

Lianna. . .

Lesbian Life In New Jersey: A Feminist Making Love?

Lianna. Written and directed by John Sayles. Produced by Jeffrey Nelson and Maggie Renzi. A United Artists Classic release.

by Karla Jay

Films like *Personal Best*, *Making Love*, *Taxi Zum Klo*, *Victor/Victoria* and *Tootsie* have made 1982-83 the year of the profitable gay (or pseudogay) film. *Lianna*—the most recent arrival—is far and away the best film yet about lesbians though it is still a flawed work by writer/director John Sayles (who previously directed *The Return of the Secaucus Seven* and who wrote the screenplay for *Alligator* and other films). As a character points out in the beginning of the film, movies are a tricky business where you can start out with a set of truths, rearrange and cut them, and end up with a falsehood that is presented in the guise of truth. That is precisely what Sayles has done.

One of the common denominators of some of the films about gayness or drag has been the portrayal of how destructive sex roles are for both women and men. This theme is especially well-handled in *Tootsie* where Dorothy (Dustin Hoffman) realized that he can relate better to woman as a woman than he ever did as a man. In *Lianna*, too, women relate so much better to women than the men do that taken by itself this aspect might seem like propaganda for lesbianism. The examples are numerous. When Lianna (Linda Griffiths) leaves her husband, Dick (Jon DeVries), after having discovered lesbianism via an affair with her child psychology professor Ruth (Jane Hallaren), Lianna's new neighbors (two heterosexual women) form a supportive relationship with her and keep her company despite her avowed lesbianism. Lianna also finds a kind of comfortable ease with two other women co-workers at the check out job she now has. The bond is formed despite the fact that the other women obviously come from radically different social and class

backgrounds (at least in terms of Lianna's former status as a university professor's wife). Lianna's best friend, Sanda (Jo Henderson), is at first very uncomfortable with Lianna's new lesbianism. She avoids Lianna and mulls over past actions (such as holding hands) to ponder whether Lianna all along had designs on her, too. It takes a male character, Jerry (John Sayles), to jog her out of it by saying: "What do you think gayness is, contagious?" Realizing it is not, Sandy returns to supporting Lianna emotionally in what is probably the most touching moment in the film.

Chauvinistic men

In contrast with the women's gentleness, the men are almost ridiculously chauvinistic. Lianna's husband, Dick, an English/film professor aspiring for tenure, is a repellent social climber and fucker of female students. He treats Lianna with supercilious arrogance—demanding her time for his research (after she had already dropped out of college to put him through school) and her energy for faculty parties where he hopes to curry enough favor for tenure. He also has the vice to which too many English professors are prone—correcting everyone else's grammar. He uses Lianna's lesbian affair as an excuse to terminate their failing marriage. He outs her from their house, denies her financial support, and claims custody of their two children. He threatens Lianna with ugly courtroom scenes involving her and Ruth if she doesn't acquiesce to his demands. His smugness at having gotten the upper hand despite his own infidelities is balanced by his bruised masculinity at having his wife leave him for a woman.

Jerry represents another brand of calculating chauvinism. Having heard that Lianna has left her husband and that "no other man was involved," he rushed over to Lianna's new apartment to fill what must be an obvious void in her life. In addition to his patriarchal

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Sandy (Jo Henderson) and Lianna (Linda Griffiths), the best of friends, in "Lianna."

The Man Behind Lianna: Director John Sayles Loves Women Who Love Women

by Steve Warren

The reason we have trouble with mainstream movies about us is that we're not in the mainstream. We're ready to go beyond the basic stories of coming out and gaining acceptance, but the majority of moviegoers—including a large number of gays especially outside of major cities—are not.

John Sayles is hardly a mainstream filmmaker. He writes for money (*Piranha*, *Alligator*, *The Howling*); sometimes quite well; and he directs for himself (*The Return of the Secaucus Seven*, *Baby It's You*), hoping to reach a larger audience without compromising.

He lives and works in Hoboken, N.J. with Maggie Renzi, who is credited as co-producer and unit manager beside playing a supporting role (Sheila, the upstairs neighbor in his new film, *Lianna*).

Lianna is Sayles' lesbian movie. It's bound to be compared to *Making Love* (this time it's the wife who has a same-sex affair that breaks up the marriage) and *Personal Best* (though it

has no athletic facade to hide behind—Sayles: "This is a film about homosexuality. I wanted to be more direct..."), but these are not the films it resembles most.

Remember *Diary of a Mad Housewife*? Lianna (Linda Griffiths) is married to the same kind of turd who dumps on her, expects her to wait on him, and thinks a good fuck will resolve her dissatisfactions. Lianna, too, is driven to find a lover, but hers happens to be a woman—Ruth (Jane Hallaren), her child psychology teacher in night school.

After they make love for the first time—to an interesting soundtrack of a chorus of erotic whispers—Ruth speaks of the risk she was taking making the first move—"but I wanted you so much." She's over dramatizing, considering that Lianna was speaking at the time of the crush she had on her camp counselor (female) when she was 16 years old, and how she would act out her fantasies with a bunkmate.

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