

# The San Diego Union-Tribune.

ON STAGE

## The ball was in her 'Court'

**\*Critic's Choice\***



**By James Hebert**  
ARTS WRITER  
**March 20, 2008**

Last time she saw Bluebonnet Court, it had weeds on the walkways and “chopped hogs on the lawn,” Zsa Zsa Gershick recalls.

But tricked-out Harleys were hardly part of the vivid vision that inspired Gershick (eventually) to turn the place into a play – a 1940s-set romance whose local premiere is co-staged by Diversionary Theatre and Moxie Theatre starting this week.

Gershick was living in Texas back in the early 1990s, teaching at Austin Community College. She had an apartment just around the corner from the Bluebonnet, a derelict, 1920s-vintage motor court that she would pass by frequently.

“And one day these characters just jumped out at me. For a moment, I could see the Bluebonnet as it was, in its heyday.”

That heyday, in her head, was the 1940s – wartime America, the era of big bands, Hollywood golden girls, gossip queens and manly men. What resulted was a play steeped in those motifs – and in

the realities they sometimes masked.

“Bluebonnet Court,” directed here by Delicia Turner Sonnenberg, follows the story of Helen, a “sob sister” columnist for the Hearst newspapers whose Jewish heritage is not the only matter of personal identity she's trying to keep under wraps.

Heading for Hollywood to make a new life with her big-screen squeeze, she gets stuck in Austin, and spends a few life-changing days amid the intrigue of the Bluebonnet and its occupants.

Though its period setting brings a vintage richness to the play, “It's not that I chose that era in a self-conscious way,” Gershick says. “The characters chose it. They seemed to come from that era, so I just went with them.”

But it's easy to see why Gershick would respond to the allure of that time. She grew up with a mother and father who were much older than her peers' parents – her dad was already in his 40s when World War II rolled around – so her whole upbringing was, in a sense, a period piece.

“The conversations I heard, the music I listened to, the movies we watched were all from that earlier time,” she says. “So, I had a foot in the present day – I grew up in the '60s and '70s – but also I had an awareness of decades past. Particularly World War II, which was an important and life-changing time for my parents.

“That period was already alive for me. So, when these characters presented themselves, I didn't say, ‘Oh no, what am I gonna do?’ ”

She also had some direct insight into the war aspect of her story (one of the characters in “Bluebonnet” is a troubled combat hero); Gershick spent five years in the Army Reserve, training as a journalist and a medic. She later wrote the book “Secret Service: Untold Stories of Lesbians in the Military.”

As restrictive a place as the military still can be for gay people, in the 1940s its mindset – that of society at large, actually – was something like “Don't ask, don't tell, don't even whisper it.”

As Gershick instructs in script notes for “Bluebonnet,” which premiered in L.A. two years ago, the play's cast “must understand that the idea of an empowered, autonomous, broad gay ‘community’ did not yet exist,” and that a sense of personal danger should inform the gay characters.

Or, as Helen is told before she hits the road: “There's a lot of places 'tween here and there won't be too pleased to see you.”

Chopped hogs might have taken the place of Studebakers at the Bluebonnet since then, but some things haven't changed completely.

## “Bluebonnet Court”

*When: Previews begin tonight; opens Saturday; runs Thursdays, 7:30 p.m.; Fridays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2 and 7 p.m.; plus March 31, 7:30 p.m.; through April 13.*

*Where: Diversionary Theatre, 4545 Park Blvd., University Heights*

*Tickets: \$25-\$33*

*Phone: (619) 220-0097*

*Online: [diversionary.org](http://diversionary.org) or [moxietheatre.org](http://moxietheatre.org)*