

THE FRATERNAL FEMININE

Liz Kotz on the Five Lesbian Brothers

Bitter jealousy, glorious revenge, corrupted innocence—these are the tropes of an emerging pulp lesbian sensibility that traffics in the tawdry castoffs of '50s and '60s American pop culture. The territory of fanzines, girl bands, and a host of recent artists and writers, this self-consciously downbeat vision salvages its images from a mélange of bad plays, pop psych, and supermarket novels from Ann Bannon to Jacqueline Susann. Trashy, melodramatic, and trading on irony, its seductions collide with more familiar aims of gay cultural politics: countering the stereotype, fighting misrepresentation, pleading for understanding.

Such urges to legislate representation always bring their own repressions; during the '70s, feminist-inspired fantasies of idyllic female relationships spawned a kitschy array of painfully sentimental and precious images that playwright Holly Hughes once described as resembling "a lesbian Disneyland." Following in Hughes' footsteps, the performance group the Five Lesbian Brothers has become known for disrupting this scenario with their sly forays into black comedy and wicked pathos. Composed of Maureen Angelos, Babs Davy, Dominique Dibbell, Peg Healey, and Lisa Kron, all veterans of the East Village's WOW Cafe, the group received a Bessie award for collaborative work this fall. While the anarchic WOW has been home to a brand of pop-soaked, off-color lesbian performance for over a decade, its hallmark style is light and frothy. The Brothers, as products of a second generation of performers and a more cynical age, take the notoriously campy WOW aesthetic and push it toward its dark underside, a troubled fascination with the imagined decadence and pathology of pre-Stonewall gay culture.

This ambivalent attraction to scenes of past depravity animates their second play, *Brave Smiles* (. . . *another lesbian tragedy*), 1992. Staging a nasty parody of a half century of lesbian images, the Brothers gleefully reenact the tragic fates that inevitably befall lesbian characters in cinema, stage, and supermarket fiction. Shifting from a 1930s German "Academy for Girls" to a wartime Paris cabaret to the contemporary U.S., the narrative-eulls scenes from trashy tabloids and more-literary sources alike, referencing Lillian Hellman's play *The Children's Hour*, Jane Rule's *Last Summer at Bluefish Cove*, and the 1931 German silent-film classic *Maedchen in Uniform*. Taking these homophobic scenarios to perverse extremes, the group's breakneck scene changes and manic performances highlight the absurdity of these clichés, as each of the play's five little orphans moves from unfortunate romance to tragic end.

By allowing themselves to succumb to the kitschy appeal of these admittedly problematic artifacts, the Brothers explore the reaches of popular memory that are often repressed in more openly politicized projects. Their first venture, *Voyage to Lesbos*, 1990, was based on a forgotten tome of '50s pop psychology called *Voyage from Lesbos*, which recounted the failed "cure" of an unsuspecting insomniac's lesbian desires. Quickly dispensing with any semblance of a plot, the ever-changing production careened through a retro-fashion nightmare complete with go-go boots, leather cigarette cases, and girls chasing pills across the linoleum.

"Taking on femme and making it dark," in the words of poet and performer Eileen Myles, the play's peculiar logic pursued the strange affinity between pulp sociology and *Valley of the Dolls* fiction, both genres partaking in a decidedly low-brow brand of gay representation that unashamedly indulged mass-market voyeurism in the perverse and exotic.

This relentless parody of femininity is more often associated with drag queens than with lesbians. And clearly the Brothers have gleaned a lot, not only from the WOW scene but from drag performers like Charles Ludlam and the Ridiculous Theater company. But the Brothers' mix of sincerity and sarcasm invites a more personal, and more precarious, sense of vulnerability and identification. If these plays hit home emotionally, and they do, it's because they dig underneath a jaded NYC hipness to address the very real desires bound up in such stock figures and tacky materials—recognizing that for themselves, and much of their audience, such materials may once have been all that they had on which to model their own lesbian desires.

Yet this work does more than stylishly take on the dystopic, the fucked-up, and the unhappy as the repressed tropes in a queer culture often forced into rituals of self-affirmation that motivate both "gay pride" marches and campaigns for "positive images." By mining the ambivalences of popular fantasy, and delving into the treacherous appeal of an Americana that has long animated gay male artists, the Brothers, like their peers in other media, are perhaps in the process producing a kind of lesbian pop art. □

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The Five Lesbian Brothers' latest production, *The Secretaries*, appears at wow this month.



The Five Lesbian Brothers, *Brave Smiles . . . another lesbian tragedy*, 1992, performance view. Left to right: Frau von Pussenheimer (Dominique Dibbell), Babe (Peg Healey), Danwell (Lisa Kron), Thalia (Maureen Angelos), Millicent (Babs Davy).