



A touch of the poet

As she portrays famed lesbian poet Elizabeth Bishop onstage, Amy Irving reflects on freedom, sexuality, and the beauty of knowing oneself By Isa Goldberg

As an actor and a woman, Amy Irving has long outgrown her beginnings as that nice girl who avoided the psychokinetic bloodshed in *Carrie* and who nabbed an Oscar nomination for marrying a cross-dressing Barbra Streisand in *Yentl*.

Irving, 52, brings all her earthly experience to bear in *A Safe Harbor for Elizabeth Bishop*, appearing through April 30 at New York's Primary Stages. Irving gives a passionate performance as Bishop, the Pulitzer Prize-winning lesbian poet who first published in the '40s and lived until 1979. Wealthy, complex, and well-traveled, Bishop chose not to write directly about her sexuality. Instead, she expressed the frisson of lesbian identity through themes of self-division and outsiderhood.

When it came to her own lesbian life, however, the Vassar-educated Bishop lived it to the fullest. Irving portrays the poet as consumed by love and totally dependent on her lover, Lota de Macedo Soares, a brilliant Rio de Janeiro architect with whom Bishop lived in Brazil for 16 of her most productive literary years.

Irving identifies with Bishop partly because she has lived Bishop's experience—as nearly as a contemporary heterosexual woman can. Irving found her own strength and self-acceptance during her 16-year relationship with the Brazilian filmmaker Bruno Barreto. "Brazilians are much freer than we are," she says. "My ex-husband used to say that he wanted to tear down

the 'white picket fence' around my life. And I feel that indeed a lot has been torn down. I am much more in touch with my own sexuality. Being there in a foreign culture, I was able to see my own self-consciousness and insecurities, which come from living in this puritanical country."



■ Bishop (left); Irving (above) in *Safe Harbor*

For Irving, playing Bishop is an opportunity to give back to the culture that nurtured them both. "[Elizabeth and I] both fell in love with the culture and the people and got so much from that country. She won the Pulitzer while she was there for the poems she wrote then," Irving says. "Lota and Brazil gave Elizabeth the strength to accept who she was. It's because she

felt she was in a cocoon that she was finally able to write about herself and her painful childhood."

Irving is confident that American audiences will relate to Bishop's story as well. "I know what it's like to love a woman," Irving tells *The Advocate*, "because every time I do this play, I love this woman. But I also think everybody can relate to the isolation, the feeling that they don't fit in, that they're not a part of the larger picture." ■

Goldberg writes for the New York Daily News.

SPOTLIGHT



Leigh Silverman

When did you last see a lesbian playwright's name up in lights on Broadway? That's reason enough to cheer the opening of Lisa Kron's *Well* at New York's Longacre Theater, opening March 30. Equally unusual is the Broadway debut of Leigh Silverman, the 31-year-old lesbian director who shepherded Kron's invigorating play over the past six years through several workshops across the country, an acclaimed off-Broadway production, and an engagement in San Francisco.

"Leigh's artistic fearlessness and humanity are what I value the most," says playwright-performer Kron. "You feel that you are in a warm bath of attention and care, but in retrospect you realize that you have also been pushed out of the safety zone."

The theme is wellness—of individuals and society—but the play defies conventions. Departing from her trademark solo shows, Kron has written parts for other actors in *Well*, skillfully and hilariously setting herself up to allow the other characters, particularly her homebound mother, to demolish her own show. "The play is really emotionally satisfying and transformative at the end, and the audi-

ence's perspective has to completely change," says Silverman. "It's fun, as the director of this crazy piece of theater, to build everything up so you can destroy it."

A playwright herself (*Brandon Teena*), Silverman says she derives her greatest pleasure from nurturing new work. "I love writers who play with form and give the audience the unexpected experience." She recently directed the Five Lesbian Brothers (Kron is one of them) in their latest, *Oedipus at Palm Springs*, and she's currently working on the upcoming musical *Pretty Dead Girl* as well as *FLOTUS*, a new play about Laura Bush. Now one of the few women directors to work on Broadway, Silverman's career has certainly kicked into high gear.

On the personal front, Silverman says the best thing that's happened to her is getting married in New York in 2004 to Susie Page, her girlfriend of eight years. "I work so hard, and I'm never home," she reports. "I'm so lucky to have somebody in my life who is so supportive and willing to put up with me."

—Gerard Raymond

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