

SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE, Edward Guthmann

"EXUBERANT AND WELL-ACTED."

LOS ANGELES TIMES, Kevin Thomas

"Abounds in good-hearted humor... Scotti is flat-out terrific."

THE NEW YORK TIMES, Janet Maslin

"Lighthearted...a playful comic ingenuity of its own."

NBC-TV, Jeffrey Lyons

"Fresh, clever and very funny."

TIME OUT NEW YORK, Andrew Johnston

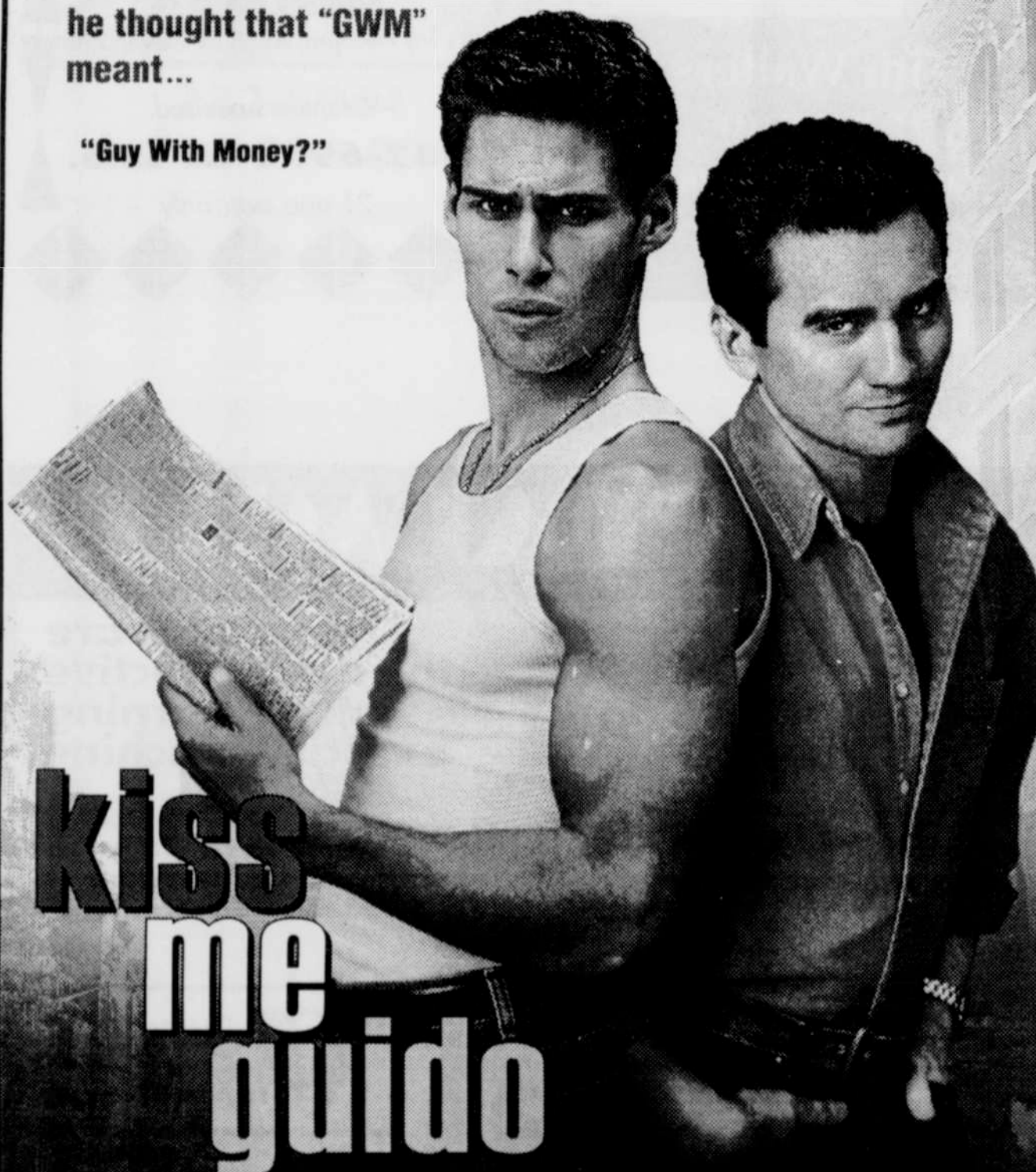
"A cross between 'Moonstruck' and 'The Birdcage'."

ROLLING STONE, Peter Travers

"Charming!"

When he answered the ad for a roommate he thought that "GWM" meant...

"Guy With Money?"



Paramount Pictures Presents In Association With Kardana/Swinsky Films and Capitol Films
A Redeemable Features Production A Tony Vitale Film "Kiss Me, Guido" Nick Scotti
Anthony Barrile Anthony De Sando Casting by Hopkins, Smith, Barden Production Designer Jeffrey Rathaus
Costume Designer Victoria Farrell Editor Alexander Hall Music Supervisor Randall Poster Director of Photography Claudia Raschke
Executive Producers Jane Barclay, Tom Carouso, Sharon Harel & Christopher Lawford



Produced by Ira Deutchman & Christine Vachon

Written & Directed by Tony Vitale



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POMO AFRO LESBO

The Watermelon Woman offers a fresh slice of some alternative characters for all to enjoy

by Rupert Kinnard

I would imagine one of the challenges for many filmmakers would be to incorporate within their works themes that are universal enough so as not to alienate any one particular group of people from experiencing the work as fully as possible. Of course if the goal is to target the film to a specific group, the chances of attracting a wide audience decrease. Many films don't have to be targeted to a specific group for some to feel alienated by them; if the

especially in the acid-tongued interchanges between her character, also named Cheryl, and her best friend, Tamara, played with languid sassiness by Valarie Walker.

The film takes place in Philadelphia and follows Cheryl as she experiences some parallels between her own life and what she learns about the life of 1930s actress Fae Richards, the "Watermelon Woman." Cheryl learns through her research that Fae developed what seems to be an intimate relationship with a white lesbian director who became instrumental in furthering her career. During her research adventures Cheryl meets and develops a relationship with a white lesbian named Diana (played by Guinevere Turner of *Go Fish*), while working at a video store with the ever-so-horny Tamara.

The cinematic style of *The Watermelon Woman* is refreshing and slightly rough compared to the slick schlock shelled out by Hollywood these days. The film has a witty edge to it, and there are a number of scenes that are hysterically humorous as they comment on racism and intolerance without being preachy. One such scene has Cheryl being mistaken for a male "crackhead freak," and another features controversial cultural critic Camille Paglia (as herself) charging full steam ahead as she defends her perceptions of "mammies" and depictions of watermelon-eating children as viable black stereotypes. The film also features Brian Freeman, of Pomo

Cinema

movie simply features a mostly female cast or a mostly black cast, many would conclude that the film would have no interest for them.

The success of *The Watermelon Woman*—the first African American lesbian feature film—by writer, director and star Cheryl Dunye, might suffer as a result of a couple of these dilemmas. Where do we start? Straight people might be offended by the lesbian content. Rep. Peter Hoekstra, a Republican from Michigan, saw the film after having read a review that stated it had "the hottest dyke sex scene ever recorded on celluloid," and was shocked by the movie. The fact that it has a largely black cast might cause some to think it's a black film for black people. And gay men don't tend to flock to see lesbian-oriented films, any more than lesbians line up to see gay men knocking boots. But as is the case with most good movies, no matter how much they are perceived as not reflecting our realities, *The Watermelon Woman* truly has something for everyone.

Most of my pleasure in viewing *The Watermelon Woman* was based on not knowing very much about it beforehand. So I'm hesitant to reveal much, for fear of diminishing anyone else's enjoyment. Frank Rich of the *New York Times* put it well when he wrote that Dunye "goes on an archeological dig into America's cultural past. Dedicating her film to the memory of Hattie McDaniel and Butterfly McQueen, she retrieves the lost history of the title character, a gifted black gay actress of the '30s whose career was relegated to 'mammy' roles in Hollywood and ghettoized 'race pictures.' The film actually incorporates the documentary genre as part of what is also a detective story, a love story, an examination of friendship and interracial relationships. These are themes that push it beyond it merely being labeled a film for African American lesbians."

As a black gay man, I couldn't help but realize how much of a leap the film has taken into the real world of the African American experience. Although she was compared to Woody Allen by one reviewer, another felt the need to label Dunye a smarter filmmaker than Spike Lee. In the beginning of his career, Lee himself had to suffer being labeled a black version of Woody Allen, but he has paved the way for the most realistic portrayals of black folks in the history of cinema. Dunye takes it a number of steps further in her writing,

Lisa Marie Bronson as Fae Richards, the "Watermelon Woman"

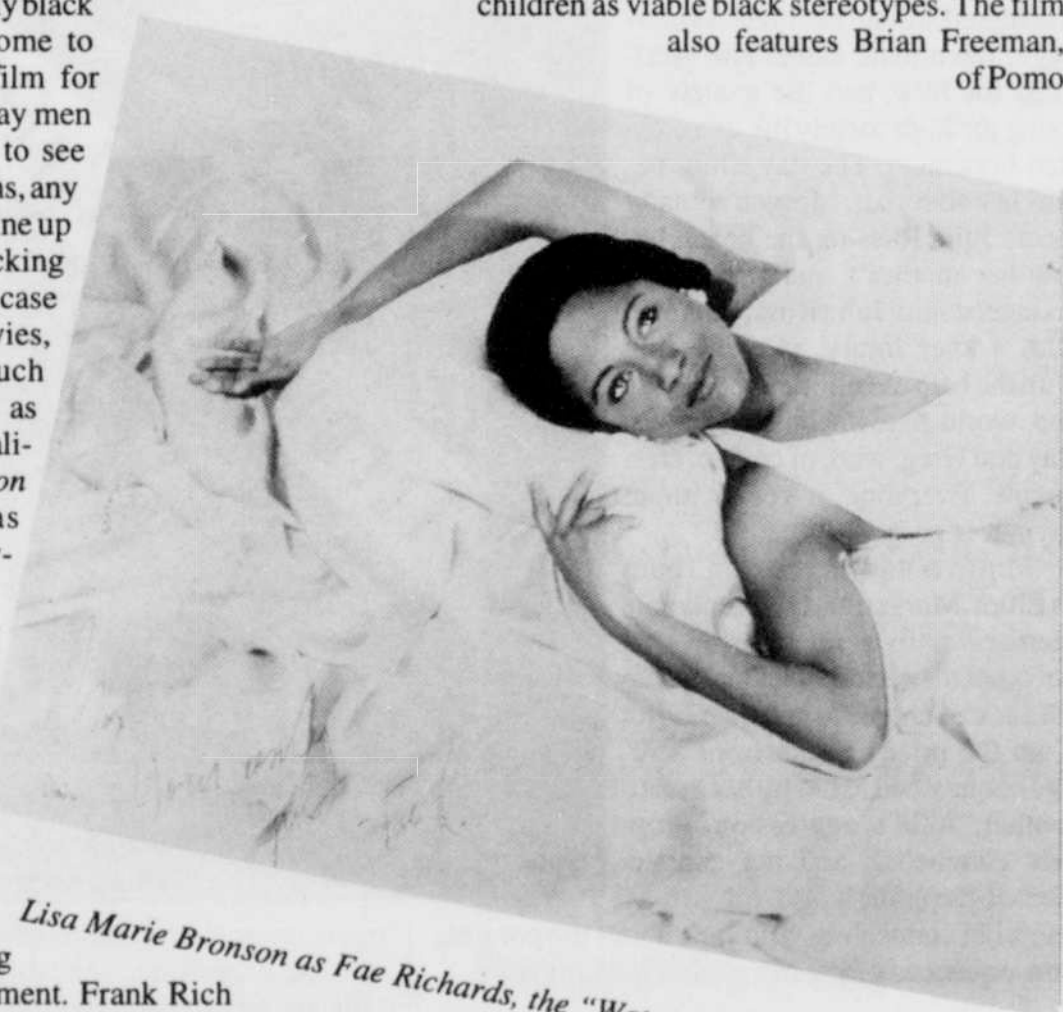


PHOTO BY ZOE LEONARD

Afro Homos fame, and musician Toshi Reagon (daughter of Sweet Honey in the Rock's Bernice Johnson Reagon) in cameo appearances.

Having been born of a Liberian father and an American mother, Dunye sees herself as being truly African American. She identifies herself as an African American lesbian independent filmmaker. The themes she weaves within the framework of *The Watermelon Woman* should be of interest to all. It would be a shame to miss it, no matter what your gender, race or sexual orientation.

The *Watermelon Woman* opens Friday, Aug. 22, at Cinema 21, 616 NW 21st Ave. Advance ticket sales for that evening's shows go in part to benefit Sensory Perceptions, Portland's Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. Advance tickets are \$6, available at It's My Pleasure and In Other Words; regular general admission is \$5.50. The film plays nightly at 7 and 8:45 pm, with weekend matinees at 1:30, 3:15 and 5 pm, through Aug. 28.