

# OUT IN AMERICA

"We are trained as older people, in essence, to be pedophiles in this culture."

## Paula Vogel in High Gear

A wrenching drama gives the playwright new voice.

**T**O SAY PAULA VOGEL'S current hit play *How I Learned to Drive* is "about pedophilia" is to do it a disservice. Moving nimbly back and forth through time, Vogel chronicles the unconventional and damaging seven-year affair between a girl called Li'l Bit and her Uncle Peck, begun when Li'l Bit is



11 and Peck is 38. But this is no violin-laden movie of the week with a clear villain and simple moral lesson. Rather, Vogel maintains remarkable empathy for both characters, and regularly exercises a lively sense of humor, as she explores the shifts in power and the emotional flux of this disturbing love story. "We are trained as older people, in essence, to be pedophiles in this culture," she says, as provocative as her play.

For its limited nonprofit production this past spring, *How I Learned to Drive* pocketed every off-Broadway writing award this season, plus acting kudos for leads Mary-Louise Parker and David Morse, who have returned to the play for an open-ended commercial run at the Century Theater. For Vogel, riding the crest of this triumphant wave is something of a new experience. Success hasn't come easily to the Maryland-born, silver-haired playwright. Although she's been writing plays for 20 years, she's always had to support herself through teaching. Prior to *Drive*, her best-known work was the whimsical and heart-wrenching fantasy *The Baltimore Waltz*, an idiosyncratic memorial to her brother Carl, who died of AIDS. (Everything she writes, Vogel says, is primarily for herself and her late gay brother.) But despite her critical praise, commercial New York producers haven't been willing to invest in Vogel until now.

Small wonder. She's a 45-year-old lesbian feminist playwright who takes on controversial subjects—prostitution in *The Oldest Profession*, pornography and domestic violence in *Hot 'n' Throbbing*, both recent works not yet produced in New York—and refracts them through an often disturbingly humane and humorous sensibility. That doesn't mean trivializing topics such as incest and sexual molestation, though. "Let's face it, there are bastards out of Carolina, and I want to be responsible to people who had bad experiences," Vogel explains. But Uncle Peck leaves *Li'l Bit* with a complex legacy. "I'm interested in complicity and culpability," Vogel continues, "in examining everything as a two-way street."

That is to say, while Uncle Peck is giving *Li'l Bit* driving lessons, he also trains her to become strong and to think ahead. "In many ways Peck creates *Li'l Bit* to destroy him," says Vogel. "I can't help seeing him as a hero."

Refuting the inevitable assumption that *Li'l Bit* is her stand-in, Vogel says the autobiographical elements are the 1960s time period, the Maryland backdrop, and the fact that she and Uncle Peck are the same age, rather than *Li'l Bit*'s character. "I want to put my own sexuality on the table, but that's not the sexuality of the play world," she says. When she started writing, Vogel says, she was very much interested in the question of lesbian sexuality, but now she calls it "the air I breathe." She explains, "It's something that's going to be a mystery for the rest of my life; it's politically necessary, but actually doesn't have a fixed meaning."

That's a view Vogel shares with her partner of eight years, pioneering developmental geneticist Anne Fausto-Sterling (author of *Myths of Gender*), who tangles with scientist Simon LeVay over the notion of an inherited basis for homosexuality. Says Vogel, "I don't have any answers for people who want their identity fixed and stable." Nor for audiences who want their theater that way.—GERARD RAYMOND

Gerard Raymond writes for New York and Time Out New York.

## Murmurs of the Heart

The acoustic duo heads west and plugs in.

CONSIDERING all the buzz that's surrounded Leisha Hailey recently—as she holed up with girlfriend k.d. lang in a Canadian recording studio, and romanced *To Die For*'s Alison Folland on-screen in the indie hit *All Over Me*—her band The Murmurs seems well-named. But for all Hailey's fresh fame, who wound up on the cover of their new album, *Pristine Smut* (MCA): "That's my Grandma Phyllis," explains Heather Grody, the other half of The Murmurs' core duo. "She was our number one fan. That picture was taken in '72, and it kind of reminds us of *us*, of some of the looks we've gone through in the past six years." Adds Hailey, "And we don't know how to put makeup on either!"

The Murmurs formed in 1991, when Nebraska-bred Hailey and New York native Grody, then both 19-year-old acting students in New York, first plucked acoustic guitars together. With the support of East Village drag diva Mistress Formika, the harmonizing twosome found a following. "That was basically our whole scene, the drag queen scene," recounts Grody. They won a recording contract with MCA and released their self-titled debut in 1994.

Recording *Pristine Smut* in Los Angeles led to the duo's decision to relocate west. "It feels more like a community out here," explains Grody, "and there's a great girl band scene." Not to mention girlfriends. Last year, Grody recalls, "we met



CHRIS CUFFARO. HAIR AND MAKEUP BY THOMAS KOLAREK/FERRO (MURMURS)