



Polly (Sheila McCarthy) in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*.

To all the stars who won't say 'it'

Or why I cringe when Patricia Rozema says her film is not 'about lesbianism'

By Loie Hayes

I don't know about you, but I'm always interested in claiming my cultural idols — movie directors, TV stars, writers — as queer kin. It's an obsession I don't completely enjoy. But my thirst for public role models, and for gay content, has hardly been satisfied by the increase in gay film and TV characters in the last three years. And when a filmmaker does feature a gay or lesbian character he or she is usually

film

loathe to discuss the significance of that inclusion. Maybe we're just longing to make visible the "invisible" minority, but then too, it may be a more personal longing to be closer to our stars in spirit if not in status.

That longing gets even stronger when the idol in question declines to come out explicitly yet gives lots of broad hints that they might "know Dorothy" or be one of "our kind." People like Lily Tomlin or Richard Chamberlain are certainly entitled to their privacy and I can even understand not wanting to do Queerness 101 in every interview for the rest of their lives. But if all the gay stars stay so tight-lipped that their queerness remains the thing everyone's waiting for them to talk about, how will we ever get to the day when it really is "no big deal"?

Consider this example: a feminist filmmaker writes in lesbians as two of the three main characters in her film. The actors present authentic portraits and the audience gets to see lust, affection and the eye-to-eye confidence of women who do not fear another woman's desire. The film's lead is an asexual woman who's emotionally attracted to the lovers. She's surprised by their sexuality but quickly comes to think that gender is irrelevant. In this attitude she speaks for her creator, and she addresses those in the audience who may be surprised or reticent when confronted by the lovers' natural lust up there on the wide screen.

The filmmaker, Patricia Rozema, hopes heterosexual viewers of her film *I've Heard the Mermaid Singing* will be able to adopt her own "matter-of-fact, so-what" attitude toward the lesbian characters. "If the film has been effective," she says, "we have seen this relationship through Polly's [the protagonist's] eyes. At first she's shocked and then she can handle it. In Polly's mind it's all the same. It's love and attraction and romance."

Rozema is adamant that the film is not "about dykes" and I'm glad to agree that *Mermaids* is "about" much more than whether or not Polly can come to accept two lesbians. *Mermaids* is an ambitious and thoroughly entertaining treatise on creativity and commercial success; it's an "anti-authority" film with the nerd winning over the admiration of the elegant, savvy, rich power-turkey. So what if they're all women?

I guess it comes back to that longing again. I asked Rozema how she wanted lesbians to feel after viewing her film. "The funny thing is," she said, "when you make a film or write a story, the world seems to think you're making a statement about all

people in that category. And I'm not. I'm creating very distinct characters, out of my head. With Mary [one of the lesbians] I did put a leather jacket on her and gave her lots of eye liner and made her very direct. Partly because the actress who was playing her looks a little too wholesome, not to play a lesbian I mean, but for that character. So I made her just a little tougher. I also wanted just to make her look good and I thought she looked good," Rozema laughed.

"But lesbians who watch it, I guess I would like them to feel... certainly not offended by the characters, but interested in them... I guess, affirmed. I think one of the most effective ways to affirm is to just make no issue of it. It's like I consider myself a feminist, but I never get into feminist arguments. I just try to do a good job and assume I can do whatever I want to do and that my gender is not relevant in almost every situation. You assume the validity and you get it."

Oh Mary, shoot me if I'm coining a new critical term but Rozema's attitude seems distinctly post-liberationist. *Mermaids*, *Waiting for the Moon* and *Parting Glances* could not have been shown without the last two decades movement against homophobia. Yet they have gone so far beyond our familiar coming out advocacy stories; they've got more important things to talk about, like art and death for instance. I know this is progress but why do I still want to see the *Parting Glances* boys fuck on screen? Why, when I love Patricia Rozema's film just as it is, why do I cringe when she says it's not "about lesbianism"?

Rozema argues, "We all know that homosexuals exist. I don't have to state that. We all know that there's a certain amount of public hesitation about them. I think it's insulting to an audience, homosexual or heterosexual, to present this kind of relationship as a new thing that needs major discussion. It's just no big, fucking deal," and Rozema laughs again. □

Fiasco

Continued from page 3
to refuse to sign the affidavit.

Foster parents differ dramatically in their reactions to the affidavit and the ban on lesbian and gay foster parents, noted Jennings, who is also working on the survey. "Some think [the law] is the most wonderful thing that happened since chocolate ice cream. Other people think it is a dire threat to civil rights. I fall closer to that end."

Two gay men have lost their license to be foster parents due to the newly-implemented legislation. The men, who could not be reached for comment, were "discovered" by state Rep. Mildred Ingram, sponsor of the anti-lesbian and -gay bill, in the summer of 1985. Ingram used them as a rallying point to gather support for her legislation. The men's license, which was due to be renewed in January of this year, was not renewed until June. At that time their license was renewed until June 24, the date the new law took effect.

filed from Boston □