



Bearse, Amanda (b. 1958)

by Tina Gianoulis

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Amanda Bearse at a World AIDS Day breakfast in 2011. Still from a YouTube video. Uploaded by RosehedgeMultifaith on Nov 4, 2011.

One of the first primetime television actors to come out publicly as a gay person, Amanda Bearse helped pave the way for a new, more queer-friendly era in show business during the 1990s. Family-viewing hours, which had once deemed homosexuality taboo, would soon become home to such gay-themed shows as *Ellen* and *Will and Grace*, and almost every popular show would begin to find room for the occasional gay or lesbian character.

Bearse, who is also a film and television director, found coming out to be personally freeing as well as politically progressive, and she has become an outspoken advocate for breaking down the silence and secrecy that stifles the lives of so many gay men and lesbians. The proud mother of an adopted daughter and step-mother to her wife's daughter, Bearse has also frequently spoken out on issues of gay parenting.

Amanda Bearse was born on August 9, 1958 in Winter Park, Florida, and raised in Atlanta, Georgia, where her family has deep roots. She attended Young Harris College, a small northeast Georgia liberal arts school.

She began to act in high school and college productions and left the South to hone her craft in New York City, where she studied with Sanford Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse, a midtown Manhattan school of theater arts.

In 1981, she moved to Los Angeles and studied directing at the American Film Institute and the University of Southern California.

Bearse's first big break in the television industry came with a role on the ABC soap opera *All My Children*, where Bearse played Amanda Cousins from 1982 through 1984. Her casting was part of the show's attempt to increase its young viewers by adding dynamic young actors and youthful storylines.

In the 1980s, Bearse also began landing roles in such films as *First Affair* (1983) and *Fright Night* (1985). The latter, a comic-horror classic in which she co-starred with William Ragsdale, Chris Sarandon, and Roddy McDowall, became a surprise hit and attracted a cult following.

In 1987, Bearse was cast in a new syndicated series called *Married . . . with Children*. Described by some as a "live-action cartoon," the show was an irreverent look at the dysfunctional life of a working-class American family, the Bundys. Bearse played the family's tightly-strung neighbor, Marcy Rhodes D'Arcy.

The show, which was the FOX network's first regular sitcom, became a cult hit and ran from 1987 to 1997 and has been widely syndicated.

Although Bearse has referred to the show as a "Road Runner cartoon," she has also expressed gratitude to it for giving her a second career that sustained her after the sitcom finally ended. It was while appearing on *Married . . . with Children* that she began directing.

While developing her acting career, Bearse was also living openly as a lesbian. She became involved in a two-year affair with flamboyant bisexual actress and comic Sandra Bernhard, which alerted the tabloid media to her sexual orientation, and in 1991 *The Globe* printed a story outing Bearse. Though she paid little heed to the tabloid exposés, they did cause her to begin to think seriously about coming out on her own terms.

In 1993, Bearse and then-partner Amy Shomer adopted an infant daughter, Zoe. Her new role as mother gave her yet another reason for public openness about her personal life.

Although she had never hidden her lesbianism from colleagues and friends, she was aware of the ways that the closet limits gay choices and enables oppression. Purposely choosing the time right before National Coming Out Day in October, Bearse publicly announced her lesbianism in an interview in the September 21, 1993 issue of *The Advocate*, where she also encouraged other gay celebrities to use their fame and position to increase gay visibility.

In the interview, Bearse expressed relief at having been outed by the tabloids. "The outing really was quite a freeing experience. . . . That one thing, that one big secret is out. For a lot of people, it was just a confirmation of what they thought about me. I mean, I look like the girl next door, but I was always kind of off-center."

Bearse's decision to come out in 1993 (four years before Ellen DeGeneres came out) carried considerable risk. No primetime actress had previously done it. However, Bearse had an advantage that encouraged her to take the risk: she was supported by her colleagues on *Married . . . with Children*.

As she remarked at the time, "I've been very fortunate. I'm supported by the people I work with. I'm on a hit show. I just renegotiated my contract: It was completely up, and this was a time when they could have easily cut me loose. Fortunately I'm valued there as a person, as an actor, and as a director. Being lesbian is a nonissue on the show."

Indeed, Bearse's coming out had little negative impact on her career. She continued acting and began increasingly to work behind the camera as well, directing numerous episodes of *Married . . . with Children* and many other sitcoms, such as ABC's *Dharma and Greg*, FOX's *Mad TV*, and *Reba* on the WB network. The comic sensibility and timing that she evinced as an actress has also characterized her directing.

Though her only lesbian acting role to date is Marcy D'Arcy's gay cousin Mandy on a 1997 episode of *Married . . . with Children*, Bearse has worked with another out comic actor, Rosie O'Donnell, in directing several episodes of *The Big Gay Sketch Show*, which began airing on gay cable channel Logo in 2007.

Bearse has continued to be a strong advocate for gay rights and gay parenting issues. She was part of a 1995 *Advocate* profile of gay parents, and, in 1997, brought public attention to lesbian custody issues when her partner at that time, Dell Pearce, a producer of television commercials, was involved in a custody dispute with a former lover.

In the late 1990s she began to work as a spokesperson for the Human Rights Campaign, and she has remained a strong supporter of queer visibility and National Coming Out Day, saying "It's harder to discriminate against a face than an abstract."

Bearse has also served as a "Gay Games Ambassador," signing on to help get the word out about the Gay Games in Chicago in 2006.

In 2010, Bearse and Carrie Schenkman, a Seattle businesswoman who tends to avoid publicity, married in

Vermont. The spouses commute between homes in Atlanta, where Bearse has long lived and where her daughter attends high school, and Seattle, where Schenkman lives with her daughter.

In addition, Bearse spends a great deal of time in Los Angeles, where she works on a number of projects.

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About the Author

Tina Gianoulis is an essayist and free-lance writer who has contributed to a number of encyclopedias and anthologies, as well as to journals such as *Sinister Wisdom*.