hat-wearing, chain-smoking southern guy who was born a biological female. Her documentary relishes Eads' grounded sense of self—a warm blend of strength and tenderness. Constantly wisecracking in his cute drawl, Eads also invites the camera into tough emotional territory. Eads has terminal cancer, but in this, the last year of his life, he has found something else: true love. Surrounded by his adoring Betty Boop-like girlfriend Lola (an MTF) and his chosen family of friends, a skinny, semi-lucid Eads attends his last SoCo, a Georgia-based convention for the trans community, in order to say goodbye. Grade: A

Set It Off (New Line Cinema, 1996)

Hard up for cash and disillusioned by the institutionalized racism and sexism that keeps them in dead-end jobs, four young black women from the L.A. projects pull off a successful bank heist in this thriller by director F. Gary Gray. Frankie (Vivica A. Fox), Stony (Jada Pinkett Smith), Cleo (Queen Latifah), and T.T. (Kimberly Elise) become hooked on the easy money and their sense of empowerment packing firepower. They soon strike back against "the man" again. Latifah is dead-on as the malt liquor-swigging, fearless bull dyke Cleo, who is really a "sugar bear" at heart. Although she paws her curvy girlfriend every chance she gets, the film doesn't make a spectacle of Cleo's lesbian identity—it's just part of her character. The DVD includes Ray Jay's "Let It Go" music video. Grade: A-


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