

# Alix Olson: Combining All the Isms

BY CATHY RESMER

On a recent afternoon in her Brooklyn apartment Alix Olson was struggling with directions for constructing a new piece of furniture. Her roommates were at work, but she didn't mind tackling the project on her own. Thanks to a recent grant from the New York State Council for the Arts, she says, "I'm the stay-at-home artist. This is what I get to do."

Olson is a performance poet.



She moved to New York after graduating from Wesleyan College in 1997 with a BA in English. One night in 1998, she signed up to perform at a poetry slam at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe. She was later selected for the Nuyorican's poetry slam team, which that year won the National Poetry Slam Championship. She also won the 1999 Outwrite National Queer Poetry Slam last February.

Olson's slam set list is taken mostly from her chapbook, *Only The Starving Favor Peace*—a rallying cry for those beleaguered by the rainbow flag corporate assimilationist brouhaha. Ironically, *Girlfriends Magazine*, which recently endorsed bio-engineering multinational Monsanto and Chevron Oil as two of the top ten places for lesbians to work, named Olson "girlfriend of the month" earlier this year. Olson deftly tackles such taboo subjects as the American corporate monoculture, female masturbation, and the sexualization and demonization of post-menopausal lesbians. She doesn't beat around the bush, so to speak—she dives right in.

In "Witches," a poem that

pays homage to lesbians "in their crone prime," she writes, "I'll give myself a lube job, shake my broomstick until my clit throbs...sweep that granny off her feet." A lot of older lesbians have reacted positively to Olson's work, but sometimes people tell her to "tone it down." "A lot of women still have a very timid way of talking about their bodies," she says. This is one of the reasons her work is so sex-positive. "You have to go over the top with language," she says. "If it were ok to say those things, people wouldn't react so strongly to it."

Olson's experience teaching in New York City's public schools has shown her the need for this kind of openness. She works with the Night Star program, teaching sex ed and sexual awareness classes to high school students.

She describes a game called Cross the Line where students indicate agreement with a statement by stepping over an imaginary line. "We would say, 'it's ok for boys to masturbate,' and

they'd all cross the line. We'd say, 'it's ok to be gay,' and they'd all cross the line. Then we'd say, 'it's ok for girls to masturbate,' and out of a class of 30, two of them would cross the line. These girls were outgoing and raucous about everything else, and none of them knew the correct terms for the parts of their vaginas! They're thought of as this new generation of women who are sexually aware, but for them, saying 'clit' was not very easy."

Poetry slamming was a natural outlet for Olson's synthesis of poetry and activism. "I'd say at least half of the performance poets I know are activists," she says. "In the slam scene, there's a lot of emphasis on activism, on changing stuff."

Olson teaches poetry slam workshops through the Gowanus Arts Exchange. Recently she, and other Nuyorican poets, have been teaching performance poetry to members of a nurses and custodial union, helping to lead them in after work poetry slams. This kind of grassroots outreach is what differentiates slam from traditional poetry readings—the kind held in

bookstores or coffeeshops, or galleries. Slam is an urban phenomenon that rewards a poet's engaging and energetic delivery, and demands audience participation. "There's such a cacophony of voices," says Olson. "Even though there's a kind of formula [for slamming at the national level], there's definitely still this idea of 'anyone can do it.' It's very democratic."

Olson is involved in a variety of other projects, including Rainbow Flags For Mumia. Olson's work, along with that of other Nuyorican poets, is featured on a compilation cd recently released to benefit Mumia Jamal's defense. The African-American journalist was convicted (under dubious circumstances) of killing a Philadelphia police officer.

Olson says her LGBT and anti-racist work intersected during a recent visit by Fred Phelps. Mumia supporters and the anti-Phelps crowd joined forces unable to get separate demon-



stration permits. This, she says, confused Phelps and his small band of miscreants, who began screaming "cop killers! cop killers!" Olson continues, "Basically, they just knew that the people on the other stood for something they didn't like, but they weren't really sure what. It was really great, combining all these isms, having all these people standing up for each other." Unfortunately, she says, "a few of the rich white Christopher Street people starting yelling, 'white trash go home,' and I thought 'whoops, there's the

other ism, and this time we're on the wrong side."

Alix Olson is proving that success and popularity doesn't have to mean giving up good old fashioned radical lesbian feminist politics. She continues to talk the talk, walk the walk, and assemble her own furniture. ▼

See Alix Olson in Vermont this month—at Middlebury on Monday, October 11, at 8pm in the Gamut room, and with Alix Dobkin on Thursday, October 14 at 7pm at UVM.

## The Lesbian Polyamory Reader: A Review

By Maxwell Stroud

On a quiet Sunday afternoon, I am sitting alone and surrounded by love. My best friend is in the process of moving into my apartment, and as I look up from my chair, the sight of her things mingling with mine comforts me. I've been curled up in the newest addition to our home, my sweetheart's overstuffed green chair that just recently relocated from his former partner's house. Looking up, I see a photograph my father gave me for my birthday, and I remember I need to call home—a Sunday ritual.

They say that a culture creates many words for things important in the daily life of its members; that's why Eskimos have so many words for snow. It's always bothered me that English is lacking in words to describe the many different facets and faces of love. The title of the book I've spent the day reading, *The Lesbian Polyamory Reader:*

*Open Relationships, Non-Monogamy and Casual Sex*, is an example of how cumbersome the English language can be when trying to capture something as poetic as multiple ways of loving.

This collection of essays, articles, plays, poems, and songs follows a progression in thought and experiences that charts a course from dichotomous debate to the real variety of human experience. Reading the foreword, I was greeted by the familiar and uninspiring argument that monogamous relationships are an instrument of patriarchal oppression and the only real route to radical liberation is through polyamory. I almost put down the book when I found myself being lumped into the category of "assimilationist." Almost.

I am intrigued by the idea of polyamory, and I'm interested in how people manage relationships with more than one partner, from the logistical aspects of coordinating day planners to dealing with issues of honesty, jealousy, and limits or rules. The editors of this collection, Marcia Munson and Judith Stelbourn, selected an array of works that provide the reader with narratives exploring a diversity of polyamorous experiences.

Although the title is terse, the stories within are filled with poetry. Marny Hall writes, "No matter how coupled we are, we rarely remain in actual twosomes for very long. Typically, pets or parents, children or friends, are constantly joining our magic circle." Lisa Lusero writes, "It is about building powerful relationships based on unremitting honesty and agonizing trust. Mutual trust. Mutual freedom. Mutual love—not every heart loves in a line."

The women included in this collection write unabashedly about every aspect of their lives in relation to polyamory, from their difficulty in finding a therapist understanding of their situation to the intimacy experienced with a primary partner

that understands one's desire for outside exploits. In addition to the truly intimate portraits painted by each author, this anthology is also unique in that the editors also provide information about how to contact the contributors and how to obtain copies of the articles.

After finishing the last page, I smile. I'm reminded of the many ways in which I experience love in my life. I'm still interested in the ideas of polyamory, but I have to agree with Ellen Orleans: "Frankly, polyamory looks like processing hell." ▼

Borders Books and Music of Burlington is hosting a reading by several of the authors from this collection on October 13 at 7:00 pm.

