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A Film About Lesbians, and Don't Hold The Humor

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By LIZA BEAR

MIRRORING SOCIETY'S ATTITUDES, the film industry has long shunned lesbians, rarely making movies about them, much less movies from their point of view. But that seemed to change last year when "Go Fish," by and about lesbians, was a modest hit. This year two more films about lesbians are opening, and another has been a surprise hit in France.

"Bar Girls," which opened here on Friday, began life over two years ago, when the director, Marita Giovanni, was teaching an acting class at the Celebration Theater in Los Angeles. There, one of her students, Liza D'Agostino, asked her to read a friend's first play. That play, Laurant Hoffman's lesbian comedy "Bar Girls," became the basis for the new film, which is from Orion Classics.

"It's unusual for me to laugh at a lesbian play," said Ms. Giovanni, who immediately sensed the cinematic potential in this light-hearted material. "We need more films that explore lesbian characters and life styles, not just the three or four that have received a U.S. theatrical release in the past 12 years. There have been many more major films exploring canine characters and life styles than there have been lesbian films, and dogs hardly ever go to the movies."

A former actress and playwright, Ms. Giovanni holds a degree in directing from Boston University Theater School, has directed more than 50 plays and has made documentary films for PBS.

Ms. Hoffman, by contrast, had no prior stage or film experience. When lesbians finally started to be portrayed on film and television, she said, "the material was written by heterosexuals for heterosexuals and often reflected us negatively." So she decided to raise money to put "Bar Girls" on the stage. After a public reading of the script, she sold shares in a theatrical pro-

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duction of "Bar Girls" at a lesbian bar in the San Fernando Valley.

"Initially, we had a lot of trouble casting this piece," Ms. Hoffman said. "At least one of the actresses quit because both she and her agent didn't think it would be a good idea to portray a lesbian."

To publicize the play, she put up life-size billboards of the actresses on Sunset Boulevard. Ms. Giovanni directed, and the play had a successful two-month run at the Gene Dynarski Theater in Hollywood.

Ms. Hoffman used a similar technique to raise \$50,000 of the \$600,000 needed to make the film, which was shot in five weeks last summer. Ms. D'Agostino has a leading role as one of the eight habitués at Girl Bar, an actual bar in West Hollywood. Ms. Giovanni directed, and Ms. Hoffman produced. Michael Ferris, a well-known cinematographer and childhood mentor for Ms. Hoffman, offered his services as director of photography.

Timing was on their side. "Go



Yael Swerdelow/Orion Classics

Nancy Allison Wolfe, left, and Liza D'Agostino in "Bar Girls."

Fish" appeared in July 1994. That film, released by Samuel Goldwyn, went on to earn \$2.4 million. "We were finishing production as 'Go Fish' was being released," Ms. Hoffman said. Orion picked up the movie after it was shown at the Toronto Film Festival last fall.

"We felt it could withstand the critics and appeal to a certain niche audience," said Jay Peckos, senior vice president for distribution of Orion. "Compared to the two theatrically released lesbian-themed pictures that I know of, 'Claire of the Moon' and 'Go Fish,' this, in my opinion, is just a slice of life. It doesn't have any politics to preach."

The success of "Go Fish" in a specialized market has inspired the release of a third low-budget film. "The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love," about a relationship between two teen-age girls, will be released by Fine Line in June. The romantic comedy, directed by Maria Maggenti, was shown at the Sundance Film Festival earlier this year. And a current hit comedy in France, "Gazon Maudit," or "Bushwhacked," also deals with lesbian themes.

"Bar Girls" presents women who flirt, date and fight just like other couples; whatever conflicts the women have, anxiety about their sexual orientation isn't one of them. "A lot of us have been out for a very long time," said Ms. Hoffman, 31, who grew up in Beverly Hills and Acastadero, a small town north of Los Angeles. "It's the 90's, and I think people are feeling comfortable with their sexuality." She refers to her parents as radically political hippies turned yuppies. Her father is a computer programmer, and her mother is an arts therapist.

Ms. Giovanni, 46, the daughter of a factory worker and a nurse from rural Virginia, added: "Young lesbians of today are very different. In the 70's and early 80's, I would have said: 'I'm a lesbian feminist. And I'm a film maker.' Now I think I'd say, 'I'm an artist who happens to be a lesbian.' Things have loosened up a little."

Their film is set in the kind of place where custodial bartenders dispense wheat grass juice and aphrodisiac cocktails. Girl Bar is a mecca for romantic intrigue between debonair young lesbians with flowing hair and lithe physiques. The scene is far from what Ms. Hoffman calls Hollywood's "lesbian killer-thriller mentality" (think "Basic Instinct," in 1992) or the outdated portrayal of lesbians as unattractive frumps ("The Killing of Sister George," in 1968). "Bar Girls" is a sort of Sapphic "Cosi Fan Tutte," with the constantly changing partners at Girl Bar given a populist California flavor.

Ms. Hoffman said "Bar Girls" was screened in Palm Springs, Calif., last month to coincide with the Dinah Shore Classic golf tournament, an event that has long been popular as a spring gathering spot for lesbians. The movie is now playing in 20 cities.

"We're not dead sure what the critical response is going to be to the picture in all markets," Mr. Peckos of Orion acknowledged. "I'm not going to beat around the bush. We looked at the results of a picture like 'Go Fish' in choosing our markets, because it did have a lesbian theme as well. I don't think it hurts to try and mimic to a certain point where someone else had been successful." □