

Lesbians Who Kill

Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver and the men that made them do it.

by Gerard Raymond

WOMEN AND MEN EQUAL? ONLY IN YOUR dreams! Ask May and June, a couple of lesbians who fantasize about offing average white men. They are the *Lesbians Who Kill*, played by Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw, currently off-Broadway at One Dream

through July 25. Written by Deb Margolin, this two-hander is the latest theater piece from Split Britches, the Obie-winning company which the three women founded in 1980.

The traditional Split Britches show is a collaborative work in which all three members of the group perform. This time, they decided Deb Margolin would write a complete script for Weaver and Shaw. Margolin suggested a play inspired by Aileen Wuornos, the serial killer in Florida, who was all over the tabloids.

The idea caught fire when Weaver and Shaw were in London, going through a difficult patch with *Belle Reprieve*—a cross-dressed reinterpretation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*—their previous show in collaboration with Bloodlips, the British drag group. Even working with gay men, sexism reared its ugly head. "We were getting misogynist reviews that were saying, 'As usual, the men are very funny and charming and witty and, as usual, the women are very dogmatic and boring,'" reports Weaver. One particular day, the two women felt they'd had more than they could take. They'd been insulted on the streets, their car had been towed, and the bar they went to had played a near-snuff movie. At the end of the day, Weaver turned to Shaw and declared, "I know what we will call the show: LESBIANS WHO KILL!"

In typical Split Britches style, the show mixes feminist and lesbian politics with vaudeville, 1950s television humor, film noir, and popular songs like "Blame it on the Bossa Nova," "I Shot Mr. Lee," and "I Didn't Know the Gun was Loaded." Weaver and Shaw studied Imogen Coca and Sid Caesar to achieve a similar kind

of repartee between their characters, May and June. But there's always an edge to *Lesbians Who Kill*: Violence

last month, Lois Weaver and Peggy Shaw talked to *TheaterWeek* about the show, their lives, sex, and men.

TheaterWeek: *Lesbians Who Kill* feels like the angriest piece you've done so far. Where does this anger come from?

Peggy Shaw: Everyone is so fed up with trying to reason with the system, and men in general. In 1968,



lurks as the ultimate solution to the problem of endlessly repeated misogyny.

In the Club at La MaMa E.T.C., where *Lesbians Who Kill* premiered

women used to say this very utopian thing about working together so that we will all be equal together. Now we're saying, "That's it, you've had your chance." All women, not just les-

bians, feel it's not working anymore and we'll just have to kill the bastards.

Lois Weaver: I think what we are doing is exploding images of power. Someone may interpret this as us wanting to be men, but I think we crawl inside those images and sort of take them on. My character, May, works in the health profession, a role that women have taken on. She is a nurturer, a nurse, and a gardener, but she is also a killer. It's bursting out of a stereotype, and I guess the utopian idea for me is that there is something else on the other side. We don't have to become men, but right now we

driving in from the country with Bettye Bourne of Bloodlips. And, you know, in order to survive, the minute I get into the city, I start doing things like screaming "You fucking asshole" out the window. Bettye got very frightened and said, "You are acting like a man." And I said, "What makes you think I can't just be an angry woman?"

Weaver: We used to have those discussions about butch and femme. Does being butch mean you want to be a man? No. It is about being able to take on the images of dominance, power, and strength, and play with them without having to live the real-

inance, psychological dominance. That is part of what we are taking on in the realm of violence—taking on the roles of the killer, the dangerous woman, the bad girl.

Shaw: A lot of people joke that we did *Lesbians Who Kill* right after *Belle Reprieve*. Working with Bloodlips was the first time we really thought about men in a long time. We never paid attention to them before. But they won't go away, they are just like mosquitoes. We don't have to fuck men, but they still won't leave us alone! And somewhere I really resent that we have to spend our time on them.

You thought this subject was out of the way when you started doing your own work at Spiderwoman Theater and Women's One World Cafe (WOW) in the early '80s?

Shaw: Yes, we became separatists. We were all very happy to get back to our own sexes after *Belle Reprieve*. So was Bloodlips. They kept saying it was exhausting to be around us because everything was a gender issue. Well, guess what? It is! When you mix up women and men you have a gender issue, and you know, it is lot of work for us, too. However, as lesbians and gay men, obviously, we have to be a power base together in order to survive.

Weaver: I get a great swell of pride about the Split Britches/Bloodlips collaboration. I think we did good work together and yet I understand the real need for affinity. It is just easier, and more comfortable among ourselves. There are fewer issues that you have to deal with.

But the third part of your group, your writer Deb Margolin, is a heterosexual woman.

Weaver: Certain affinities overpower others. We have such a good working relationship, our artistic communication with her has been strong from the start. To use an old-fashioned term, she is a woman-identified woman.

Shaw: We watch each other all the time. It's hard to explain what feels heterosexual, but we know. She knows us and our relationships intimately, but sometimes she'll write something and we'll go, "Oh, wait a minute..."

Weaver: And then she will explain what she meant so that we can then

"Everyone is fed up with the system, and men in general."

Amy Meadow

have to wear the male images in a certain way in order to. . .

...frighten the shit out of them?

Weaver: Yes!

Shaw: I remember once we were

ity of what they are. I can play dominant/submissive roles with Peggy without having to live in the fear of what that means in a heterosexual relationship where there is real dom-

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reinterpret it from our cultural point of view. Also, although she is married, her relationship to her work is very separate from her life. One of the things about working with heterosexual women in a lesbian context is that somehow men do manage to get involved because the women go home and they talk—sometimes you feel that influence coming back in. We can separate ourselves. We used to have this joke, "We don't have to hate men because we don't have to live with them."

You are lovers both on stage and off. Have your work and your life become intertwined over the past decade?

Weaver: They have become one and the same thing. Because we create our own characters, whatever we are going through, personally, feeds the character. For instance, there is a renewed intimacy in our own lives, which you have to work on after fifteen years of being together. That manifests itself in the show and then the show feeds our lives.

Shaw: Playing Stanley in *Belle Reprise* was the first time I played a man, and it was very hard. I used to be rough and tough, and very male-identified when I first met Lois, and playing that role was very regressive for me.

Weaver: We used to fight during *Belle Reprise* in a real heterosexual way. She would become extremely aggressive and I would become a victim. That came out of left field for both of us.

Shaw: We do shows about what we know. A lot of women thank us for putting our relationship on stage. We put things in the show as they happen—the whole thing about May having an affair in this piece, for instance.

Isn't that a little scary? You may say something which is not just a line in the script, but something you really want to tell her....

Weaver: Sometimes I think it gives you an element of safety which you don't have in the dark of night in your bedroom. You know there are lots of people watching, the play will end, and you can only go so far. If I find myself leaning towards something too personal, I stop myself for the sake of the performance.

It sounds like great therapy!

Weaver: We used to say when we

started at WOW, take the drama out of the bedroom and put it on stage, please. I enjoy taking the risk of putting our relationship on stage, not from a selfish or a vicarious point of view, but because we [lesbians] don't have that much representation. It makes me feel good that we are trying to put it out there.

Shaw: We have only begun exploring lesbian relationships. . .

Weaver: . . . and lesbian eroticism and sex. The piece gives you visual images, or images in the language.

Your work is also distinguished by its humor, not always a characteristic of political women's theater.

Weaver: We confronted that at the very beginning with Spiderwoman Theater which was about, if nothing else, appropriating the dirty joke and being funny. But working with Bloolips, we saw the root of the problem. When we were working in the context of men, that willingness to make fools of ourselves—in the way that you must in order to make humor—was really hard.

Shaw: But it was really easy for them. During *Belle Reprive*, Betty would ask me why I couldn't be funny. And I would say, "I don't think it is particularly funny. Stanley rapes somebody." We believe in humor, but it wasn't easy to be funny in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, even though we were reclaiming these images.

There is one moment in *Lesbians Who Kill*, in the Bogey Man song, where you don't seem to be joking. You sing it directly to the men in the audience and lines like "We will murder you in self-defense," sound very serious.

Weaver: Peggy wrote the words to that. It is the most real thing we have ever done. It was scary to do, because we have always couched whatever our issues were in other kinds of ways. But in our work, we always try to remind our audience, as well as ourselves, that we are performers as well as the characters. I enjoy doing the Bogey Man because I feel we really need to see the underlying anger.

Shaw: After I had written it, it looked like Feminism 101, and we thought we couldn't do it because it is very didactic. Then it became this rock'n'roll song that Lois did rather than me. Lois is the inferred killer in the show, instead of me. That runs counter to expectations, since most

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men would tend to assume that I, a butch woman, would be the one who hates them. Actually, there are certain men I really trust and like. In fact, I sometimes think men really have a rough deal. I mean, what role models do they have? That is why in *Bogey Man*, she says "Who taught you to kill?" Somebody is teaching men to be dickheads and it is not women!

Although the script was written before *Thelma and Louise* was released, comparisons are inevitable. And with Linda Hamilton fighting for her life in *Terminator II*, and the *Basic Instinct* controversy, as well, you seem to have plugged into the current zeitgeist.

Weaver: We rarely find ourselves in an issue that is so topical. Suddenly there was this wave coming in, a consciousness that was happening, which we just happen to be riding on as well. You don't know what is under the wave as it comes in, and then all this stuff gets littered on the shore. We are just a part of that. All the images you see of women with guns is the frustration that we are feeling more and more. Change is not going to occur, in fact things are getting worse, and the only thing to do is to take power into our own hands.

But doesn't that negate what women used to say? Playing the men's game of "guns = power" is like agreeing that the men were right all along.

Weaver: Just from the point of view of our show, the humor, to my mind, changes it and sends it up slightly. Our guns are all play guns, but that doesn't mean that we don't want to be perceived as powerful or dangerous. It doesn't mean that we are going to become killers, either. It is the fact that we *could* become killers.

Shaw: It's a neat feeling for a woman to have, that maybe we are going to be the ones to survive, instead of always being the victims of the war. You know, it is almost like an educational tool.

Weaver: We work a lot in schools, teaching theater. Often, when you run out of resources within an improvisation, you either lie down and die, or you kill somebody. We feel like we have come to the end of a very long improvisation, and we are not the ones who die! □