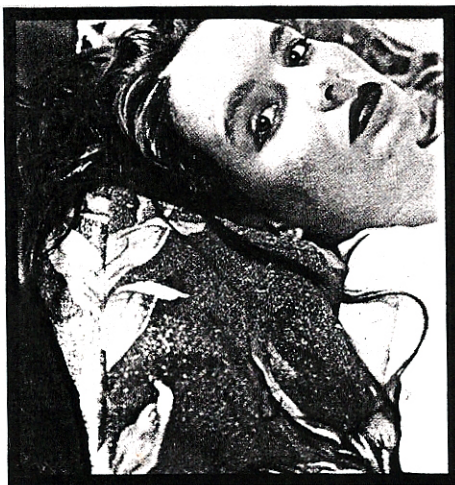


# GOINGS AND COMINGS

**Lesbian comedy 'Go Fish' quickly became a festival hit and legendary deal. As it opens in Britain, B. Ruby Rich describes its birth pangs and offers ten ways of viewing the fish that got caught**



● This is a fish story about not the one that got away, but the one that got caught and won the trophy. Caught big time, in other words. But it's also a cautionary tale, one about marketing, identity and innocence. *Go Fish* – the movie, the trailer, the legend – wasn't always such. It was once just like its title – derived, presumably, from the beloved children's card game that uses "Go fish" as a command, but also, more pointedly, from the corny classic sign (gone fishin') hung on office doors throughout America when spring fever, that most uncaptialistic and anti-entrepreneurial syndrome, struck. It's probably fitting, then, that a little, low-budget, black and white independent film with a title signifying 'play' at its least hip, almost provincial best, should have evolved so immediately into a festival hit and legendary deal. This kind of success, after all, is the other kind of American fantasy. But in the process, care has to be taken that the fragile innocence and labour-of-love sincerity of the original doesn't evaporate on its way to the bank. If this article has a hidden agenda, it's the attempt to head off the backlash and argue that this film is far more than any mainstream distributor's fishing expedition.

*Go Fish* started life as a little film called *Max & Ely*. It was written in Chicago in 1991 by Rose Troche and Guinevere Turner, a couple of twenty-somethings smitten with each other and their project. It was a lesbian film, by and about and for lesbians. As Turner says, it was "the little film that could." For a while, though, it couldn't.

In 1992, Roche and Turner ran out of money. Their all-volunteer crew began to lose faith. Everybody had been working for free because they shared the dream of bringing a lesbian cinema into existence. Troche says, "if you don't think that you can walk up to any lesbian and say, 'hey do you want to make a film because

look at the shit that's out there?' and they're, like, 'I'm with ya'" – well, the consequences go without saying. So when they found themselves with little money, fewer friends and a film only partly made, they sent a letter to Christine Vachon in New York. As bad as things were, there was now a lesbian producer in the US helping independent films (*Poison*, *Swoon*) to get made. And her production partner, Tom Kalin, was a Chicago boy. Vachon read the letter, saw their 20 minutes of film, read the script and signed on. They were back in business.

By 1992, John Pierson's Islet Films came up with completion money and shooting could be finished. By 1993, ex-lovers Turner and Troche were working and playing in New York. Troche was editing the footage, Turner was fine-tuning the voiceovers, and the Sundance Film Festival would soon decide to show the film. As soon as I saw it, fine-cut on an editing table, I was enchanted and started composing catalogue copy in my head: "*Go Fish* begins just about where coming-out films used to end." I wasn't particularly restrained in my choice of adjectives: wistful, lyrical, seriocomic, fanciful, plus "an assured cinematic ability to confer grace."

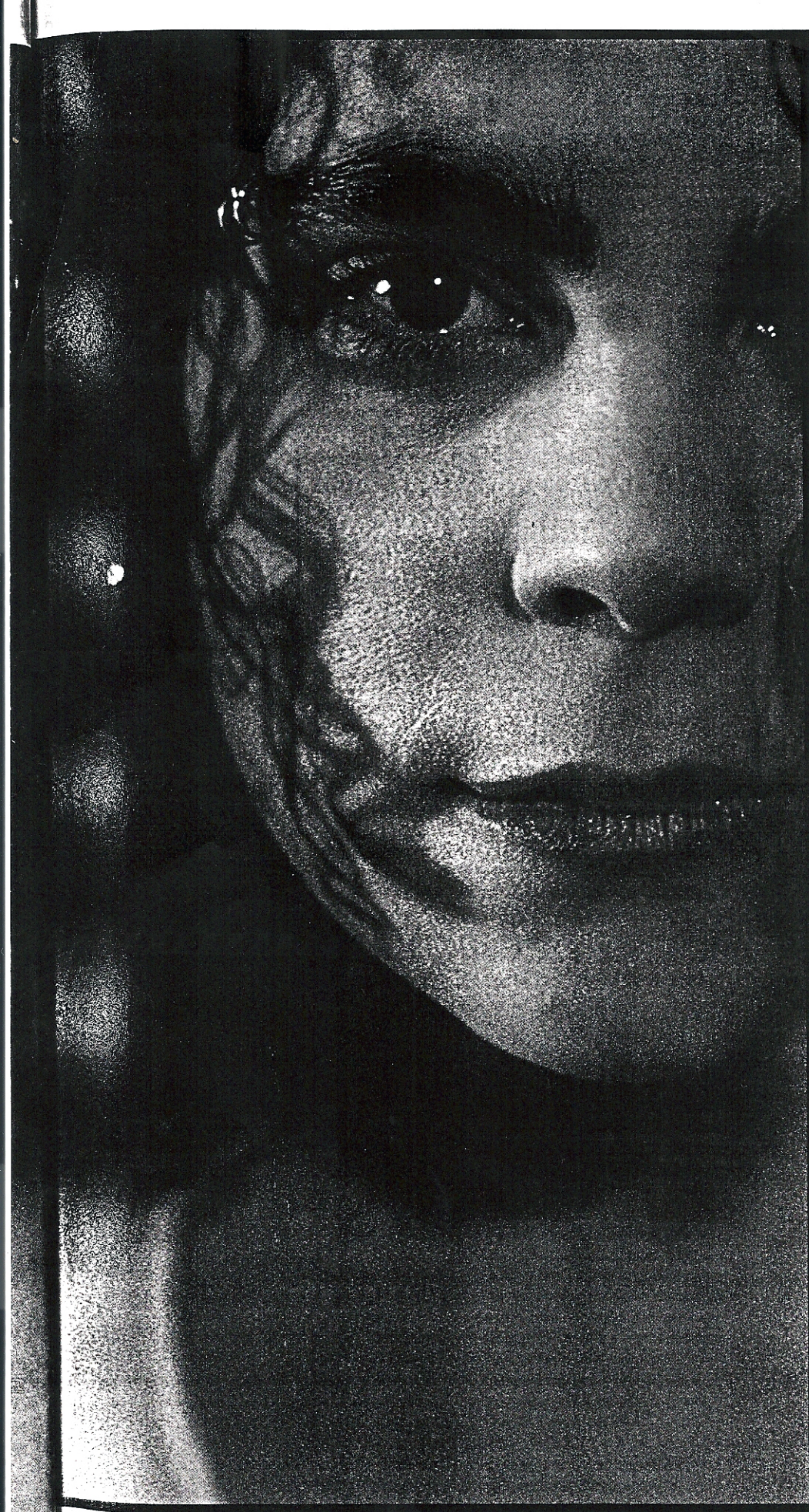
*Go Fish* came to Park City, Utah, with high hopes and lots of fears. By the opening day, director/co-screenwriter Rose Troche and actor/co-screenwriter Guinevere Turner had arrived. A box of nail clippers to be distributed as promo hadn't. Troche and Turner wondered if anyone would like their film in boytown – until its first screening. The crowd went nuts. "God, are they hot," said the straight women about the lesbians on screen. "Give her money to make another one quick," said the straight man about the lesbian on stage. Goldwyn made festival history by signing them to a distribution contract on opening weekend.

Then came the marketing. Unprecedented ads matched two women kissing (except that when it's printed too dark, one looks like a man, intentionally or not) with quirky handwritten copy. Trailers were in the theatres by May, playing back-up to other big-time quality product. Then the press kicked in. Turner, her hair arranged in front of her face like a beaded curtain, had a whole page in *Interview* touting her as a writer to watch; Rose, all pierced and intense-looking, got a pitch in *Rolling Stone* as the hot director for 1994; the two together got the number two slot in the *New Yorker* Talk of the Town section, which would be a major status symbol even if the writer (anonymous, as is customary for Talk contributors, even when Jacqueline Kennedy wrote an item) hadn't gone on and on about what a good flirt Turner is and how much all the adulation was pleasing Troche and, well, how charmingly full of themselves and hand-rolled cigarettes and beautiful women and Café Tabac these two were. It's unprecedented respect for a lesbian movie. And bear in mind that *Go Fish* hadn't even opened.

*Go Fish*, then, offers up a lovely fable: the little film that is saved from extinction, hits the bull's-eye and is swept into the marketplace leaving its hardcore fans to worry that the hype might backfire, that the innocence and fervour

**A pair of twenty-somethings: Rose Troche, director, right; Guinevere Turner, actor and co-screenwriter, above left**





that are the film's finest qualities will be mistaken for mere artifice once the context changes. If *Go Fish* is to get the respect it deserves – and to get it on its own terms, undistorted by the context of reception – it's important to understand the film's birthright. Consider these ten origin myths as a start.

**Origin 1: 'A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts'** In 1975, Jan Oxenberg made *A Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts*, the first (and nearly last) lesbian comedy. As a send-up of both political correctness and homophobic stereotypes, it was ahead of its time. Technically raw and politically sophisticated, it was shot on a shoestring and went on to play for years at women's film festivals and cultural womyn's evenings. For me, *Go Fish* is the daughter of *Comedy*, the living proof that lesbian camp does exist and even has a lineage. Except that Troche and Turner have never seen it.

**Origin 2: Puerto Rican rhythm** Rose Troche's parents are Puerto Rican, from the island. She says that they couldn't understand why moving to the US didn't make them automatically able to pump out blue-eyed, blonde-haired babies instead of the kids they got. They moved all over the country, thereby obliging her to change schools mid-year to comply with the moves; she learned to fight and/or make people laugh. With no vocabulary for racism, Troche could never understand why their house was egged in the white suburban neighbourhoods her parents favoured or why her mother's accent on the telephone was a cause of social ostracism for her. She looks around the room, points out how differently she'd be treated at Sundance if she had a heavy-duty accent herself instead of assimilation speech. Moving around and switching communities became a theme. She went to a public university where students commuted and never really knew each other. She had lots of time to study lots of things in the nine years she spent at the University of Illinois. Industrial design, for instance, which was her major for several years. "Can you imagine anything more shallow than designing the *outside* of things?" jokes Troche, who clearly moved on to designing the guts.

**Origin 3: Commune crisis** Guinevere Turner doesn't like to talk about her past or her childhood, though she finally admits she was a commune kid. "That's the book I want to write: the children of the flower children." I ask if she was radiantly happy or damaged and she indicates the latter. Her college experience at Sarah Lawrence continued the commune theme: in other words an isolated and mutually dependent group, sure of themselves, with cultish tendencies. Probably great boot camp for the lesbian nation. She moved to Chicago to get away from scrutiny and to try to write. She was afraid her long-haired straight-girl look would make it hard to find dykes. So she went to an ACT-UP meeting, where she met Troche. The rest is history.

**Origin 4: The bars, negative** Turner and Troche did what any young self-respecting dyke couple in love would do: they went clubbing. And ►



◀ what did they see? "Oh no, not the rain scene from *Desert Hearts* again. Not *Personal Best*! Oh, *The Hunger* again." Video clips are the entertainment staple of lesbian bars all over the US. The trouble is that there's so little to clip. The pair didn't have anything against most of these films: in fact, Turner saw *Desert Hearts* when she was 18 and was totally fixated, as much by the lesbian couple in front of her as by the movie. No, it was the paucity that got to them. Then that hideous Blake Edwards vehicle came out: *Switch*. Troche remembers: "We thought, well, if they can do it, we can." Vows were taken. They stopped making T-shirts and staging ACT-UP benefit performances and making lesbian safer-sex erotic photographs, and got themselves a new concept. They'd make a film. "We loved having a project. It wasn't even a labour of love. It wasn't a labour."

**Origin 5: The bars, positive** They loved what they found in the bars: the energy and camaraderie, the fierce commitment to a life choice. And, I venture to add, the video. Not the video clips of mainstream movies featuring historical or farcical lesbians, but the alternative videotapes that were being produced, starting in the late 80s, in and for the community. Just as disco music fuelled gay male culture in the 70s, I'd argue, so has the bar video explosion fuelled lesbian identity in the 90s. Turner and Troche see their allegiances to this sector very clearly. Troche says: "I really hope the connection between our work and the work of people like Cheryl Dunye and Sadie Benning is recognised. It would be terrible if *Go Fish* were to be put up on a pedestal just because it's a feature." Film critics, though, tend to live outside this subculture: to them, *Go Fish* must look as though it dropped, unique, out of the sky, instead of out of a community with a shared aesthetic voice.

**Origin 6: Happy writers write happy characters** "No, we were miserable." Turner and Troche insist that they fought like cats and dogs when they were together and that *Go Fish* was a very deliberate attempt to imagine lesbian happiness. They wanted to make a feel-good movie in spite of themselves. "Yes, yes, this is so excellent" was their mantra for being a lesbian. "We need a jolt in our lives to remember: girl, don't hold your head down." Pride, you might say, was on their minds. Once there was a car accident in their script, and a suicide, and a confrontation with some violently homophobic men. But they got over it. Despite charming everyone who crosses their path, they continue to insist that their characters are much nicer than they are. And vice versa. When Turner tries to claim that she's not obnoxious like Max, Troche counters that it's more that she wears a different hat off-screen.

**Origin 7: Chicago** Rose Troche is a product of the Chicago avant-garde tradition and is proud to say that she wants her audience to know that what they're watching is a fiction. Hence the eloquent bridges between scenes that link emotion and gesture in a series of dances, games, hands. She studied at the University of

## Their film is something of a Molotov Cocktail, tossed, like a bridal bouquet, to the waiting throng

Illinois with Hans Schall, her hero. "I owe it all to Hans," she insists, in tribute to the man who taught her that, given three minutes of footage and an optical printer, you could make a feature. "I like to see film grain." She prides herself on doing all her own opticals and freely admits her avant-garde training. "My negative cutter hated me because there are so many cuts in the film." She remembers struggling to find a film analogue for the scratch in hip-hop music when she was cutting to 'Feel That Love' at the end. She thinks it's a question of rhythm, wanting to get the groove. She jokes that, being Puerto Rican, she ought to have rhythm. "But I'm so white-washed, it's like: excuse me, could I have some of my culture back now?" Of course, the University of Illinois wasn't all a piece of cake. Wayne Boyer, the resident authoritarian, would never let her near the "good" optical printer, to this day.

**Origin 8: Literary and filmic formation** They, uh, vary. For Turner, studying fiction writing at Sarah Lawrence, the major influence was Jeanette Winterson's writing. She's still her hero. Turner writes short - very, very short - pieces of fiction and great one-liners. That's why *Go Fish* has such a coherent sense of vignette. Since the pair virtually finish each other's sentences, Troche immediately launches into a polemic about her desire to find a way to put the passion, the intensity of a love story like Winterson's *Written on the Body* into a film that can taste and smell and breathe like books do. For Troche, some of the influence was counter. She bemoans the way that Lizzie Borden and Chantal Akerman switched from their core lesbian audience to mainstream ones where heterosexuality has to rule on screen, but stops herself from "dissing" the sisters. "Go girl" is more their style. She loved *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*. Patricia Rozema is another hero, unmet so far, like the rest.

**Origin 9: The lesbian community** When Troche and Turner rounded up their lesbian company for the years-long *Go Fish* shoot, they still had a euphoric view of lesbianism and lesbians. In the beginning, the crew was all women, and Roche can still recall the energy field produced by that gathering: "Some days you'd see 15 women laying down the track for the camera." It was a fantastic experience. "There's just so much strength in this community," says Troche, bemoaning how little it is mobilised. When the tide turned and the gang got haircuts, got attitude, took off, well that's the lesbian community too. "They won't believe this is happening." Now Troche and Turner have a philosophical view of the film: "Even if lesbians who see it say: 'damn that *Go Fish*', then that's a success." If they swear they can top it, and they go off to make their own, great, let it spur successors and oppositions and debate, so long as it

generates more films. In this sense, their film is something of a Molotov Cocktail, tossed, like a bridal bouquet, to the waiting throng.

**Origin 10: Genre traditions** The original press kit for *Go Fish* has a fascinating statement from its director. She tries to talk in one and the same breath about the need to build a tradition of lesbian film-making and her desire to be recognised as a film-maker, period. She bemoans the fact that reaction so far is so fixated on content that comments on the film's complex structure and associative image-cutting go unexpressed. She argues that the genre need is so great that *Go Fish* is moved into the new slot "regardless of its merit" and earns its place "purely because of lesbian content". She talks wisely about how a starved market is asked to prove its loyalty over and over. She finally ends as follows, reconciled: "I believe I should deal with a subject I have a relationship with, and be able to make my art without taking a political vacation, and hope that with the fulfilment of these beliefs I will gain the momentum to see me through the tasks ahead." Go girls.

### Decade of the dyke

This text goes to press on the eve of the *Go Fish* premiere at the 18th San Francisco International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival. Playing the massive 1,500-seat Castro Theatre on opening night, the film sold out on the first day of ticket sales. (But then, the festival itself sold out all its season passes on day one too.) When Troche and Turner come to San Francisco for their fix of adoration, they'll alternate interviews with the mainstream press with an informal lesbian discussion at the Bearded Lady Cafe. It's a symptomatic juxtaposition.

Today, there's a locomotion to lesbian and gay film work that's undeniable. Two years into the 'New Queer Cinema', film and video are still taking off, driven by the fuel of political passion and aesthetic urgency. The queers have staked out this historical moment, making sure it doesn't erode. And the new film-makers and video artisans are producing their work without compromising stylistic rigour. Who can resist, when there's a huge audience willing and waiting to respond to less traditional work? There's nothing like a political movement to make artists responsive and interactive and full of mandates, while audiences full of their own sense of empowerment can be counted on to swell the ranks of the ticket line and bring their own serious demands to the screening (and, sometimes even to the film-makers themselves).

Finally, critically, not incidentally, a lesbian feature cinema is emerging alongside lesbian video. After years of boys-only film-making, *Go Fish* is a lesbian dramatic film to cheer. It's the flagship for a season already sporting Shu Lea Cheang's new *Fresh Kill* and Midi Onodera's just completed *Sadness of the Moon*. If the papers are to be believed, there are already more than a dozen mainstream lesbian films in production or pre-production in Hollywood. If this keeps up, then the 90s may just be the decade of the dyke after all.

*'Go Fish' opens on 8 July and is reviewed on page 42*