



## Film Actors: Lesbian

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From the days of silent films through the present, lesbian actresses have played a significant role in Hollywood--both in the movies themselves and outside of them--but their contributions have rarely been recognized or spoken of openly.

While female bisexuality and homosexuality are gradually becoming more acceptable in the film world--and sexual identity more of a pressing issue--many queer actresses still fear that openness will damage their careers. The "lavender marriage," a term coined to describe nuptials between gay male and lesbian stars for reasons of career insurance and social approval, is by no means only a relic of the past.

### Early Films and the Advent of the Hays Code

The private lives of early film stars Alla Nazimova, Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Tallulah Bankhead have long been fodder for public speculation and gossip. Many actresses of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s were part of what were then termed in gay argot "sewing circles," a phrase allegedly coined by Nazimova to describe discreet gatherings of lesbians in Hollywood. Unable to be open about their sexuality, these women--with varying degrees of secrecy--nevertheless formed romantic and sexual relationships with each other.

The bisexuality of Nazimova, a Russian stage actress who moved to New York City shortly after the turn of the twentieth century to pursue a career in acting, was fairly well-known in the film community, despite her long-term involvement with (gay) actor Charles Bryant. In 1918, she moved to Hollywood, where she bought a large Spanish-style house that would later become the Garden of Allah, a hotel and apartment house where a number of Hollywood luminaries would live.

In the 1920s, Nazimova became one of the most popular movie stars in America. Her film career began with the silent film *War Brides* (1916) and continued through such movies as *Camille* (1921) and culminated in *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* (1944). For a while she was Metro's highest paid actress and later formed her own motion picture company, which produced a famous (but financially disastrous) all-gay film version of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1922), the failure of which effectively eroded her status as a Hollywood power broker.

Nazimova's lesbian relationships with writer and lover of female celebrities Mercedes de Acosta, stage actress Eva Le Gallienne, butch film director Dorothy Arzner, and Oscar Wilde's lesbian niece Dolly, earned her a reputation as something of a ladykiller.

But her film career finally dried up, not only because of the spectacular failure of *Salomé*, but also because of the formation of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America in 1922, which was to institute the infamous Motion Picture Production Code in 1929, and the rise of the studio system.



Bisexual actress Alla Nazimova in *Marionettes* (1911). Nazimova was both a successful actress and Hollywood power broker until her company released an all-gay film version of Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1922), a financially ruinous project.

The Code--also known as the Hays Code after the man who drafted it, former chairman of the Republican National Committee and Postmaster General Will H. Hays--was a major boon to advocates of censorship. It decreed that there would be no "immorality" or "impropriety" on screen--only chaste kisses and heterosexual characters.

Worse, the Code was applied to actors' private lives; and drug use, adultery, sexual promiscuity, and especially homosexuality were grounds for blacklisting. The consolidation of the movie industry into a few powerful studios rendered gay and lesbian actors particularly vulnerable.

The name Alla Nazimova, with its lesbian connotations, became known as "unsafe" in Hollywood. In an increasingly repressive climate, many lesbian actresses retreated ever more deeply into the closet, dating or even marrying men in order to appear heterosexual.

Yet several actresses in the decades to follow--such as the openly bisexual seductress Marlene Dietrich and the irrepressible Tallulah Bankhead--appeared unconcerned about the gossip surrounding their sexuality. They seemed even to encourage it.

### **Golden Age Actresses**

The underground network of lesbians and bisexual women in the film industry during Hollywood's golden age illustrates how many upper-class lesbians adapted to the restrictions imposed on them. Unlike working-class lesbians, whose socializing largely took place in bars and who had less glamorous careers to lose, Hollywood lesbians tended to socialize at private parties, where they could safeguard their "secret" lives. Absentee or gay husbands made it easy for these women to meet regularly.

Nazimova hosted many a soiree at her home. Salka Viertel, a lesbian screenwriter, also threw notable parties. She is rumored to have been the only person with whom Greta Garbo discussed Marlene Dietrich.

(If legendary screen sirens Garbo and Dietrich had been involved romantically with each other, they were tight-lipped about it to the very end. In fact, throughout their careers, the two women publicly denied having ever met. But according to Diana McLellan, the two appeared together in the silent film *The Joyless Street* [1925] and enjoyed a brief affair.)

Garbo went on to lead a life entirely different from that of Dietrich: she never married and became famously reclusive after her retirement from film at the tender age of 36. In contrast, Dietrich, who had had a husband and child in her early 20s, maintained her notoriously seductive ways with both men and women throughout her long career.

Despite the differences in their approaches to sexuality, apparently Garbo and Dietrich had, whether knowingly or not, lovers in common. For example, de Acosta and Le Gallienne, aside from their relationships with each other and Nazimova, both became involved with Garbo at different times; de Acosta also had an affair with Dietrich.

Tallulah Bankhead, primarily a stage actress, but also the star of films such as *Tarnished Lady* (1931) and *Lifeboat* (1943), was intimate with one of the only openly lesbian actresses of the time, comedienne Patsy Kelly. Bankhead reportedly had affairs with both Dietrich and Garbo and also claimed to have slept with Barbara Stanwyck.

Louise Brooks--the silent-film actress famous for her bobbed hairdo as well as her role as Lulu in *Pandora's Box* (1929)--became outspoken in her later years. In her memoirs and conversations, she reminisced about affairs with women, including a tryst with Garbo.

Aloof from the "sewing circles" were other actresses rumored to be lesbian or bisexual, including Janet

Gaynor, star of *A Star is Born* (1937), and Mary Martin, best known for her Peter Pan role. Reportedly, the "best friends" both had "lavender marriages," to a costume designer and an interior decorator, respectively.

Character and supporting actresses also went to great lengths to hide their sexuality, although they usually lived without the constant public scrutiny superstars experienced. Agnes Moorehead, for example, never mentioned her widely presumed lesbianism.

Moorehead appeared in more than 60 films, including *Citizen Kane* (1941), and received several Academy Award nominations for her supporting performances. She is perhaps now best known for her role as Endora, mother of witch Samantha in the 1960s television series *Bewitched*. Despite her reticence, however, her alleged lesbianism was widely assumed. Gay comedian Paul Lynde proclaimed her "classy as hell, but one of the all-time Hollywood dykes."

Barbara Stanwyck, best known for her steamy roles in such films as *Stella Dallas* (1937) and *Double Indemnity* (1944), also had a booming television career in the 1960s and 1970s. Stanwyck married twice, the first time to vaudevillian Frank Fay and the second time to Robert Taylor. Although she rebuffed any questions about her sexuality or her marriages, many observers of the Hollywood scene believed that neither Stanwyck nor either of her husbands were heterosexual.

Throughout their careers, Dame Judith Anderson, Elsa Lanchester, and Sandy Dennis were the subject of persistent rumors that they were lesbian, but they never confirmed the rumors.

The closetedness of lesbians and gay men during the golden age of Hollywood is, of course, quite understandable. Not only were homosexual acts a prosecutable offense in all parts of the United States, but, especially after World War II and the advent of the Cold War, homosexuals became one of the favorite targets of witch-hunts.

Moreover, during this period, scandal magazines became ever bolder. The climate in the United States for homosexuals in the 1950s and early 1960s was oppressive in the extreme. Hence, the fear of lesbian and gay male actors of exposure was by no means paranoid.

### **Coming Out: Lesbian Actresses into the Present**

Although the gay rights movement has helped to improve visibility in industries such as publishing and music, and gay men and women no longer live under quite the same climate of oppression that they did in the 1950s and 1960s, Hollywood has not been liberated from severe heterosexism. There are still only a handful of out lesbians and bisexuals in film, and many of those have only recently come out.

For example, the brilliant stage and film actress Lily Tomlin, whose persistent advocacy for feminism and gay rights led many to suspect her lesbianism for decades, remained hushed about her sexual orientation until early 2001. Even then, the statement she made concerning her thirty-year relationship with writer Jane Wagner was not entirely unambiguous. Moreover, she made it clear that while she does not "disavow my private life . . . I also don't want to become someone's poster girl either."

There is no doubt that television actress and comedienne Ellen DeGeneres's public coming out in 1997 was a landmark in the advancement of lesbians in the entertainment industry. The well-publicized relationship Ellen maintained with film actress Anne Heche--who subsequently married a man--made them for a while the only high-profile out lesbian couple in Hollywood.

Before Ellen's big announcement, however, Amanda Barse made one of her own. In 1993, Barse, a movie and television actress who appeared in films such as *Fright Night* (1985) and *Protocol* (1984) but is primarily known for her portrayal of Marcie D'Arcy on the television show *Married with Children* for over a decade, became the first prime-time television lesbian to come out. She reported that her announcement,

prompted by a threat of "outing," had no negative repercussions on her career.

Bearse remained comfortably a part of the cast of *Married with Children* until its 1997 finale. However, in recent years she has more frequently worked as a director than as an actress.

Female bisexuality generally meets with more acceptance than lesbianism--especially for those bisexual celebrities who do not appear with female companions in public. For instance, former child star Drew Barrymore and current It-Girl Angelina Jolie are open about their bisexuality; however, both have married men. In contrast, lone Skye, known for her romantic lead role in the film *Say Anything* (1989), divorced her husband in 1999 and soon after went public about her relationship with lesbian model Jenny Shimizu.

Comedienne/actress/singer Sandra Bernhard has also been forthcoming about her bisexuality--and about her involvement with superstar singer Madonna--for years. Popular comedienne and independent film actress Margaret Cho proclaimed herself bisexual in the late 1990s, just as she launched her one-woman show "I'm the One That I Want."

Independent cinema generally puts less pressure on actresses to remain closeted. Out lesbian Guinevere Turner, who co-directed the all-lesbian film *Go Fish* (1994), also starred in it. Turner went on to appear in more mainstream films such as *Chasing Amy* (1997), *Kiss Me Guido* (1997), and *American Psycho* (2000), which she also co-wrote.

Equally out Cheryl Dunye directed and starred in *The Watermelon Woman* (1997), and has gone on to direct *Stranger Inside*, an HBO movie that premiered in June 2001. Leisha Hailey, half of the out lesbian pop duo The Murmurs, appeared in a romantic role opposite Allison Folland--rumored to be a lesbian herself--in the film *All Over Me* (1996).

Many lesbian and bisexual actresses remain secretive for fear of bringing ruin upon their film careers. While some women simply want to maintain their privacy, or, like Tomlin, worry that they will become a "poster girl" for Hollywood lesbianism, the notion that acknowledging a same-sex preference will destroy an actress's chances for future (heterosexual) romantic or leading roles is no doubt also a reason. If an actress is publicly identified as a lesbian, then perhaps she will not be convincing (or even cast) in a heterosexual romantic role.

It is worth noting, however, that Anne Heche was cast in a romantic lead opposite Harrison Ford in *Six Days Seven Nights* (1998) after acknowledging her relationship with Ellen DeGeneres. The film was relatively successful, and Heche received critical acclaim for her performance.

The most recent, high-profile coming out was that of actress/comedienne/talk show host Rosie O'Donnell. Tabloids had frequently published stories about O'Donnell's sexual orientation and her relationship with Nickelodeon executive Kelli Carpenter. But O'Donnell, who declared "I love you, Kelli," during her acceptance speech at the Daytime Emmys in 2001, refused to confirm the rumors, saying that her sexuality had no significance for her fans or her career.

However, as part of her advocacy for children, in order to give a human face to gay parents, who are often discriminated against by adoption agencies and state governments, O'Donnell declared in March 2002, on ABC's *Primetime Thursday*, that she is in fact a lesbian mom. The reaction from her fans was overwhelmingly supportive.

### **The Usual Suspects**

Over the years, rumors of lesbianism or bisexuality have persisted about several Hollywood actresses--such as Catherine Deneuve, Kristy McNichol, Helen Hunt, actress and musician Queen Latifah, and actress and singer Whitney Houston. The lesbianism of newer actress Clea DuVall, star of the lesbian film *But I'm a*

*Cheerleader* (2000), has also been rumored, but DuVall has made no public statement to date.

The multiple Academy Award-winning Jodie Foster occupies a special place in the hearts of many lesbians. She often plays relatively butch on screen, but refuses to discuss her private life at all. She has also remained notoriously close-lipped about who fathered her two children, but actor Russell Crowe mentioned that Foster influenced his band's song "Other Ways of Speaking," which is about "meeting somebody that you think [you] could easily fall in love with . . . but they . . . in fact play for a different team."

In response, Foster's publicist declared only that "'playing for a different team' could mean a lot of things."

### **Why Does It Matter?**

The eagerness on the part of gay men and lesbians to know the truth about the sexual orientation of public figures such as actors and actresses has little to do with prurience, but with a desire for honesty and a need for self-validation.

The need for validation makes coming out for actresses an important issue to the queer public. Mainstream films reach audiences across a wider spectrum of class and sexual identity than other forms of media, such as gay-themed magazines or books. For gays and lesbians, particularly those living in oppressive locales, queer movies and actresses themselves can provide much-needed representation.

Because such public figures are often looked up to as role models, the visibility of queer Hollywood actresses--many of them household names--is a crucial step toward more widespread gay acceptance. Conversely, the failure to come out on the part of figures in the public eye sends a message that homosexuality or bisexuality is something shameful that needs to be hidden.

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