

Lest We Forget The Dangers of Lesbian Love Recalled in Film and Theatre



By KRISTIN PETTIT

The National Film Board of Canada/Studio D provided me a wonderful Valentine's Day surprise: *Forbidden Love: The Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Love*. In it, ten Canadian women remember what it was like to be a young woman experiencing her emerging lesbianism in post-WWII Canada, an environment that offered them only distortions of gay identity as their role models, churned out in lesbian pulp fiction and an hysterical, homophobic press.

Each woman's reminiscence is a personal narrative, of course, but taken together they offer an entertaining window into the good old/bad old days when sex and love between women was the "love that dares not speak its name." Some of those pre-Stonewall women took the (sometimes literal) beating and paid the price for their open rebellion, truly gutsy, as they struggled to express their truest selves, often laboring under the weight of the sleepwalking marriages many drifted into (or used for cover) or the frenetic double lives they led so their gay identity would survive, at least, if not thrive.

Now in middle or old age, the women seem comfortable in their bones, having overcome (or burned out?) the fear and anger that dominated their youth. And, still, some women retain an old pain, etched-in around the eyes, but it's just a memento, not the reality of their lives now.

Intertwined with the women's stories is a dramatization of the plot of one of the novels of Ann Bannon, a successful and influential novelist in the "Golden Age of Lesbian Writing" (late 1940's through mid-1960s): a young woman leaves home, goes to the city – Vancouver, Toronto, Montreal – seeks the gay bar, tries to negotiate the stylized butch/femme roles, takes a lover, makes her way ... passages remembered by all of us who came of age in the 1960s or before. Bannon did everything she could to flout the conventions of the genre or the dictates of bosses that called for the characters' punishment or remorse – even their deaths. Some of the novels were set in girls' reforma-

tories but even more usually, in private schools for girls.

In May, Vermonters will see on stage just what could befall two teachers in such a school, set in an even earlier time, before the Second World War.

Montpelier's Lost Nation Theater is offering Lillian Hellman's 1934 play *The Children's Hour*, set at an upper-crust New England private school headed by two best friends, Karen Wright and Martha Dobie. The two women must deal with the crisis that occurs when an angry student accuses them of having an "unnatural relationship," a phrase she may have lifted from the cover of the gay books in the town's drugstore. Of course, Hellman's play was far from lesbian pulp fiction; it was excellent stagecraft and quite daring for its day. Many of you may even remember the film version in 1962, with Audrey Hepburn and Shirley McLaine as the besieged young teachers.

Performances of *The Children's Hour* will be May 15-18, May 22-25 and May 29-June 1. Janice Perry and Kathleen Keenan (Lost Nation's co-artistic director along with Kim Bent) will reinvigorate Hellman's work, giving immediacy to what many consider to be a dated play. In fact, Perry thinks it is important to put the play before the public now – perhaps especially the young – because violence and hatred against gays plague us still.

I had a memorable evening myself at LNT in March, thanks to Janice Perry and her students, who were concluding a workshop led by Perry. The Conservatory, a program offered under the direction and implementation of LNT's theatrical community, offers high school students the opportunity to create theater while being mentored by an acclaimed performer or technician – in this case, Janice Perry, a teaching performance artist. The focus of both teacher and students was intense and respectful as the kids performed their autobiographically-based theater pieces for each other. They'll perform for others soon, as well, bringing their work to the end-game: the live performance for an audience.

The Conservatory gives students experience learning how to produce theater – all aspects of

it – and involves them in a community of like-minded people for support and inspiration. Kids are immersed in three theatrical areas of their choice (undiluted by the distractions and rough and tumble of a typical high school day) and, finally, they engage in a performance experience in a mainstage show, *The Children's Hour* in May – if the tryouts go well, of course.

From what I saw of the kids' performance pieces that night, Janice Perry and Kathleen Keenan will be ably supported when the play opens in May with these women in the lead roles and a selection of young folk appearing as the students.

I reviewed Janice Perry's video "Holy Sh*t: Stories From Heaven and Hell" in *OITM* in June, 2002. Seeing it again – or for the first time – is a tonic, a refreshment against our present-day political theatrics. Its satire is dead on, lampooning "miracles from modern life" as well saints and sinners from the past. In that review, I mentioned Perry's growing involvement in teaching and her amazement at the capabilities, risk-taking and idealism of students. I said kids would be lucky to spend time under her direction, buoyed by her enthusiastic, challenging support. I said it then because I thought it was probably true and because good teachers have something of the actor in them, and Perry's a versatile, engaging actor.

Perry says the play still backs a wallop (I re-read it; it does), and she's looking forward to working with this current crop of Conservatory students who may play the students in *The Children's Hour*.

Look for an update in May's issue of *OITM*. ▼

For more on *The Conservatory program for young thespians call LNT (802-229-0492)*, and ask for *Kim Bent or Kathleen Keenan*. For more on *Janice Perry or Holy Sh*t: Stories From Heaven and Hell*, point your browser at www.janiceperry.com. *Kristin Pettit is a semi-retired teacher and drama club coach who lives with her partner in Underhill.*

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