

**THEATER**

**Dancing pretty fast**

**Suzanne Westenhofer stands and delivers during a difficult period for comics and their audiences**

BY LISA BRADSHAW

**S**he talks for a living. How hard could an interview be? She's a comedian. I will have an abundance of rich information on which to draw. This will be great.

**Lisa Bradshaw: What's the name of your new show?**

**Suzanne Westenhofer:** I'm calling it *Banned in Pittsburgh*. I got banned in Pittsburgh, but I'm not going to tell you about it.

**LB: I read about that; I'm going to ask you about it later on.**

**SW:** I'm never gonna tell you because I put so much of it in the act that I don't want to talk about it in interviews.

**LB: Come on, a little preview.**

**SW:** Nope.

**LB: I'm going to slip it in later, and you'll forget....**

**SW:** Nope.

OK, then. Suzanne Westenhofer is talking to me from Provincetown, Mass., so I ask about Lesbianville. That works.

"There's *nothing* like fall in New England.... Fall in New England is the reason people write books, the reason people do art. It's so astounding. Leaves, smell, everything. I love the West Coast, and I love the Pacific Northwest, but y'all don't have any fall."

And it's Women's Week in Provincetown. Westenhofer exclaims: "20,000 women in a space about 12 blocks long. Yeah, that works."

Westenhofer is touring the United States doing the standup act thousands of dykes world-wide know and love. The show is ever-changing, but nearly every word, every breath, screams *gay*.

She can't help it. "It's lesbian because I'm lesbian," she says.

**W**estenhofer's story is a whirlwind of comedic success. After graduating from Clarion University with a bachelor's degree in acting—"four years I can never get back"—she rushed to New York to be a movie star but instead "became an amazing bartender."

Slinging barbs along with customers' drinks, she eventually was taunted by some regulars to try out her naturally funny queer-girl act on a real stage. After weeks of nervous planning and standing in the back of a comedy club, she went up to do her three minutes.

"I won the contest—\$20!" Westenhofer exults. "And then I wanted to do it again."

Six months and many acts later, she was asked to appear on an episode of *The Sally Jesse Raphael Show* titled "Lesbians Who Don't Look Like Lesbians." The long-haired femme sat along with fash-

ion models and other "straight-looking" women, describing what it was like to be a real, live dyke.

"This one woman said, 'Did you get that way because you had a bad experience with a man?'" Westenhofer remembers. "I said, 'No, did you get that way because you had a bad experience with a woman?'"

In 1992 Westenhofer won the New York Cabaret Award for Best Performer. Fast-forward to 1994, when she became the first out lesbian to snag her own HBO comedy special, which was nominated for a prestigious Cable Ace Award.

A few years later her first recording, *Nothing in My Closet but My Clothes*, won the Gay and Lesbian American Music Award for Best Comedy CD. So the next year she released another and won the same award. (You can catch one of her Portland performances on the boxed set *Hilarith*.)

**N**ot bad for a girl who never really considered being a comedian. "What can I tell ya?" Westenhofer quips. "I just had a lot to say."

This comic hasn't left acting behind, though; you can catch her in the film *A Family Affair*, which is making its way around the gay and lesbian festival circuit. The first thing you'll notice in the movie is that those trademark long, blond locks are gone.

**LB: So you cut and died your hair specifically for this film, right?**

**SW:** Yes, but you can't talk about that.

**LB: Why can't I talk about that?**

**SW:** Because it's in the show!

Westenhofer enjoys acting immensely, but standup is her first love. Why?

"It's me," she says. "I fail or I succeed because of me. It's my words, my stories, my truth. I make all the decisions. It's me and you. If you don't like what I'm doing and you boo and hiss, then I do something else. And if you love what I'm doing, and we're all laughing, then let's go. I love that! It's so powerful—us, our night, nobody can touch it."

Westenhofer also used to write pieces for *The Advocate*, so I joke about why they never put her on the cover. "Because I wasn't straight first," she deadpans. "That's my bitter, bitchy way to say it. If you become famous when you're straight and then come out, you get to be on the cover of everything, don't you know?"

Which brings us to the delicate subject of that other blond lesbian comic. With all of Westenhofer's success, you'd think media deals would be flying at her, and they were—right before Ellen DeGeneres came out.

Suddenly, the deals ended. There was no more room for a gay woman on television.

"But there is room," Westenhofer insists. "I'm extremely different from Ellen; our comedy styles could not be further apart.... It's interesting to have your career be so deeply affected by someone you barely know."

I did hear about another HBO project, though.

**LB: You play a Jewish lesbian in an HBO series, right?**

**SW:** No, that's not exactly true.

Again, we can't talk about this.

**LB: You play something in an HBO show, right?**

**SW:** Can't tell ya.



Suzanne Westenhofer waves two flags

**LB: You're in it.**

**SW:** You're on a need-to-know basis, here, missy.

What Westenhofer can talk about right now is what everyone else in the country is talking about. She loves what she does but is finding it particularly hard to be a standup comedian during a time of terrorism and war. At the first performance after the Sept. 11 attacks, she honestly did not want to take the stage.

"I didn't want to be funny. I didn't *feel* funny." Still, the show must go on, and in the end it was "wonderful...the audience was spectacular. You know, we were all there for each other."

However, Westenhofer proceeds with caution. She describes a bit in which she talks about losing her luggage: "The moment I said 'airport,' a hundred women just froze. And I went 'oh' and just skipped it."

Even seemingly safe homo humor can be on shaky footing. "All of a sudden a joke about gays in the military is not funny.... So you're just up there, and you're just, uh, let's see where we can go. I'm definitely dancing pretty fast."

Westenhofer, who spends half her life on airplanes, insists: "I'm not afraid to fly, I'm not afraid to go out, I'm not afraid to do anything...nobody gets to take that away from me. I can't live my life saying, 'Is this going to happen?' What a horrible place to be."

Westenhofer stood in line for two hours to buy a U.S. flag and a rainbow one. She and Annie, her partner of nine years, both definitely have found their patriotism—but don't confuse that with Republicanism.

"You can't shut Annie up right now because everybody is pro-Bush and stuff," she laughs. "She's like: 'This is fuckin' bullshit. He didn't get any smarter.'"

In closing, Westenhofer wants to make sure the gay boys come to her show, too. "Sometimes they think that it's lesbian and somehow it won't be about them, but it is."

She doesn't even mind if straight people come. "It's a really inclusive show because, you know, it's about...me." ■

SUZANNE WESTENHOEFER performs 8 p.m. Nov. 2 at Portland's Aladdin Theater, 3017 S.E. Milwaukie Ave. Tickets are \$23 at the door and \$20 in advance from It's My Pleasure, Ticketmaster or 503-224-4400. She takes her act to Eugene's Wild Duck Music Hall, 169 W. Sixth Ave., at 8 p.m. Nov. 3. Tickets are \$23 at the door and \$20 in advance from Mother Kali's Books, Fastix or 541-485-3825.

LISA BRADSHAW is a free-lance writer who also has a head of fabulous thick, blond hair.

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