



DeLaria, Lea (b. 1958)

by Linda Rapp

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Lea DeLaria.
Courtesy Office of Lea DeLaria.

A proudly out lesbian from the very beginning of her career, the versatile Lea DeLaria has earned accolades for her talents as an actor, a singer, and a stand-up comic. Big, brash, brassy, and very butch, she has been described as "an Ethel Merman with attitude." She brings both energy and honesty to her performances and has been embraced by glbtq fans for her candor about and celebration of her sexual orientation.

Lea DeLaria hails from Belleville, Illinois, where she was born on May 23, 1958. Her father, a social worker who also performed as a jazz musician, introduced her to music early, playing recordings of Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, and Chet Baker. At the age of four DeLaria began singing out herself, with a rendition of "When the Saints Go Marching In." Eventually she began playing jazz with her father. Once she entered high school she also became interested in theater.

Her strict Catholic education--"mandatory training for stand-up comedy," as she said in a 1999 interview--imbued her with a passion for social responsibility but also "a sense of total guilt" for all the ills besetting the world, including war and the hole in the ozone.

Those ills did not include homosexuality. DeLaria has been unabashedly out since the start of her career.

The revelation of her lesbianism temporarily cost DeLaria her relationship with her family, who, she said, "basically disowned" her and did not speak to her for five years. DeLaria did not give up on re-establishing a good rapport with them, however. In time her family came to accept her as she is. Happily, by 2001 she was able to declare that her father was "so proud [of her signing to make a jazz CD] he can hardly fit in the house."

DeLaria's entertainment career began when, fresh out of high school, she joined a touring company doing Stephan Schwartz and John-Michael Tebelak's *Godspell*.

DeLaria moved to San Francisco in 1982. There she worked in underground theater and also tried her hand at stand-up comedy--with quick and resounding success. She spent several years at the Valencia Rose club, hosting a gay comedy night with Tom Ammann, who went on to become a member--and then president--of the city's Board of Supervisors.

DeLaria relocated to Massachusetts in the late 1980s, spending seven years developing her acts as both a comedian and singer.

The hefty DeLaria made a splash in 1993 when she became the first openly gay comedian to appear on national television, taking the stage of the *Arsenio Hall Show* and declaring, "I'm a big dyke!" She subsequently got the clearly uneasy Hall to utter the word *queer*.

DeLaria had already appeared in the gay-themed *The World According to Us* (PBS, 1992), for which she won a regional Emmy award. She went on to do further television work, including *Out There* (1993), an all-gay

special on the Comedy Central network. She had recurring roles on *Matlock* (1994) and *The John Larroquette Show* (1994-1995) and also made guest appearances on *Friends* (1996), *The Drew Carey Show* (1997), *Armistead Maupin's Tales of the City* (2001), and *Will & Grace* (2003). She also voiced a character on the animated television series *The Oblongs* in 2001-2002.

In 1999, DeLaria played the recurring role of psychic Madame Delphina on the ABC soap opera, *One Life to Live*. In 2008, she returned to the soap to play both Delphina and Professor Delbert Fina, a supposed expert on time travel.

In addition to her television acting DeLaria has appeared on the big screen. She played a small but memorable role in Hugh Wilson's *The First Wives Club* (1996), making a pass at the character played by Goldie Hawn. DeLaria's film credits also include Adam Rodgers' *Rescuing Desire* (1996) and Bob Koherr's *Plump Fiction* (1997).

In 1998 she appeared in the independent films *Homo Heights* (directed by Sara Moore), which also starred Quentin Crisp, and David Moreton's *Edge of Seventeen*, a coming-of-age story that earned high marks from the critics at the next year's Sundance Festival. She was also in David Adkin's documentary *We're Funny That Way* about eleven gay and lesbian stand-up comics.

The versatile DeLaria has played a wide variety of roles on stage, from Audrey in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* (1999) to the preacher Marryin' Sam in *Li'l Abner* (1998; book by Norman Panama and Melvin Frank; music by Gene de Paul; lyrics by Johnny Mercer).

The part that first brought DeLaria to the attention of mainstream critics and audiences was that of feisty cab driver Hildy Esterhazy in a 1997 revival of *On The Town* (book and lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green, music by Leonard Bernstein) directed by George C. Wolfe at the Public Theater in New York. DeLaria was grateful to Wolfe for casting her even though she was then much better known for her stand-up comedy than for her acting. The director's instincts were right on the mark, however: DeLaria won an Obie Award, a Theater World Award, and a Drama Desk nomination. She continued to receive enthusiastic notices when the show moved to Broadway.

DeLaria's other theatrical successes have included the off-Broadway hit *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told* (1998) in a role that Paul Rudnick wrote especially for her; a 1999 production of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart's *The Boys from Syracuse* in Los Angeles; a turn as Big Mama Morton in the national touring company of *Chicago* (1999; book by Fred Ebb and Bob Fosse; music by John Kander; lyrics by Ebb); an appearance on Broadway (2000-2002) playing Eddie and Dr. Scott in Richard O'Brien's *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*; and a starring role in a San Francisco revival of *Once Upon a Mattress* (2004; book by Dean Fuller, Jay Thompson, and Marshall Barer; music by Mary Rodgers; lyrics by Barer). Of the last, critic Robert Hurwitt declared, "Lea DeLaria doesn't just light up the Eureka Theatre stage. She owns it."

Because of her numerous acting jobs DeLaria has had to cut back on her appearances in stand-up but remains a popular performer on the club scene. In the course of her career she has taken her act to many cities in North America and also toured in Australia, New Zealand, and England. She has produced two comedy CDs, *Bull Dyke in a China Shop* (1992) and *Box Lunch* (1997), featuring material from her shows.

DeLaria's club performances include not only her brash and topical humor but also music. Her singing talent earned her a contract from Warner Brothers. *Play It Cool* (2001), on which she sings jazz versions of Broadway tunes including Stephen Sondheim's "Losing My Mind" and Kander and Ebb's "All That Jazz," was enthusiastically received.

Since then, she has issued three more jazz albums: *Double Standards* (2005), *The Very Best of Lea DeLaria* (2006), and *Lee DeLaria--The Live Smoke Sessions* (2008).

DeLaria has written (with Maggie Cassella) *Lea's Book of Rules for the World* (2000), a funny, frank, and irreverent compendium of her thoughts. She has also written a screenplay of Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* but has yet to find a producer for it.

While DeLaria relishes the diverse roles that she has been able to play, she said in a 2004 interview that she is still waiting for the perfect part. "There is a fantastic musical for me, but nobody has written it yet," she commented.

As DeLaria searches for that role she continues to delight audiences with her talent, energy, and wit. She has a special place in the hearts of many glbtq spectators, who prize her honesty, openness, and pride in herself.

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