



## Bernhard, Sandra (b. 1955)

by Teresa Theophano

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Sharp-tongued comedienne, writer, singer and actor Sandra Bernhard is known almost as well for her amorphous sexuality as for her cynical wit.

Over the past three decades, the prolific entertainer has toured extensively on and off Broadway with her one-woman stage shows, appeared on numerous television programs and in movies (including films made of her live shows), written three books, and recorded several albums.

She has also been forthright regarding both her sexual orientation--perhaps best described as "pansexual"--and progressive political stance in countless interviews, speaking about her ex-girlfriends and her support of women's rights with equal candor.

Bernhard was born on June 6, 1955. She was raised Jewish alongside three older brothers in Flint, Michigan. Her artist mother and doctor father moved the family to Arizona when Bernhard was in high school.

At the age of 19, Bernhard relocated to Hollywood, where she worked as a manicurist and took acting classes before she began landing gigs at Los Angeles comedy clubs. Developing her distinctively acerbic style of stand-up, Bernhard became popular locally, which led to her national television debut in 1977 on Richard Pryor's short-lived variety show.

Bernhard went on to appear in her first film, entitled *Shogun Assassin*, in 1980. But the movie that established her reputation as an actor came a few years later when she appeared opposite Robert DeNiro and Jerry Lewis in Martin Scorsese's satire *The King of Comedy* (1983). Numerous bit parts in 1980s movies such as John Byrum's *The Whoopie Boys* (1986) and Genevieve Robert's *Casual Sex* (1988) followed.

In 1985 Bernhard toured with her first solo show, entitled *I'm Your Woman*, and she also released her first album, of the same name, that year. Her 1988 show *Without You I'm Nothing* was recorded and received a Grammy nomination for Best Comedy in 1991.

It was around this time, in the early 1990s, that Bernhard became closely linked with Madonna, and for some time the two maintained a widely publicized, erotically charged friendship that led to much public speculation about both being lesbians.

To this day, in fact, Bernhard is described interchangeably as bisexual and as lesbian, and she herself has claimed at different times that she is gay; that she does not understand labels; and that she simply does not gravitate towards a particular sexual preference.

Whatever her sexual identification, her visibility in queer culture is widespread. She appeared on the television show *Roseanne* in a lesbian role throughout the 1990s, steadily attracts lesbian audiences, and openly discusses the five-year relationship she had with model Patricia Velazquez.



A portrait of Sandra Bernhard by Richard Mitchell.  
Courtesy Office of Sandra Bernhard.

In 1998 Bernhard was very busy: she launched her show *I'm Still Here...Dammit* (which became notorious for the fact that she wore a see-through dress on stage while very pregnant); she gave birth to daughter Cicely that July 4; and she published her third autobiographical book, *May I Kiss You on the Lips, Miss Sandra?* Her film roles were also plentiful that year and included parts in Pat Proft's *Wrongfully Accused* and Daphna Edward's *Exposé*.

Bernhard continues to expand her horizons, speaking frequently in interviews about her ongoing, intensive study of Kabbalah (Jewish mysticism) and promoting her latest show entitled *The Love Machine*, in which she is accompanied by a five-piece rock band.

Her television appearances as of late include spots on *Will and Grace*, *VIP*, and *Ally McBeal*. August 2001 heralded the debut of her talk show, *The Sandra Bernhard Experience*, on the cable channel A&E; unfortunately, it aired for only one week before it was pulled because of poor ratings. In the summer of 2004, it was announced that, beginning in 2005, Bernhard would join the cast of Showtime's dramatic series about a group of Los Angeles lesbians, *The L Word*.

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