

April 2008

THE JEW IN THE CLOSET

Playwright Zsa Zsa Gershick knows all about living life in the shadows

By Pat Launer



Monique Gaffney (l) and Wendy Waddell cross the color line in *Bluebonnet Court*, a provocative play now at Diversionary Theatre.

She was 13 before she knew she was Jewish. She even attended Catholic school. “Both my parents came from a place where you palmed yourself off as a *shiksa* or *shegetz*,” says playwright Zsa Zsa Gershick. “My mother’s mother told her, ‘Don’t ever mention that you’re a Jew. Pretend you’re Catholic, or you won’t get a house or a job.’”

Gershick, whose name comes from her father’s Hungarian background – and his admiration for Zsa Zsa Gabor – was born in Oakland and grew up in nearby Alameda. “My family was so assimilated, they had no trouble sending me to Catholic school; it was the best school in the area.”

But when she turned 13, her mother took her to Israel on vacation and “came out.” Not as a lesbian, which Gershick later did, but as a Jew. “Having been denied my Judaism,” says the buzz-cut, bespectacled, suit-wearing Gershick, “I dived into it, studied Hebrew, the culture, everything.

“The very schizophrenic thing about my household,” declares the smart and funny

writer, “is that everything in the house – the language, the gestures, the temperament – were all very Jewish, without any overt acknowledgment. After my mother came out, there was a new openness and embrace of our Judaism.”

Gershick is all about embracing who you are. She’s won awards for her forthright writing. “Secret Service: Untold Stories of Lesbians in the Military” won ForeWord Magazine’s Best Gay & Lesbian Book of the Year in 2006. She garnered the same prize in 1999 for “Gay Old Girls,” which also won the American Library Association’s Best Gay & Lesbian Book Award. Her short fiction has been published in the “Best Lesbian Love Stories” anthologies of 2003 and 2004.

In 2006, she premiered her first major play, *Bluebonnet Court*, currently having its second full-scale production at Diversionary Theatre (through April 13). When it first opened in Hollywood, the comic drama won two NAACP Theatre Awards and the GLAAD (Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation) Media Award for Outstanding Los Angeles Theatre.

Set in a small Texas town in 1944, the play deals with sexual tensions, civil rights, anti-Semitism and the fantasy of Hollywood contrasted with the reality of life at a seedy motel, as war rages abroad.

“The play gives us real insight into a time when Jews changed their last names, Blacks were expected to know their place, and there was no such thing as a ‘gay community,’” says acclaimed local director Delicia Turner Sonnenberg, who helms the Diversionary production.

“Working on the play,” Sonnenberg continues, “I have come to love the characters and their humanity. They’re products of their race and class, but long for something more. There’s an interracial lesbian romance at a time when that was a very dangerous thing. It’s a painful struggle to pass for someone you’re not, to need what the outside world says you can’t have, to have your country fight the evil of the Nazis in Europe, but deny your basic human rights at home. It’s a very funny and sensual play, but it’s about real people with real needs and real human struggles.”

Gershick knows all about these struggles. In her current home in North Hollywood, where she lives with her wife/producing partner, Elissa Barrett, “the original 1941 deed says ‘No Negroes or Jews.’” She lived for five years in Texas, where “everyone is very quiet about their Jewishness. The shul had services on Sundays instead of Saturdays, so they didn’t stand out. In my family, my father was very assimilated as a Jew – and he was also a closeted gay man. But he never let anyone know.”

Gershick came out in her late teens, and marked the event dramatically.

“I thought joining the army was the most daring, most adventurous thing a Nice Jewish Girl could do, the last thing you’d expect.”

She enlisted at 18, and went to Ft. Jackson, SC. “I was the only Jew,” she recalls, “and I was terrified of being a Jew in the South.”

Of course, she represented another minority, too.

“I’m quite certain I looked like a ‘baby dyke,’ but I’m sure they thought I was merely a tomboy.”

This was the post-Vietnam era, 1978, and military women had the same basic combat training as men.

“A lot of the women and men dropped out. It’s an endurance test. But I stuck with it – learning weaponry, how to assemble and disassemble an M16, throw grenades and set landmines. These things terrified me.”

But she endured; her contract for the Reserves lasted until 1983. Since she’d always wanted to write, she enrolled in the U.S. Army Defense Information School (DINFOS) Broadcast Journalist Course at Ft. Benjamin Harrison, IN.

“I’m still on their website,” she says with a laugh. “I’m listed as one of their ‘Illustrious DINFOS graduates.’ That’s ironic, because as an out gay woman, I couldn’t even serve in the Army!”

That reality led her to write “Secret Service,” about the military’s ‘Don’t Ask/Don’t Tell’ policy. “Before that Federal Law,” she explains, “They had to prove you’re gay. Now, you have to prove you’re not.”

Gershick went on to receive a Journalism degree from Antioch University, a Masters in Professional Writing from USC, and an MFA in Playwriting at the USC School of Theatre, where she’s taught writing and playwriting. Along the way, her byline has appeared in Newsweek, the Advocate and the Texas Observer, among other publications.

When she was teaching at Austin Community College, she lived around the corner from a dilapidated motel called the Bluebonnet Court.

“It fascinated me,” Gershick admits. “It was all weedy and overgrown, there were

motorcycles on the lawn. I was walking past and these characters jumped into my head. And they kept haunting me. They wanted me to tell their story.” She wrote *Bluebonnet Court* during her second year in the USC Playwriting program.

“Through various workshops – which were funded by initial seed money from Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward – I learned that the play appealed to all ages, black and white, Jews and gentiles, gays and straights.

“What makes it universal is that the characters are very human. They’re not perfect; they have dreams and they’ve made messes. There are no villains here, but no saints, either. All of them are in their own *mitzrayim*, that narrow place where there’s a challenge.

“What I learned, especially from my father, is that appearances can be deceiving. Here he was, with a beautiful wife, home and family. But inside, he was horribly tortured. Everyone in this play has an inner reality and an exterior presentation. Everyone is passing as something else. The question is whether or not we have the courage to be who we are.”

In the play, a closeted gay/Jewish journalist gets stranded in Texas on her way to California at the Bluebonnet Court, with its desperately unhappy owner and her perpetually-inebriated, war-vet husband; their outwardly deferential, inwardly empowered black chambermaid; and the town’s “hostess,” whom the script describes as “a cheery librarian by day, needful tramp by night.” When these folks come together, masks are removed and secrets are revealed, with comic – and tragic – effects.

“My personal mission is to educate, uplift, entertain and inspire,” declares Gershick. “Everything I do, I ask myself, ‘Will this serve my mission?’ I want particularly to illuminate the lives of LGBT folks. We’ve largely been hidden from history. I want audiences to laugh, to learn, to have a good time, and to think a little about the ties that bind us all.”

Bluebonnet Court runs through April 13 at Diversionary Theatre, 4545 Park Boulevard; San Diego 92116; 619-220-0097; diversionary.org.

For feedback, contact editor@sdjewishjournal.com