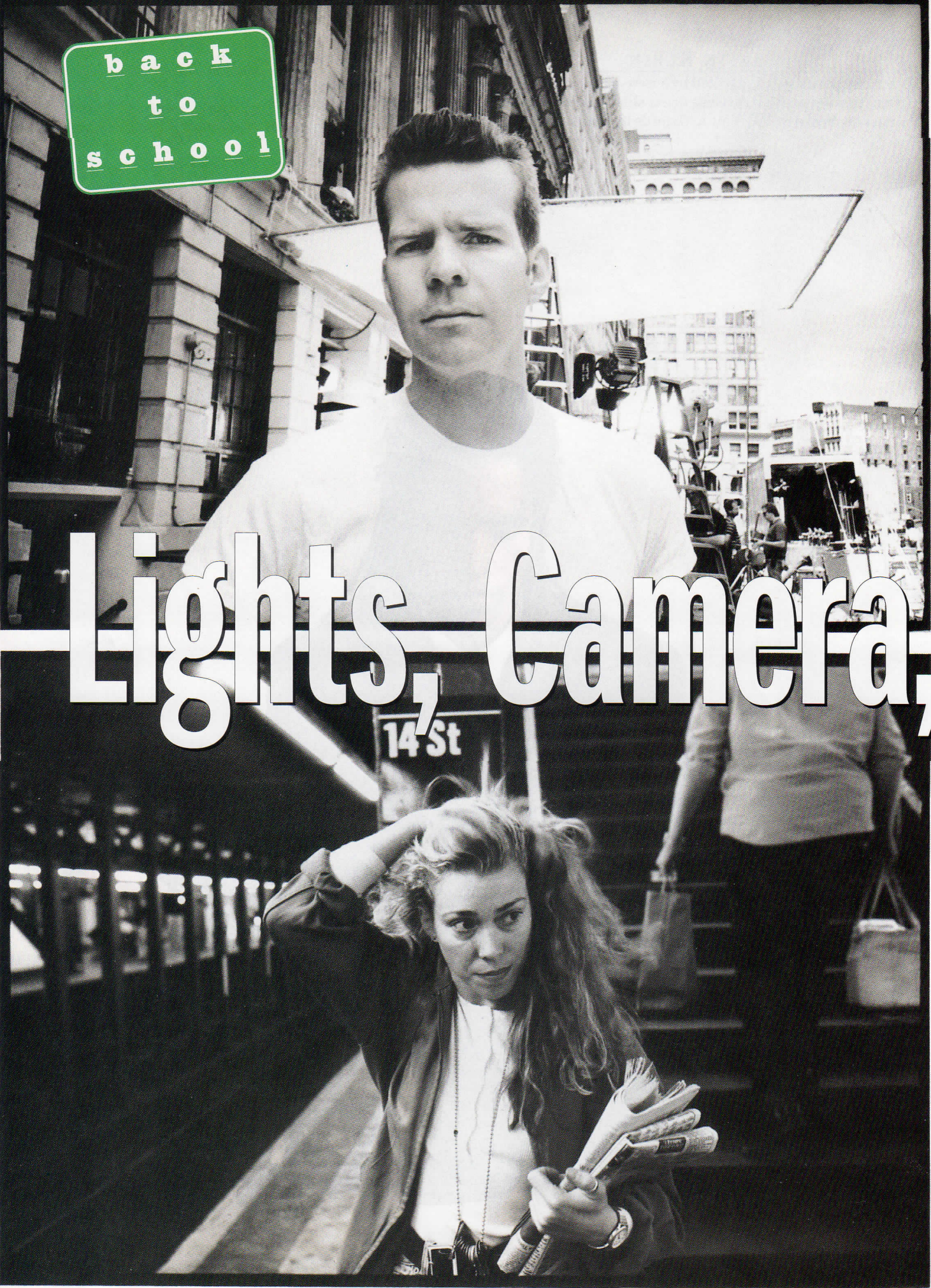
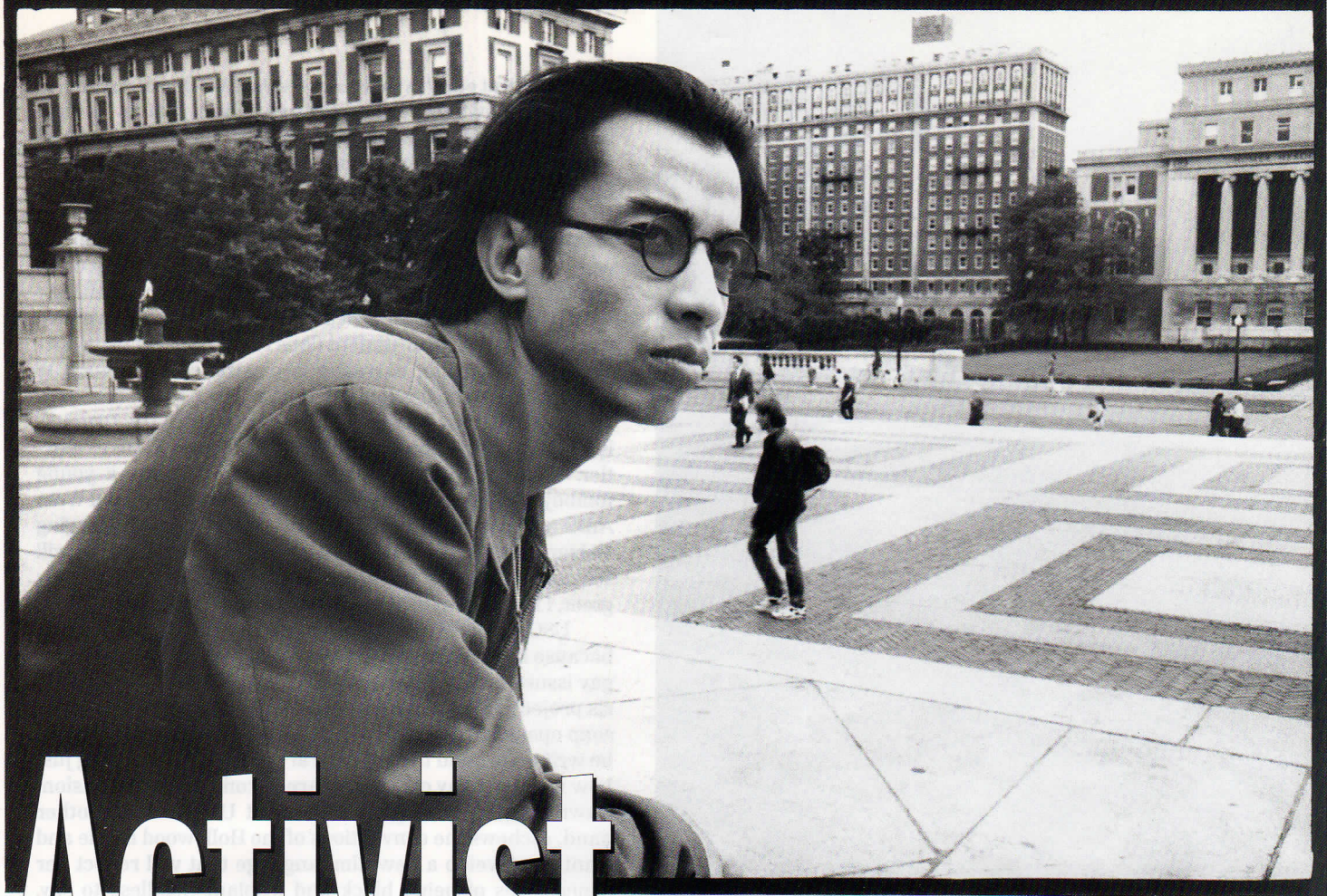


back  
to  
school

# Lights, Camera,







# Activist

**THE GAY PLAYERS:** Columbia's Hoang A. Duong (above) and (opposite) Mark Christopher, and NYU's Maria Maggenti.

Will the next generation of film students blaze the trail from the classroom, past the cutting room, to get their projects green-lighted? Gerard Raymond brings us a sneak preview of the ones to watch.

**T**HE PATH FROM THE FILM SCHOOLS to the movie industry was cemented in the late '60s and early '70s when Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, and Martin Scorsese emerged as major players in Hollywood. Blazing the same trail in the 1980s, Spike Lee opened doors and proved there was a market for so-called minority projects. More recently, a new "minority" presence is establishing itself in the film schools: out-of-the-closet gay and lesbian filmmakers.

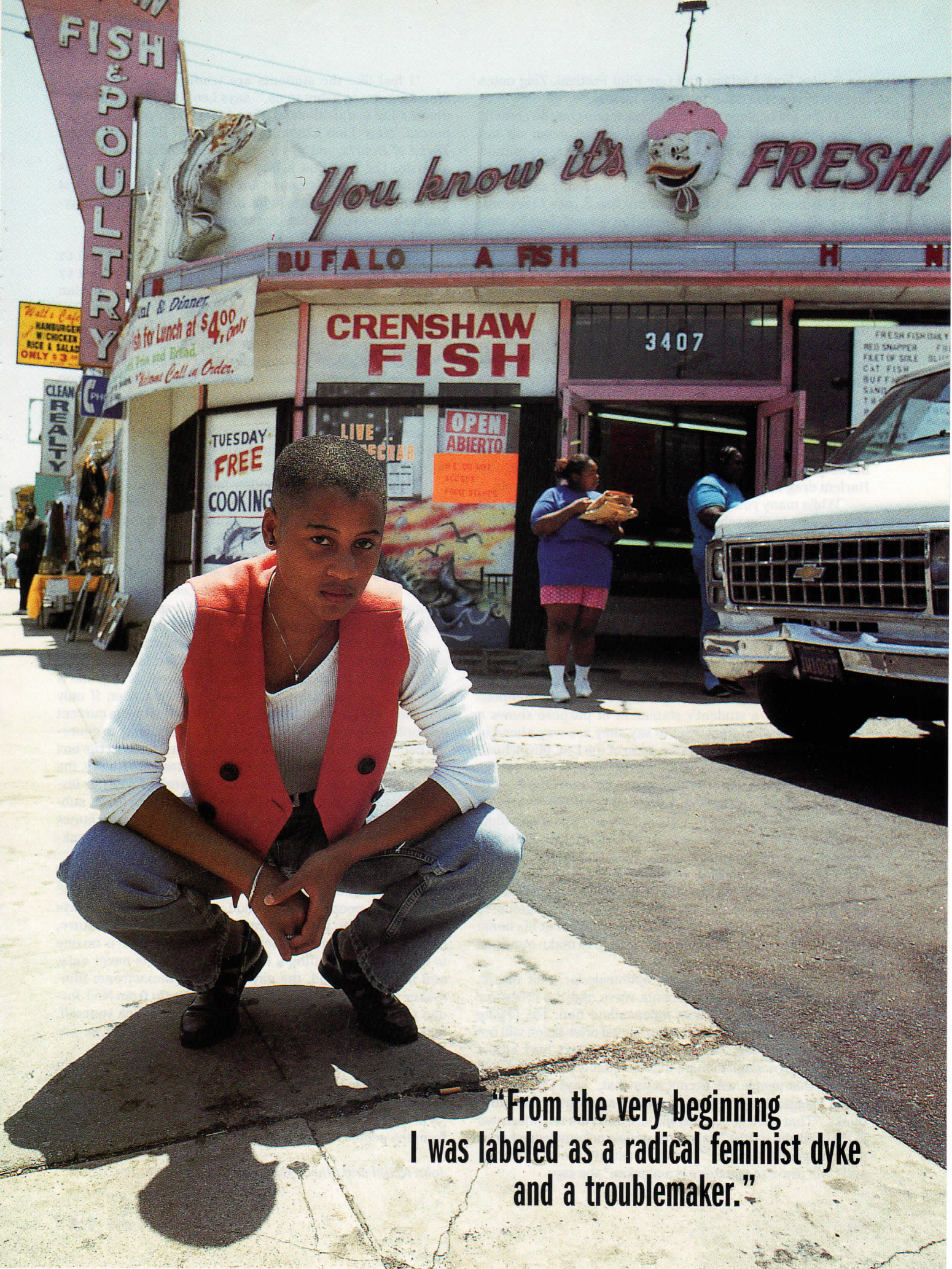
*Gerard Raymond profiled director Sally Potter in Issue No. 6. He has written on film for Premiere and The Village Voice.*

Gay and lesbian voices are not uncommon in the independent film movement, which has flourished over the past two decades, but so far only Gus Van Sant and John Waters have moved near to the mainstream. Will a gay Scorsese or Lee tread the path from film school to Hollywood in the '90s? The time is certainly ripe. Popular films like Gregg Araki's *The Living End* and Tom Kalin's *Swoon* have awakened interest in what people call the "New Queer Cinema" movement, and recent controversies over the portrayal of gay and lesbian characters, as well as the debate about Hollywood homophobia, have made the public more aware of movies' lop-sided treatment of our lives.

For Mark Christopher, a graduate student at Columbia University, this past year proved most auspicious. *The Dead Boys' Club*, his 25-minute film about a young man who gains sexual confidence by connecting magically to a lost generation of gay men from the '70s, took first prize, the New Line Cinema Award, at a 1992 showcase for Columbia's student films.

What followed was a film student's dream come true. In short order, the William Morris Agency took on Christopher as a client; the film won numerous awards and was invited to several prestigious festivals, including Locarno, Toronto, and the Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival. (It is currently touring as part of a package of films titled *Boys' Shorts: The New Queer Cinema*, distributed commercially by





**"From the very beginning  
I was labeled as a radical feminist dyke  
and a troublemaker."**



year's New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival, Zeig notes that every year the films improve in quality.

The schools place no formal restrictions on the content of the films made by students. If they can drum up the \$15,000 or \$20,000 it usually costs to make a 20-minute short, the students can make just about anything they please. The emphasis is on craft. "No one really cared that two girls made out at the end of my film," says Maggenti. "They wanted to know how I shot the scene." Suggs, who decided to go to UCLA after making two films independently, one through New York's Third World Newsreel, says, "I wanted to be in an environment that provides a certain kind of artistic space to concentrate on my craft and technical skills." Contacts made in film school are another benefit of the price of admission. In a business where who you know often matters most, schools offer countless opportunities to interact with people with clout in the industry. Witness Christopher's fortuitous relationship with Schrader.

Of course, film schools aren't the only route to the industry. Director Jennie Livingston, for instance, took a summer film course at NYU but realized she couldn't afford film school. Instead, she spent the next five years making *Paris Is Burning*, a highly acclaimed feature documentary on the Harlem drag balls. "That was my film school," she reflects.

While many young gay filmmakers try to make the most of their time in film school, the schools—particularly the two on the West Coast—are trying to make the most of having openly lesbian and gay students, if only to vary the demographics of their student body. Recently, the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation/Los Angeles conducted a workshop at USC to sensitize the faculty to the needs of gay and lesbian students. They will soon do the same at UCLA, a school that already awards its Carl David Memorial Fellowship specifically to "promote a positive image of gay and lesbian pride and culture." These days, being gay may actually prove advantageous for gaining entry to the highly competitive schools. "If a student's statement of purpose shows a passion about what they want to say, they are way ahead of the game," says Elizabeth Daley, dean of the USC film school.

But are film schools creating a utopia that does not reflect the outside hell of the film business: interminable development deals, scripts in turnaround, audience test-marketing? "I believe there is a place for us to make gay films within the studio system," says Alan Hergott, an openly gay partner at a prominent Beverly Hills entertainment law firm. With the intention of building a bridge from the schools to the industry, Hergott arranged for a group of gay and gay-friendly studio executives and talent agents to meet with the leadership of the USC film school at his home last year. "We need to prepare our people to make our films at the highest level," he remarks.

Of course, the students are optimistic for their future, buoyed by the New Queer Cinema wave and the crossover success of the nonconformist independent film, *The Crying Game*. Most of them feel their open sexual orientation will not hinder their careers. A little chutzpah doesn't hurt either. "I'm arrogant enough to think that the quality of my work will be such that people will accept it for that," says David Price. Maria Maggenti says she won't mind if an industry executive thinks, "That bitch gets on my nerves, and I am not interested in that shit she writes," as long as people acknowledge her as a "damn good filmmaker" as well. "Just give me an audience, and I will prove to you there is a market," she says.

"I feel like the students are leading the way saying, 'You have got to listen to us,'" says Lee Ann Hileman, coordinator for acquisitions at Fine Line Pictures. Fine Line's parent, New Line Cinema, released the lesbian-themed *Three of Hearts* and gives out the Columbia student film awards. The fact that a jury comprising their executives awarded Mark Christopher and Hoang A. Duong the first prize in successive years helps in some part to validate gay- and lesbian-themed films in the eyes of the industry.

**a**CCORDING TO THE LATEST TALLY from GLAAD/LA, there are at least 12 new projects with gay or lesbian themes and characters in development at the major studios. Their fate may rest on the year-end box-office performance of TriStar's *Philadelphia*, the eagerly awaited Jonathan Demme movie, even though its focus is AIDS. Stan Wlodkowski, who produced *Longtime Companion*, one of the first gay AIDS features to receive mainstream attention, warns against overestimating the market for gay-themed work. "Don't go overboard," he says, "until we have a *sex, lies, and videotape*."

But Zeig, who wears another hat as a theatrical booking agent, says, "I know, absolutely, that there are movie theaters around the country that are booking lesbian and gay films constantly." Recent UCLA graduate Edgar Bravo's *I'll Love You Forever . . . Tonight*, dubbed a "gay *Big Chill*," has played successfully in San Francisco and Los Angeles and will have a run in New York. Zeig says *Forbidden Love*, a lesbian documentary feature from Canada, received a spate of bookings before it was screened at a single venue in this country.

And whatever its queasy implications, the media's recent flirtation with "the gay '90s" and "lesbian chic" only adds to the allure of these projects. Zeig predicts the time is ripe for a lesbian narrative feature to cross over, if only someone will hurry up and make it. Indeed, take the current example of *Claire of the Moon*. The film seems only to generate poor word of mouth but has done sensationally at the box office. "If a straight white filmmaker makes a love story, the film is either good or bad, whereas the work of a gay or lesbian filmmaker can become the object of a networked subculture of discussion, debate, and festivals," observes James Schamus, who has fostered many lesbian and gay filmmakers through his production company, Good Machine.

So what about the gay or lesbian filmmaker who'll tread that famous path from film school to Hollywood? "Most of the people in Hollywood are not risk-takers," says John Keitel, who is getting ready to begin his first feature, *Ground Zero*, an independent production. "There is no one to mentor you." Getting a feature film made is never easy, and in all likelihood, the gay or lesbian mainstream filmmaker of tomorrow may have to take a tip from Neil Jordan and *The Crying Game*: Come up with the idea yourself, make the film against all odds, and then perhaps an enlightened distributor will market the hell out of it.

Even Mark Christopher's meteoric rise comes without guarantees. He knows that he must still prove himself with a feature but is encouraged by early discussions on his Studio 54 project. "Maybe I have a skewed vision," he laughs, "but from the people I've met, it's like, Hollywood is queer!"♥

*John Keitel and Maria Maggenti have contributed to OUT.*