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Women & Hollywood

from a feminist perspective

Can The Kids Are All Right Be the Female Brokeback?

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It's not news that gay and lesbian films struggle to get out of the niche and be seen as mainstream entertainment and make serious box office dollars. We all know that many films have gay characters, but films that star and are driven by gay people — male or female — are few and far between. In the last couple of years there have been several high profile and award winning films that told gay stories namely *Milk* and *Brokeback Mountain*. *Milk* made \$31 million on a budget of \$20 million and won two Oscars. *Brokeback Mountain* was way more successful making \$83 million on a \$14 million budget and wound up winning three Oscars.

But there really hasn't been a film of the stature that starred a woman or women. In doing some research in a very unscientific manner (on twitter) the responses I got when asking for the most mainstream lesbian films were: *Basic Instinct*, *Monster*, *Fried Green Tomatoes*, *The Hours*, *Kissing Jessica Stein*, *But I'm a Cheerleader*, *Chasing Amy*, *Bound*, *Desert Hearts*, *Imagine Me & You*.

Some good, some bad, some terrible and none really big successes.

Desert Hearts while excellent is from the 80s and while *Basic Instinct* grossed the most, it is not anyone's example of a lesbian film. *Fried Green Tomatoes* grossed \$82 million but that was way back in 1991. Charlize Theron ruled in *Monster* but that was not a positive movie. *The Hours* was Oscar bait and while several of the main characters were lesbians, I wouldn't call it a lesbian film. And then there is *Boys Don't*

Cry which I honestly don't know how to categorize.

So when I read the news out of Sundance about how well Lisa Cholodenko's new film *The Kids Are All Right* played, I got excited. It's got all the elements for a mainstream hit. Stars, including Julianne Moore, Annette Bening and Mark Ruffalo. And it's a comedy. All too often niche films of any kind take themselves too seriously. It's about time we got a comedy about lesbian life.

Here's a report from The LA Times:

Cholodenko's movie, a late addition to the festival, centers on the drama that ensues after two children of a lesbian couple seek out their birth father. Supporters of the movie — and there are many — say it can sustain both an awards campaign as well as a broad release to an audience that would be taken with the film's comedic and poignant moments. The movie, which played to a house packed with distribution execs (and whose screening evoked, in some ways, the response to "Little Miss Sunshine" four years ago.

It also described the audience as "giddy." Nobody said that about Cholodenko's previous films which included *Laurel Canyon* and *High Art*.

Here's NY Magazine's Vulture blog:

But Bening and Moore are the real treats. Bening plays an uptight, wine-slurping doctor and Moore plays her wife, a compost-loving free spirit. They have two kids, an 18-year-old girl (Mia Wasikowska, who will soon play Alice in Tim Burton's *Alice in Wonderland*) and a 15-year-old son (Josh Hutcherson) who both reach out to the sperm donor (Ruffalo), who gave his DNA to each mother. Cholodenko shows a warm, funny side and crafts some brilliant chemistry between her two leads, who make an extraordinarily believable onscreen couple. **This may turn out to be one of the most significant lesbian films yet made — especially because it's premiering in the long shadow of Prop 8.** (Emphasis mine) But straight marrieds will have little trouble identifying with the undermining, bitching, nagging, teasing, and reconciling, either: Lighthearted and uproariously funny, it's not at all a gay-marriage film, but just a great film about marriage. Now, back to that question: Who to push for Best Actress?

Distributors are nervous hoping that this could be a *Little Miss Sunshine* instead of a *Friends With Money*. I think that it is time to stop underestimating audiences. Figure out a way to market this to women and you will make money. Make it about family, not just a gay family, and people will come. Make sure people know they will have a good time and not be hit over the head with a diatribe.

The time is ripe for a successful film driven by a lesbian storyline.

~~As of this morning, there was no distribution deal yet for the film.~~

Update: As of 12pm EST it looks like the film is going to Focus Features.

[Sundance: Annette Bening and Julianne Moore Wow the Fest With a Gay Marriage Drama](#) (NY Mag Vulture)

[Sundance 2010: 'The Kids Are All Right' becomes a Sundance sensation](#) (LA Times)

[“Kids” More Than All Right: Cholodenko Shines At Sundance](#) (IndieWIRE)

Special thanks to The Linster and Dorothy Snarker for their help.

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- [1](#) [grrljock](#)
[January 27, 2010 at 11:27 AM](#)

Yay! Can't wait until this comes out. There is definitely a dearth of mainstream lesbian movies (which is really a subset of mainstream female-centric movies). I liked Holofcener's previous movies. "High Art" of course was amazing, though depressing, and marked the (sadly temporary) comeback of Ally Sheedy. I wasn't interested in seeing "Laurel Canyon" in the theaters based on the trailer, but it proved to be more than that when I finally rented it (of course Frances McDormand was excellent in it).

This one is definitely on our must-see list.

- [2](#) [Faith](#)
[January 27, 2010 at 12:35 PM](#)

What about "Go Fish?" Maybe it's not considered mainstream, but it did well with LBGT audiences.

- [3](#) [REEL LIVES Media](#)
[January 27, 2010 at 3:52 PM](#)

"When Night Is Falling" (Patricia Rozema, 1995) was also a significant lesbian film – much better than the majority of post-"Desert Hearts" films you mentioned. Maybe off the radar because it's Canadian. Thanks for the post!

- [4](#) [maria maggenti](#)
[January 29, 2010 at 1:21 PM](#)

My first film The Incredibly True Adventure of Two Girls in Love was a "break out hit" that crossed-over and made millions of dollars for Fine Line Features. It was also a vital contribution to the construction of lesbian identities in mainstream cinema. A huge audience favorite, it was considered a

“hit”. That being said, it took seven (7) years for me to make my second film, Puccini for Beginners, which like Two Girls, premiered at Sundance to hugely enthusiastic audiences. But this is what I was told as no one stepped up to buy the film right away: “We already did a lesbian film (“Imagine me and you”) and it was a failure so there’s no use in trying again.” I applaud Lisa for her new film, she’s an amazing filmmaker but I also feel a bit cynical about so-called lesbian films and their “cross-over” appeal. The NY Times said Puccini was going to be a hit and the NYPost said it was funnier than Woody Allen has been in years. But here it is, three years later, and not one person is interested in having me make my next film nor have I once been asked to direct anything. By the way, spare me your negative personal opinions of both films — this is just to weigh in from the front lines. PS, Melissa, thanks for your work!!

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