

FILMS

Recovering lesbians learn to be real women in *Cheerleader*

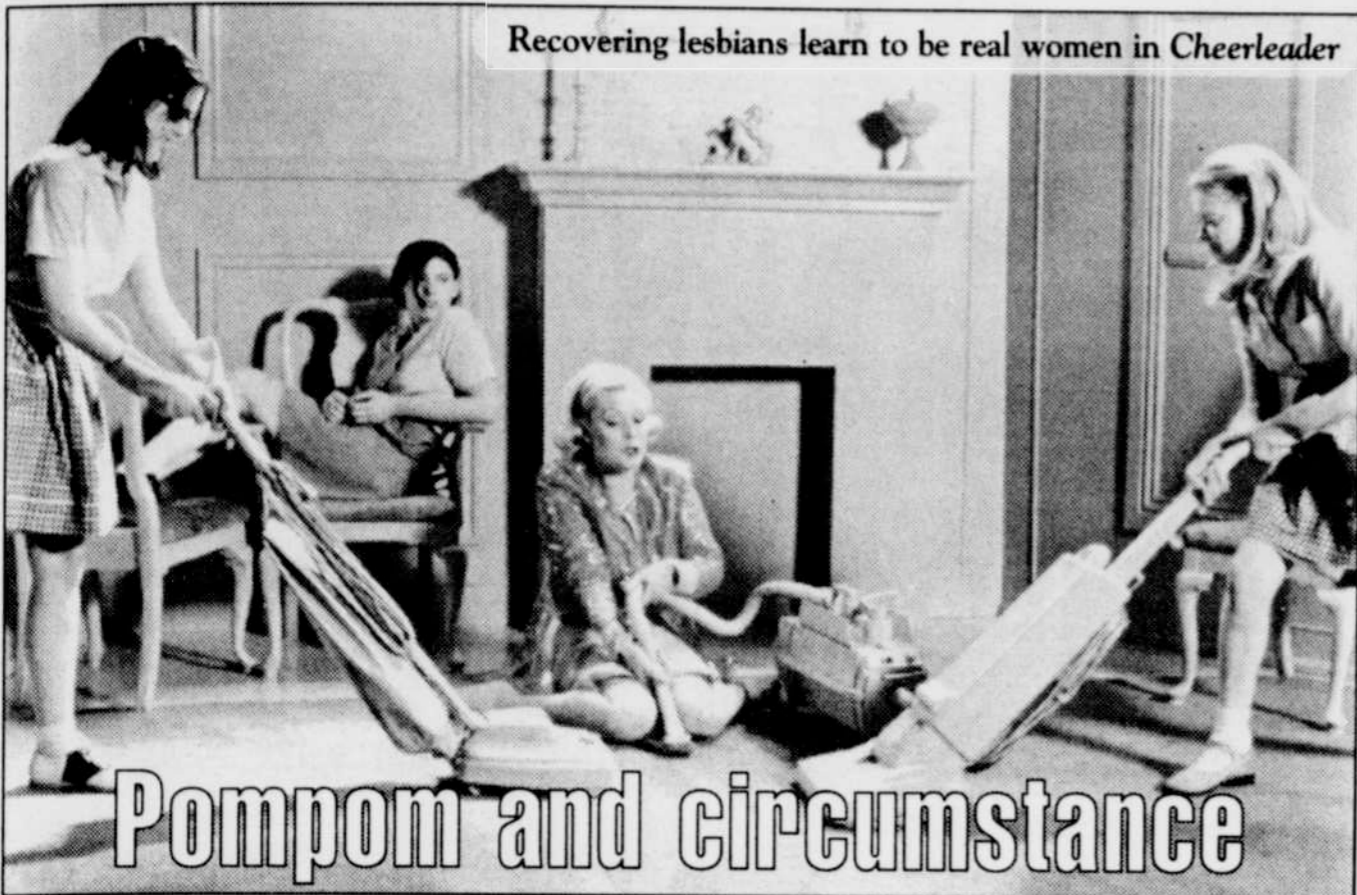


PHOTO BY MARK LIPSON

Pompon and circumstance

Jamie Babbit's directorial debut, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, finds silliness in a serious situation

BY ORIANA GREEN

Feature films with a lesbian focus are as rare as Dr. Laura at a PFLAG rally, and directors who declare themselves lesbians from the get-go make up a very short list. So, hey, I'm going to cut director Jamie Babbit some slack for her first feature effort.

Tackling the sensitive subject of the ex-gay movement is a bold move for a first-timer, and she lampoons it with gusto. *But I'm a Cheerleader* is a thoroughly queer film, and in many ways Babbit is preaching to the choir on this topic, which leads me to wonder who her target audience is. In fact, it seems like it might be more appealing to a straight audience, especially one unafraid to laugh in the dark at silly stereotypes of queer behavior.

Some applause is due Babbit for making a lesbian love story from a femme perspective, unlike most recent dyke films, which have focused on the travails of baby butches. Her heroine, Megan, played with a real vulnerability by Natasha Lyonne, is a girly-girl high school cheerleader, even if she does hang a picture of a buff babe on the inside of her locker. Which is one of the flimsy reasons her friends and family decide to ship her off for reprogramming at True Directions.

Babbit visually contrasts Megan's real suburban world, which is portrayed in a fairly realistic manner, with the surreal world of rehab, where she and others are held captive in a relentlessly pink-and-blue Disneyesque hetero theme park. A campy camp for homos who are fruitlessly attempting to turn straight, True Directions is helmed by Cathy Moriarty and RuPaul Charles (with no wig in sight), who both turn in solid performances.

One of my problems with the film is trying to laugh at the spoof of something so heinous that still exists. (Rather like watching *Hogan's Heroes* in 1943, had absurd television programs beamed into living rooms at that time.) Sadly, young gay men and lesbians are being hauled off to these POW camps by misguided parents. In fact, reading about one of these places near San Francisco is what inspired Babbit to write this story.

True Directions is loosely based on 12-step substance abuse programs, something Babbit knows all about, since her mother ran one while she was growing up.

The film surely has some funny moments, even if they often perpetuate stereotypes. The gay boys at the camp are predictably terrible at the macho activities they're required to try and couldn't lob a pass accurately to save their sweet souls—but they do look cute in their see-

through blue mesh shirts. The tomboy types struggle with classes on makeup and dusting and look suitably uncomfortable in their cotton-candy-colored outfits. The funniest bits arise from some titillating fetish references in the costuming.

I wish the screenwriter had tried for more insightful humor, but the absurd quality of the activities inside True Directions is consonant with the overall inanity of the concept in the first place. Even handyman Rock, the son of the camp's leader, portrayed by hunky Eddie Cibrian, has clearly failed the program and teases male campers with his flexed muscles and the long reach of his tools.

The budding relationship between Megan and one of her fellow inmates has its sweet moments but is, by its subversive nature, conducted in the margins of their lives and thus lacks real emotional power. Played with some grit by Clea Duvall, Graham counters Megan's assertion that cheerleading makes people feel good with this reality check: "Cheers make girls do stupid cartwheels—orgasms make people feel good."

Since Megan appears to be a virgin, "sis boom bah" is as close as she gets to a big O. Nevertheless, the actresses, who are pals off screen, were pleased with their brief lovemaking scenes. As Lyonne told *PopcornQ Movie News*: "It was a little awkward for me and Clea, because we're friends. Even though I did want to jump her bones."

The cast is very strong, to the point of wasting some talented actors in minuscule roles—Melanie Lynskey (who costarred with Kate Winslet in *Heavenly Creatures*) plays one of the forlorn campmates, as does famous French actress Julie Delpy. John Waters fave Mink Stole and Bud Cort are standouts as Megan's well-meaning parents.

All in all, it's a worthy first film and in some ways feels polished compared to the usual no-budget indie flicks. Gay men who previewed the film seemed to enjoy it more than the lesbians did.

Very few quality queer films even get made, so if we hope to eventually have great ones, we need to support young filmmakers with our dollars, which is the only thing that will keep Hollywood open to telling our stories. There's plenty of eye candy for both men and women, so open up your wallets and enjoy.

■ BUT I'M A CHEERLEADER opens July 21 at KOIN Cinemas.

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