

= But I 'm a Cheerleader =

But I 'm a Cheerleader is a 1999 satirical romantic comedy film directed by Jamie Babbit and written by Brian Wayne Peterson . Natasha Lyonne stars as Megan Bloomfield , a high school cheerleader whose parents send her to a residential inpatient conversion therapy camp to cure her lesbianism . There Megan soon comes to embrace her sexual orientation , despite the therapy , and falls in love . The supporting cast includes Melanie Lynskey , Dante Basco , Eddie Cibrian , Clea DuVall , Cathy Moriarty , RuPaul , Richard Moll , Mink Stole , Kip Pardue , Michelle Williams and Bud Cort .

But I 'm a Cheerleader was Babbit 's first feature film . It was inspired by an article about conversion therapy and her childhood familiarity with rehabilitation programs . She used the story of a young woman finding her sexual identity to explore the social construction of gender roles and heteronormativity . The costume and set design of the film highlighted these themes using artificial textures in intense blues and pinks .

When it was initially rated as NC @-@ 17 by the MPAA , Babbit made cuts to allow it to be re @-@ rated as R. When interviewed in the documentary film This Film Is Not Yet Rated Babbit criticized the MPAA for discriminating against films with gay content .

Many critics did not like the film , comparing it unfavorably with the films of John Waters and criticizing the colorful production design . Although the lead actors were praised for their performances , some of the characters were described as stereotypical .

= = Plot = =

Seventeen @-@ year @-@ old Megan (Natasha Lyonne) is a sunny high school senior who loves cheerleading and is dating football player Jared (Brandt Wille) . She does not enjoy kissing Jared , however , and prefers looking at her fellow cheerleaders . Combined with Megan 's interest in vegetarianism and Melissa Etheridge , her family and friends suspect that Megan is in fact a lesbian . With the help of ex @-@ gay Mike (RuPaul) , they surprise her with an intervention . Following this confrontation , Megan is sent to True Directions , a reparative therapy camp which uses a five @-@ step program (similar to Alcoholics Anonymous ' twelve @-@ step program) to convert its campers to heterosexuality .

At True Directions , Megan meets the founder , strict disciplinarian Mary Brown (Cathy Moriarty) , Mary 's supposedly heterosexual son Rock (Eddie Cibrian) , and a group of young people trying to " cure " themselves of their homosexuality . With the prompting of Mary and the other campers , Megan reluctantly agrees that she is a lesbian (step 1 of the five @-@ step program) . This fact , at odds with her traditional , religious upbringing , distresses her and she puts every effort into becoming heterosexual . Early on in her stay at True Directions , Megan discovers two of the boys , Dolph and Clayton (Dante Basco and Kip Pardue) , making out . She panics and screams , leading to their discovery by Mike . Dolph is made to leave and Clayton is punished by being forced into isolation .

The True Directions program involves the campers admitting their homosexuality (step 1) , rediscovering their gender identity by performing stereotypically gender @-@ associated tasks (step 2) , finding the root of their homosexuality through family therapy (step 3) , demystifying the other sex (step 4) , and simulating heterosexual intercourse (step 5) . Over the course of the program , Megan becomes friends with another girl at the camp , a college student named Graham (Clea DuVall) who , though more comfortable being gay than Megan , was forced to the camp at the risk of otherwise being disowned by her family .

The True Directions kids are encouraged to rebel against Mary by two of her former students , ex @-@ ex @-@ gays Larry and Lloyd (Richard Moll and Wesley Mann) , who take the campers to a local gay bar where Graham and Megan 's relationship develops into a romance . When Mary discovers the trip , she makes them all picket Larry and Lloyd 's house , carrying placards and shouting homophobic abuse . Megan and Graham sneak away one night to have sex and begin to fall in love . When Mary finds out , Megan , now at ease with her sexual identity , is unrepentant . She is made to leave True Directions and , now homeless , goes to stay with Larry and Lloyd .

Graham , afraid to defy her father , remains at the camp . Megan and Dolph , who are also living with Larry and Lloyd , plan to win back Graham and Clayton .

Megan and Dolph infiltrate the True Directions graduation ceremony where Dolph easily coaxes Clayton away . Megan entreats Graham to join them as well , but Graham nervously declines . Megan then performs a cheer for Graham and tells her that she loves her , finally winning Graham over . They drive off with Dolph and Clayton . The final scene of the film shows Megan 's parents (Mink Stole and Bud Cort) attending a PFLAG meeting to come to terms with their daughter 's homosexuality .

= = Background and production = =

But I 'm a Cheerleader was Babbit 's first feature film . She had previously directed two short films , Frog Crossing (1996) and Sleeping Beauties (1999) , both of which were shown at the Sundance Film Festival . She went on to direct the 2005 thriller The Quiet and the 2007 comedy Itty Bitty Titty Committee . Babbit and Sperling (as producer) secured financing from Michael Burns , then the vice president of Prudential Insurance (now Vice Chairman of Lions Gate Entertainment) after showing him the script at Sundance . According to Babbit , their one @-@ sentence pitch was " Two high @-@ school girls fall in love at a reparative therapy camp . " Burns gave them an initial budget of US \$ 500 @,@ 000 which was increased to US \$ 1 million when the film went into production .

= = = Conception = = =

Babbit , whose mother runs a halfway house called New Directions for young people with drug and alcohol problems , had wanted to make a comedy about rehabilitation and the 12 @-@ step program . After reading an article about a man who had returned from a reparative therapy camp hating himself , she decided to combine the two ideas . With girlfriend Andrea Sperling , she came up with the idea for a feature film about a cheerleader who attends a reparative therapy camp . They wanted the main character to be a cheerleader because it is " ... the pinnacle of the American dream , and the American dream of femininity . " Babbit wanted the film to represent the lesbian experience from the femme perspective to contrast with several films of the time that represented the butch perspective (for example , Go Fish and The Watermelon Woman) . She also wanted to satirize both the religious right and the gay community . Not feeling qualified to write the script herself , Babbit brought in screenwriter and recent graduate of USC School of Cinematic Arts Brian Wayne Peterson . Peterson had experience with reparative therapy while working at a prison clinic for sex offenders . He has said that he wanted to make a film that would not only entertain people , but also make people get angry and talk about the issues it raised .

= = = Set and costume design = = =

Babbit says that her influences for the look and feel of the film included John Waters , David LaChapelle , Edward Scissorhands and Barbie . She wanted the production and costume design to reflect the themes of the story . There is a progression from the organic world of Megan 's hometown , where the dominant colors are orange and brown , to the fake world of True Directions , dominated by intense blues and pinks (which are intended to show the artificiality of gender construction) . According to Babbit , the germaphobic character of Mary Brown represents AIDS paranoia and her clean , ordered world is filled with plastic flowers , fake sky and PVC outfits . The external shots of the colorful house complete with a bright pink picket fence were filmed in Palmdale , California .

= = = Casting = = =

Babbit recruited Clea DuVall , who had starred in her short film Sleeping Beauties , to play the role of Graham Eaton . Babbit says that she was able to get a lot of the cast through DuVall , including

Natasha Lyonne and Melanie Lynskey . Lyonne first saw the script in the back of DuVall 's car and subsequently contacted her agent about it . She had seen and enjoyed Babbit 's short Sleeping Beauties and was eager to work with the director . She was not the first choice for the role of Megan . An unnamed actress wanted to play the part but eventually turned it down because of religious beliefs ; she did not want her family to see her face on the poster . Babbit briefly considered Rosario Dawson as Megan but her executive producer persuaded her that Dawson , who is Hispanic , would not be right for the All @-@ American character .

Babbit made a conscious effort to cast people of color for minor roles , in an effort to combat what she describes as " racism at every level of making movies . " From the beginning she intended the characters of Mike (played by RuPaul) , Dolph (Dante Basco) and Andre (Douglas Spain) to be African American , Asian and Hispanic , respectively . She initially considered Arsenio Hall for the character of Mike but says that Hall was uncomfortable about playing a gay @-@ themed role . As Mike , RuPaul makes a rare film appearance out of drag .

= = Themes = =

But I 'm a Cheerleader is not only about sexuality , but also gender and the social construction of gender roles . One of the ways in which Babbit highlighted what she called the artificiality of gender construction was by using intense blues and pinks in her production and costume design . Chris Holmlund in Contemporary American Independent Film notes this feature of the film and calls the costumes " gender @-@ tuned . " Ted Gideonse in Out magazine wrote that the costumes and colors of the film show how false the goals of True Directions are .

Gender roles are further reinforced by the tasks the campers have to perform in " Step 2 : Rediscovering Your Gender Identity . " Nikki Sullivan in A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory says that this rediscovery is shown to be difficult and unsuccessful rather than the natural discovery of their latent heterosexuality . Sullivan says that the film not only highlights the ways in which gender and sexuality are constructed but also takes the norms and truths about heteronormative society and renders them strange or " queer . " Holmlund says that Babbit makes the straight characters less normal and less likable than the gay ones . Sullivan says that this challenge of heteronormativity makes But I 'm a Cheerleader an exemplification of queer theory .

= = Rating and distribution = =

When originally submitted to the Motion Picture Association of America rating board , But I 'm a Cheerleader received an NC @-@ 17 rating . In order to get a commercially viable R rating , Babbit removed a two @-@ second shot of Graham 's hand sweeping Megan 's clothed body , a camera pan up Megan 's body when she is masturbating , and a comment that Megan " ate Graham out " (slang for cunnilingus) . Babbit was interviewed by Kirby Dick for his 2006 documentary film This Film Is Not Yet Rated . A critique of the MPAA 's rating system , it suggests that films with homosexual content are treated more stringently than those with only heterosexual content , and that scenes of female sexuality draw harsher criticism from the board than those of male sexuality . American Pie (also released in 1999) , which features a teenage boy masturbating , was given an R rating . Babbit says that she felt discriminated against for making a gay film . The film was rated as M (for mature audiences) in Australia and in New Zealand , 14A in Canada , 12 in Germany and 15 in the United Kingdom .

The film premiered on September 12 , 1999 at the Toronto International Film Festival and was shown in January 2000 at the Sundance Film Festival . It went on to play at several international film festivals including the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras festival and the London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival . It first appeared in U.S. theaters on July 7 , 2000 , distributed by Lions Gate Entertainment . Fine Line Features had intended to distribute the film but dropped it two months before it was due to open following a dispute with the film 's production company , Ignite Entertainment . It closed after 8 weeks , with its widest release having been 115 theaters .

The film was released on Region 1 DVD by Lions Gate on July 22 , 2002 and by Universal Studios

on October 3 , 2002 . Other than the theatrical trailer , it contains no extras . It was released on Region 2 DVD on June 2 , 2003 by Prism Leisure . In addition to the trailer , it features an interview with Jamie Babbit and behind the scenes footage .

= = Reception = =

= = = Box office and audience reaction = = =

But I 'm a Cheerleader grossed US \$ 2 @, @ 205 @, @ 627 in the United States and US \$ 389 @, @ 589 elsewhere , giving a total of US \$ 2 @, @ 595 @, @ 216 worldwide . In its opening weekend , showing at four theaters , it earned \$ 60 @, @ 410 which was 2 @. @ 7 % of its total gross . According to Box Office Mojo , it ranked at 174 for all films released in the US in 2000 and 74 for R @- @ rated films released that year . As of December 2011 , its all time box @- @ office ranking for LGBT @- @ related films is 73 .

The film was a hit with festival audiences and received standing ovations at the San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival . It has been described as a favorite with gay audiences and on the art house circuit .

= = = Critical reception = = =

Critical response to But I 'm a Cheerleader was mostly negative . Rotten Tomatoes gave it a score of 34 % based on 47 reviews , and Metacritic gave it a score of 39 % based on 30 reviews . The overall theme of reviews is that it is a heartfelt film with good intentions , but that it is flawed . Some reviewers found it funny and enjoyable with " genuine laughs " , however . Roger Ebert rated it three stars (of four) and wrote , it " is not a great , breakout comedy , but more the kind of movie that might eventually become a regular on the midnight cult circuit . " Others found it obvious , leaden , and heavy handed .

Writing for The New York Times , Elvis Mitchell described the character of Megan as a sweet heroine and Lyonne and DuVall were praised for their performances . Mick LaSalle called Lyonne wonderful and said that she was well matched by DuVall . Marjorie Baumgarten said that they " hit the right notes . " Alexandra Mendenhall , writing for AfterEllen.com felt that the relationship between Graham and Megan , having great chemistry , does not get enough screen time . Mitchell called their love scenes " tender . " Other characters , particularly the males , were described as " offputting " and " nothing but stereotypes . "

Several reviewers compared the film to those of director John Waters but felt that it fell short of the mark . Stephanie Zacharek called it a " Waters knockoff " while Ebert said that Waters might have been ruder and more polished . Babbit says that although Waters is one of her influences , she did not want her film to have the " bite " of his . She states that whereas John Waters does not like romantic comedies , she wanted to tell a conventionally romantic story . The production design , which was important to the overall look and feel of the film , drew mixed responses . LaSalle described it as clever and eye-catching and James Berardinelli called it a standout feature . Others found it to be gaudy , dated , cartoonish and ghastly .

Stephanie Zacharek , writing for Salon.com said that with regard to issues of sexual orientation and homophobia , Babbit is preaching to the converted . Cynthia Fuchs , for NitrateOnline.com , agreed , stating that " no one who is phobic might recognize himself in the film " and that " the audience who might benefit most from watching it either won 't see the film or won 't see the point . " David Edelstein said that the one sidedness of the film creates a lack of dramatic tension and calls it lazy counterpropaganda . In contrast , LaSalle said that " the picture manages to make a heartfelt statement about the difficulties of growing up gay " and Timothy Shary said that the film openly challenges homophobia and offers support to teenaged gay viewers . Chris Holmlund said that the film shows that queer identity is multi @- @ faceted , using as an example the scene where the ex @- @ ex @- @ gays tell Megan that there is no one way to be a lesbian .

Reviews from the gay media were similar to those from the mainstream press . Jan Stuart , writing for The Advocate , said that although the film tries to subvert gay stereotypes , it is unsuccessful . She called it " numbingly crude " and said that the kitsch portrait of Middle America is out of touch with today 's gay teenagers . Mendenhall for AfterEllen.com called the story predictable and the characters stereotypical . Nevertheless , she said that overall the film was funny and enjoyable . Curve called the film an " incredible comedy " and said that with this and her other work , Babbit has " redefined lesbian film " .

= = = Awards = = =

The film won the Audience Award and the Graine de Cinéphage Award at the 2000 Créteil International Women 's Film Festival , an annual French festival which showcases the work of female directors . Also that year it was nominated by the Political Film Society of America for the PFS award in the categories of Human Rights and Exposé , but lost out to The Green Mile and Boys Don 't Cry , respectively .

= = Music = =

Pat Irwin composed the score for But I 'm a Cheerleader . The soundtrack has never been released on CD . Artists featured include indie acts Saint Etienne , Dressy Bessy and April March . RuPaul contributed one track , " Party Train , " which Eddie Cibrian 's character , Rock , is shown dancing to .

= = = Track listing = = =

" Chick Habit (Laisse tomber les filles) " (Elinor Blake , Serge Gainsbourg) performed by April March

" Just Like Henry " (Tammy Ealom , John Hill , Rob Greene , Darren Albert) performed by Dressy Bessy

" If You Should Try and Kiss Her " (Ealom , Hill , Greene , Albert) performed by Dressy Bessy

" Trailer Song " (Courtney Holt , Joy Ray) performed by Sissy Bar

" All or Nothing " (Cris Owen , Miisa) performed by Miisa

" We 're in the City " (Sarah Cracknell , Bob Stanley , Pete Wiggs) performed by Saint Etienne

" The Swisher " (Dave Moss , Ian Rich) performed by Summer 's Eve

" Funnel of Love " (Kent Westbury , Charlie McCoy) performed by Wanda Jackson

" Ray of Sunshine " (Go Sailor) performed by Go Sailor

" Glass Vase Cello Case " (Madigan Shive , Jen Wood) performed by Tattle Tale

" Party Train " (RuPaul) performed by RuPaul

" Evening in Paris " (Lois Maffeo) performed by Lois Maffeo

" Together Forever in Love " (Go Sailor) performed by Go Sailor

= = Musical = =

In 2005 the New York Musical Theatre Festival featured a musical stage adaptation of But I 'm a Cheerleader written by librettist and lyricist Bill Augustin and composer Andrew Abrams . With 18 original songs , it was directed by Daniel Goldstein and starred Chandra Lee Schwartz as Megan . It played during September 2005 at New York 's Theatre at St. Clement 's .