

# PLAY'S THEME: LESBIANS WITH OUT APOLOGY

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JANE CHAMBERS is a playwright who speaks for the cause of women in general and lesbians in particular. Ask her which has been the greater obstacle in her life: her gender or her sexuality, and she answers: "That's easy - judgments are based on seeing; one of the things about being gay that doesn't get in the way is that, most of the time, you can't see it, but being a woman is something you have to deal with every minute."

Miss Chambers, a resident of Greenport, has been spending most of her evenings of late at the Actors' Playhouse in Greenwich Village, where her play, "Last Summer at Bluefish Cove," which is billed as "a lesbian love story," recently opened.

The genesis for the fictitious Bluefish Cove is a place where Miss Chambers used to rent a cottage near Orient Point; it is a summer haven for lesbians. A heterosexual woman wanders in, naively. She has left her husband and is looking for a retreat - and a friend. A lesbian, the only other "single" in a colony of couples, invites her to a party. When the visitor arrives, eager to meet men, the resort regulars are embarrassed by the intrusion of a "straight" stranger. But she winds up having a love affair with the hostess, who is dying of cancer.

"The play came out of my feelings about a friend's death," Miss Chambers said. Ironically, the most personally felt aspects of the play - the leading character's death and the newcomer's identity crisis - were dismissed as "lesbian soap opera" by some critics.

By consensus, the critics responded most positively, least pejoratively to the scenes of clever repartee. "If the play turned into an entertaining evening of theater, that's fine," Miss Chambers said. "But it's silly to pretend I don't recognize it's more than that. The testimonies I get afterward just overwhelming.

"Gay people tell me they feel better about themselves, and straight people can suddenly understand a son or a daughter who is gay. I didn't mean for the play to do that, but I'm thrilled that it's helping people."

"Growing up female in this country and wanting to be a playwright" was perhaps Miss Chambers's biggest frustration. "When I went to college," she said, "women were not allowed in the playwriting or directing courses unless there were seats left over after the men signed up. It was insidiously clear that this was not a field women were expected to excel in. We were steered into design and acting."

To this day, the reaction of producers to plays written by women, according to Miss Chambers, goes something like this: "'But they're not about anything important; they're only about women's issues' - as if having a baby is not as important as Vietnam," she said.

"I've come out of many experiences, and I want to write about all of them," Miss Chambers said. "I'm not a one-subject playwright, and there is no reason to believe I will be categorized - at least I hope not." She mentioned some dozen plays she has written, of which only two are about lesbians. Nor is she a one-dimensional artist, having started out as a performer and now replacing an ailing actress in her own play.

The question of whether film companies have expressed interest in "Bluefish Cove" elicits from Miss Chambers the sort of agitated response that interview subjects usually prefer to keep "off the record." Here's one who insists it be kept on.

"Two major studios felt that the play presented lesbianism too positively and that the general audience is not ready for this," she said, "They want us to be unhappy and shoot ourselves."

Which brings Miss Chambers to her mission of enlightening people about "the gay image" in theater. As a member of the East End Gay Organization, which originated on the Island and has, she maintains, "the largest membership of any gay organization in the United States," she often addresses just that issue - on college campuses and as keynote speaker at club meetings and teachers' associations.

"The Boys in the Band," the breakthrough play for male homosexuals, "was negative; the characters didn't like themselves," Miss Chambers declared. "Maybe 'Bluefish Cove' " - which has been referred to as "The Girls in the Sand" - "will open the door for lesbian characters," who, Miss Chambers says, have been depicted as bizarre ("The Killing of Sister George") or suicidal ("The Children's Hour") or simply nonexistent.

"None of the women in this play apologize for being lesbians," Miss Chambers said. "They accept it and go on to lead productive lives. I don't know why that should be a threat to people."

"Lesbians have been ignored," she added. "People turn their heads the other way as if to say, 'We know you exist, but we don't want to have to deal with this, so let's all keep our mouths shut and we'll all pretend it's not there.'"

"We are bonding together to gain a kind of strength that will enable us to move out into society and be who we are, so everyone knows, and there'll be no problem. As we become more comfortable with ourselves, the rest of the world will become comfortable with us. We've got a big battle to face in a way that no other minority group does," she concluded, adding in considered afterthought, "except women."