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# A Legend Comes Out

Critically Acclaimed Filmmaker Yvonne Rainer Talks About *Privilege*, the Art World, and Her Life as a Lesbian

BY LIZ KOTZ

**F**ilmmaker Yvonne Rainer's public coming out at 56 earlier this year perhaps signals a new challenge to lesbian invisibility in the arts at a time when many of the most prominent

women artists remain deeply closeted. Rainer's work in dance, writing, and film over the past three decades has made her a major figure in the American avant-garde and feminist filmmaking. Rainer, who lives in New York City, received a \$330,000 lifetime-achievement award from the MacArthur Foundation last year.

Trained as a dancer, Rainer became an influential choreographer in the early part of her career, and her work with the Judson Dance Theater in New York helped define American modern dance throughout the '60s and '70s. In 1972 she made her first feature-length film, *Lives of Performers*, and soon turned to filmmaking full-time. Her works include *A Film About a Woman Whom—* (1974), one of the most influential works of early feminist filmmaking; *Kristina Talking Pictures* (1976); *Journeys From Berlin/1971* (1980), for which she earned the Los Angeles Film Critics Association Independent/Experimental Film Award; *The Man Who Envied Women* (1985); and *Privilege* (1990).

In *Privilege*, a fictional filmmaker interviews several friends talking about menopause and the sexuality of mid-life women. The central figure, Jenny, a white middle-aged straight woman, recalls a period in her youth in which she was friends with Brenda, a lesbian whom she saves from an attempted rape. Jenny's retelling of events from the friendship illuminates to her critical issues of feminism and sexuality. Throughout the film, Jenny reexamines her past, untangling her experiences of sexuali-

ty, age, race, class, and privilege.

Rainer, who appears in *Privilege*, states in the film, "The most remarkable thing was the silence that emanated from friends and family regarding the details of my single middle age. When I was younger, my sex life had been the object of all kinds of questioning, from prurient curiosity to solicitous concern. Now that I did not appear to be looking for a man, the state of my desires seemed of no interest to anyone."

Presenting *Privilege* at lesbian and gay film festivals this year, Rainer took the opportunity to come out publicly as a lesbian and to discuss the changes in her life since she began a relationship with a woman, writer and art critic Martha Gever. *The ADVOCATE* recently caught up with the filmmaker in her TriBeCa loft. In this interview, Rainer discusses how her shift in sexual identity has affected her work and its reception and her own experiences of living as a middle-aged woman.

**Could you talk about your decision to publicly come out?**

Let me begin with a talk I gave in Australia a year ago and that I subsequently revised after coming out. In the original version I called myself a political lesbian and lapsed heterosexual. Also I called myself *awoman*, a term I devised based on [feminist writer] Monique Wittig's essay "The Straight Mind," where she says, "Lesbians are not women."

**I am surprised that you used the term**

*political lesbian*, because it's not a term lesbians use much right now. Why is that?

Within the lesbian community in the last few years, there's been a rejection of the kind of '70s model of lesbian identity as a politically motivated choice. Instead, lesbians are returning to seeing it as a much more specifically sexual thing as well as trying to depoliticize all these aspects of sexual identity and sexual behavior.

Using the prefix *political* was a way of declaring my solidarity, but it is also part of a questioning of the whole idea of fixed categories of sexual identity. Besides, since I had hardly any history of sleeping with women at that point, I didn't think I had grounds for calling myself a "real" lesbian, nor did I want to.

**You were at a point in your life where there weren't any available categories?**  
Right. Having been pretty much celibate for ten years, I was trying out this self-



A still from Rainer's newest work, *Privilege*. The film focuses on issues of menopause, sexuality, and race.

*"After getting involved with Martha, I embraced the term lesbian."*

identifying nomenclature around sexuality and gender. All of that was very speculative. Then after getting involved with Martha, I revised the paper and actually embraced the term *lesbian*, admitting that anything short of the term was a kind of sop to, or hiding in, what I called the safe house of heterosexuality. But prior to that, I didn't feel it was appropriate to claim that identity in the same way I had resisted calling myself a feminist in the early '70s because I wasn't active.

There's been an increasing awareness of the necessity to make visible the specific social and sexual positions from which we declare and act on certain kinds of stakes. I had to question what mine were. As far as race, class, and gender were concerned, it was clear where I was coming from, but sexually I was in a no-man's-land. So I was trying to stake that out, knowing that I was on somewhat dubious ground.

**How has coming out at 56 changed the way you see your work?**

Insofar as my work always contains autobiographical material, coming out will probably have an effect. And if I use lesbian characters, they will undoubtedly read differently from Brenda, the lesbian character in *Privilege*. *Privilege* sweeps through a number of issues, lesbianism being only one of them. Since so many different conditions intersect in daily life, I felt justified in dealing with issues of race, lesbian identity, aging, menopause, sexuality—addressing these from my position as an aging white woman living in New York City. And I should add straight. I imagine straight and gay will strike a different balance in whatever project I get into next.

**How do you feel your work functions in a gay context?**

One event comes to mind: Crazy Nannie's, the [New York lesbian] bar on Seventh Avenue, screened *Privilege* as a video projection. The audience was composed of women of all ages, and they responded very enthusiastically to the film. But afterward they were mostly concerned in a general way with the feminist treatment of menopause and aging. The word *lesbian* was not



Pioneering feminist filmmaker Yvonne Rainer

## "Had I dealt with lesbian relationships in my work in the '60s or

uttered once.

However, I've been challenged by lesbians over the problematic Brenda character—why she isn't the central character, why I didn't deal specifically with lesbians and aging. I think some gay audiences are also impatient with this film because Jenny, the central character, is not a lesbian, or rather the part of her life that is depicted is about her straightness. She admits to having been "terrified of women" 30 years ago, but it is unclear what her present orientation is. Again, I wasn't an active lesbian when I made that film. I was still interrogating my straight past, which to some extent I may continue to do.

### How has coming out changed the way you see yourself?

The main thing in my personal life is that I find myself working through a lot of psychological hang-ups that I never worked out before. Whether this was because I was with men—or with the wrong men—or because I'm at a different stage of life, I don't know. But it's somehow become possible to be constructively committed to another person, and this person happens to be a woman.

Aside from this, much of the change has to do with how you are perceived—or think you are perceived—by others. I know there are superficial things, like I used to wear earrings whenever I left the house. They were the only jewelry I felt I had to cling to to avoid being called "sir." And now I don't give a damn. If I wear jewelry, it's to vary my appearance, not to avoid looking masculine.

**It seems as though a lot of the ways sexuality and attractiveness function for lesbians are very different from how they operate for straight women. For instance, in the lesbian community, some of the women who are considered very attractive are in their 40s or 50s. Maybe lesbians are allowed to age more gracefully, while among straight women there's such pressure to fight aging or hide it.**

You sometimes run into a kind of misery among aging heterosexual women, women who suddenly realize they aren't being



A still from *Privilege*

whistled at anymore. In a key scene in *Privilege*, my middle-aged protagonist is whistled at as she plays her younger self in flashback. The scene is meant to make that aspect of heterosexual aging very apparent and jarring.

Someone I know used to work at Saint Marks Bookstore [in New York]. Over the years she watched many women come into the store in couples. It seemed to her that the older gay women seemed very happy, while the older heterosexual women seemed miserable. She might have been wrong in her sexual assessments in some cases, but it's an interesting observation.

**The lesbian club scene in New York seems very young. How does that feel to you? Do you go out much?**

Not too much. I've been to the Clit Club, and I'm the oldest person there of course. I've been going to some of the bars, which also seem pretty young. Going to the Clit Club... well, that's when Martha and I got involved, so it was a key event: I went in straight and came out gay. It was very liberating—going down to the basement, watching these pornographic lesbian tapes and the Madonna tape. I felt liberated. There's something totally ex-

hilarating about it.

**Has coming out changed your perspective on your career?**

One consequence of privilege has come home to me recently. I wouldn't have achieved a comparable success had I come out in the '60s or '70s. The fact that I was a heterosexual woman dealing with heterosexuality in my work—however troubled and embattled it was—this was the mother's milk of dominant cinema, so it was acceptable for me to handle such material. Had I declared myself a lesbian and dealt with lesbian relationships in my work, I would have been a pariah in the art world, which comprised my audience. It would have been assumed that I hated men, and we know who ran, and still runs, the art world: men and the women who love them.

The statistics on women's careers in the visual arts are still abysmal. How sexuality affects this, I don't know. It will be interesting to see how it will affect the perception of my future work. I can almost hear in my head a dismissive "Oh, she became a lesbian." I hope I'm being paranoid.

**Yet it's surprising that someone whose**

'70s, I would have been a pariah in the art world."

**work is already so central could still be risking marginalization.**

It remains to be seen exactly what I'll be risking. It's interesting how one comes out. I'm not putting it on posters or making formal announcements, but everyone I know, even if they haven't been informed by me or my lover personally, seems to know. This kind of news travels very fast via the grapevine. In my daily life it's interesting to monitor how I speak about it. I notice that I casually mention it to women much more easily than to men, at least straight men. And I notice a distinct reticence on my part in certain situations. I am tempted to use the protective covering of "It's only *my* business." This conflicts with an awareness that as long as lesbians are invisible, it's everybody's business.

I got into a hot argument with some members of my family after they responded to my announcement with "It's great you're with someone, but you don't have to call yourself a lesbian." I found myself trying to run down their homophobia, but good liberals and radicals don't want to admit to that. They objected to my lesbian self-identification on the basis of a so-called dislike of labels. But all that says is that the word is a stigma and will remain so for as long as people avoid using it.

Coming out in a cultural context is another matter. If it's apparent in your work, you don't have to go out of your way to tell people, but I find myself a lesbian before I've done any work that marks me as one. It's a very peculiar situation that I am attracting all this attention—this interview, for instance, plus invitations to festivals and panels—not primarily because of my work but because of the gender of the person I am having sex with. To be a little disingenuous about it, I feel I should register a token protest against being addressed with so much emphasis on my sexuality. I retain the right to a complex and heterogeneous identity: white, middle-aged, menopausal, lapsed-heterosexual, homosexual, and political-lesbian awoman. Independent anarchist atheist filmmaker. Ambivalent individualist.

**Whom do you see as the audience for**

**your work now that you've come out?**

That question has been asked of me also in relation to race and racism. In this area I feel a kind of mission: I am addressing white audiences. I don't think there is anything in *Privilege* that is new to people who have been oppressed on the basis of their race. I want to make white audiences squirm a little bit, the way I wanted to make my family squirm, admit to just a wee bit of homophobia.

I think I'm going to continue to address heterosexual audiences. There are still a lot of voices trailing me, challenges I am answerable to, from my heterosexual past. Voices that accuse me of settling for second best, voices that demand derisively, "Exactly what can lesbians do in bed in the absence of a penis?" From my observations of lesbian audiences, I suspect they are impatient with the idea of being affected by patriarchy. I myself can't forget it. I can't lull myself into a false sense of autonomy.

**Now that your personal life has changed, how has that changed what you're reading, seeing, and thinking about?**

I have a pile of books on my table: gay and lesbian history, older lesbians speaking, Vito Russo, Judy Grahn, Cherrie Moraga, and a lot more. A straight friend of mine came in here and said, "Oh, are you studying to be a lesbian?" It's funny but true. I haven't been around that long as a lesbian. My lover has. Martha's an unabashed militant and has a lot of history behind her. Even though she's younger than I am, she knows what it was like before from older friends of hers.

**How does being involved with Martha affect your work? Are you influenced by her intellectual and political concerns?**

She's definitely a kind of guide. Sometimes I have to laugh at the changing fashions in politically correct sexual mores: butch/femme, dildos/no dildos, etc. I think a lot of that stuff goes by the board when you get deeply involved with someone. But at the beginning it's as though all of the codes, signals, and subtexts—things that are so totally understood in hetero culture as to require no articulation—must all be

spelled out and uttered in lesbian sexual relations, often in jokes, but they must still be articulated. Nothing can be taken for granted. It's as though lesbians must constantly reinvent their social-sexual wheels.

**How has coming out affected your film practice? For instance, in *Privilege* there's a tension between a more traditional avant-garde ideal of instability of identity and what you felt was a political necessity to have a clear awareness of social boundaries around age, race, and class. It seems like there's a desire, as you work with more politically loaded materials, to be more accessible and more narrative.**

I think that's going to continue. I have an ongoing love-hate relationship to narrative, and I will continue to work that out, both through aesthetic conventions that propel narrative and through challenges to our need to be immersed in those conventions.

If the filmic illusion of identity is made unstable—by having two actors play the same part, for instance—this does not necessarily mean that social boundaries have to be made ambiguous. Challenge to verisimilitude is not antithetical to political necessity, as even so-called dominant cinema has learned. Look at the fantastical ending of *Thelma & Louise*.

**How do you see yourself in relation to the gay media community and the kinds of work being done now?**

I'm much older than most of the lesbians involved in media. I come from another background, another tradition. It's important to acknowledge that. As a filmmaker, I've always worked as a solitary artist. Although I was involved in collaborations as a choreographer in the '60s and early '70s, as a filmmaker I don't have experience with the kind of collective work many people are doing now. I think that is a big difference between my generation and the activist artists of today. They didn't grow up with this idea of art as some kind of retreat. Although my work is topically engaged, my process is solitary. However, that doesn't mean it has to be that way forever. ▼