

TORONTO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2006



Comedian Elvira Kurt is hosting one of the QL events during the festival. 'Maybe what comes out of it is a different kind of storytelling,' she says.

Importing the Queer Lounge



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Pamela Anderson dancing on the furniture at a party for Dave Chapelle. Naomi Watts and Jared Leto singing *Happy Birthday* to Alan Cumming. Director and deejay John Cameron Mitchell spinning *The Star-Spangled Banner* at the annual Homos Away from Home party and sighing to the crowd, "Remember Bill Clinton? Remember how great that

was?"

Those are some highlights from last January's Queer Lounge parties at the Sundance Film Festival. It was the third, um, outing for the QL at Sundance, and already it felt like an institution. Now the organization has landed for the first time at the Toronto International Film Festival, and its creator and executive director, Ellen Huang, is hoping to create a similar scene.

Los Angeles-based Huang conceived of Queer Lounge in late 2003, after six years of working as a development executive for, among others, Helen Hunt and the composer Hans Zimmer. "I was going to film festivals and meeting a lot of other queer executives who work in the mainstream," she said. "I thought it would be cool if we could

have a home base for networking, sort of like the international pavilions in Cannes." Sundance, a "very gay-friendly festival," felt right as a launching pad, but Huang always had her eye on the bigger, more international TIFF.

Last year especially, a number of gay-themed films that premiered at TIFF—*Capote*, *TransAmerica*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *Breakfast on Pluto*—made news internationally. Huang counts 26 films with gay content this year. And TIFF has become awfully lounge-y. *Premiere* magazine has a music and film lounge. The Rivoli bar is running a Canadian Music Café for three afternoons next week. There's a new Doc Bar for documentary makers, as well as various filmmakers' spaces.

Unfortunately for Huang, the first TIFF Queer Lounge is more an idea than a location. Between rent and staff, a lounge costs about \$200,000 to put together, Huang said, and fundraising didn't go as well as she'd hoped, so she couldn't afford to rent space for the duration of the festival. Instead, there will be two big parties at the Phoenix on Sherbourne Street (more on those later), an Industry Brunch on Saturday at the Church of the Redeemer (162 Bloor St. W.)—"It's brunch. It's what we do," Elvira Kurt, who's hosting, told me—and three panel discussions, also at the church. (All QL events, unlike most TIFF events, are open to the public; call Ticketmaster.)

The first panel, on Saturday at 3:30 p.m., will be about gay and les-

bian films post-*Brokeback Mountain*. Producers and casting directors will talk about how to nudge gay films out of indie world and more into the mainstream. The second, on Monday at 2 p.m., will focus on *The Bubble*, Eytan Fox's film about two men, an Israeli and a Palestinian, who fall in love. And the third, the same day at 4 p.m., will be about the making of *Shortbus*, John Cameron Mitchell's raunchy sex comedy. "That should be lively," Huang understated. "I heard that the cast's rehearsal period involved going off to a ranch together and just having sex all the time."

As at Sundance, though, the QL's main focus will be its parties: Monday night's fete for *The Bubble*, featuring performances by Kurt, Hawksley Workman, Scott Thompson and Ivri Lider (an Israeli pop star); and Sunday night's blowout for *Shortbus*, which promises to be the down-and-dirtiest event of TIFF.

"Where stars go, the press follows," Huang said. "And we need to spread awareness of gay films. There's still a lot of ghettoization and homophobia. There are a lot of \$15-million gay films, but almost no \$40-million films. There's no gay James Bond." Yes, *Brokeback Mountain* got a lot of attention, but it was mostly about how "brave" the straight stars and director were to take it on, or about how it was banned in some states. Everyone still referred to it as "the gay cowboy movie."

"And if Queer Lounge had had a space at TIFF last year, I don't think Focus Features [*Brokeback's* distributors] would have touched us with a 10-foot pole," Huang continued. "Hollywood is still conservative, and economically homophobic. They fear gay films won't cross over to the American mainstream, so they don't invest in them."

So the point of the Queer Lounge is to give filmmakers, gay and straight, the chance "to build bridges, see if what you're working on meshes with what others are doing, get access to better equipment, start a real conversation. It's not about, 'Get your gift bag and keep moving,'" Kurt says. It's also different in a mainstream setting, she adds, than at Toronto's annual gay film and video festival, *Inside/Out*. "It's more, we're here, we're queer, we have cocktails, and maybe what comes out of it is a different kind of storytelling," Kurt says. "People say, 'Isn't it enough that you have your little festival where you get together and show each other your films?' But guess what? Being merely tolerated should never be enough. There's room at the table for more kinds of films than just the mainstream."

And where else at TIFF can you watch elaborately costumed trapeze artists sing upside down? What other promoter wanted to include a grope room at her party? "The *Shortbus* party will be talked about," Huang promised. "We're hoping to make it a debaucherous situation." If that isn't the Queer Lounge's slogan, it should be.