

Who's Afraid Of Kathy Wolfe?

Meet the woman who identified and nurtured lesbian cinema as we know it today.

REMEMBER WE would drive for two hours to go to San Francisco to see a [gay] movie," recalls Kathy Wolfe, about the years before she founded the world's largest gay and lesbian movie distribution company. Wolfe, who started in film production in 1982 when "hardly anyone even had a VCR," made her first video and "realized there were no video distributors yet, and this could be a really important contribution to gay and lesbian visibility if I stepped forward to take on this challenge."

Back in those dark days, pickings were slim — not only for gay filmmakers wanting to get their work out there, but for viewers as well. Many of us went to video stores and scoured the Art House or the Foreign Film section, hoping to find a film of lesbian interest. "That was one of our biggest challenges in becoming the level of distributor we are now," recalls Wolfe. "Mainstream saw our niche as porn." "What do you mean, a gay movie? You mean porn, right? And it took years to break through the buying network that went gatekeepers to us having our movies in Blockbuster or other mainstream outlets."

Wolfe Video celebrates 25 years this year, and looking back over her business decisions, Kathy Wolfe identifies a major turning point in the form of Lily Tomlin. At that time, Tomlin had several titles of her own and had been distributing them herself. She agreed to let Wolfe become her distributor. "That broke down the barriers to getting into mainstream distribution direct. No one could do without the Lily Tomlin collection. We became a real distributor then and all our titles after that were devoted to a new level."

Equally important was support from the LGBT+ community who began to purchase



Clockwise from top right: Kathy Wolfe with Lily Tomlin in 1982, landmark independent movie, *Cleare of the Moon* breakthrough mainstream film *The Kids Are Alright* (image: Focus Features)

Wolfe Video Turns 25

Happy Birthday to you! Every month Wolfe Video gives away a women's collection of DVDs worth \$1,000. Enter to win at wolfevideo.com

from the catalogue. Wolfe feels a sense of responsibility, almost as if she were an archivist of gay and lesbian cinema rather than a distributor. She has been known to not pick up film that

don't bolster the community. "My customers are not going to be happy if a film makes them look bad or feel bad," says Wolfe, whose support of film is instrumental to their success. She

has created a distribution channel for lesbian-produced films, thereby creating a market for it, and thus an independent film genre. But Wolfe is too modest to take credit for all that, rather attributing the growth in lesbian moviemaking to "the ability to take digital movies that look just like film for a fraction of the cost."

lesbian film is, "For me it's not one movie. We have hundreds of movies on our label now and each one has its own story. Some of them I remember fondly because they were so controversial and people hated or loved them; other films were important because they featured icons of the lesbian genre, they had certain stars or storylines that resonated."

For Wolfe, the most controversial lesbian movie was *Cleare of the Moon*. "This was a very interesting experience for me as a new film distributor, to really get a sense of the depth and breadth of the lesbian market. It was a very big learning experience for me to understand that if I was to take on this distribution I really needed to pay attention to really representing a lot of different opinions, and we've tried to do that, even when films are small and we don't think we're even going to get our money back; if it happens

to represent a certain race or cultural aspect or something foreign that we've never seen before, we'll put it out. We can only hope that our lesbian audience appreciates it."

Because of Wolfe's sense of duty to these many voices she only very reluctantly reveals that a personal favorite film of hers is *Bound*,

but at the end of the day she speaks of the films on her label as though they were her children. And yet she has her eye firmly on economics, too. "I have to think about who would actually go to the store and buy this movie. That becomes an important element of what we can advance filmmakers and create our budgets around. If there's anything I'd like to communicate to your readers, it's that really, the future of lesbian cinema is in their hands. If there's anyone that's inclined to watch pirated movies or make and distribute illegal copies — that all serves to drive a stake in the heart of lesbian filmmakers. We need to understand, as a group, that we need to support our artists and if we don't we're not going to have the good movies. Don't just be gay, buy gay."

If lesbian cinema goes more mainstream, it's inevitable that straight actors (like Annette Bening and Julianne Moore) will be cast. "I think it's great, I do," concedes Wolfe. "I think it's great to have actual lesbians, also. There's a wonderful film called *And Then Came Lola* which has not only lesbian actors, but a lesbian crew and director. It's really gone out on a limb to put lesbians out front." In terms of the next big lesbian film, Wolfe puts forward *Eloise Chastain*. Turn to page 41 for a sneak peek.

But every lesbian film strikes another blow for representation and visibility. *Loving Annalee*, about a schoolgirl who seduces her teacher, "was another really interesting moment for me to realize that we have a huge following in the youth market; to put out a high school movie that shows a lesbian as empowered was just absolutely the right thing to do."

Times have changed since Wolfe started her company and had parents attacking her as a corruptor of morals. "It would not have been uncommon for us to get letters from parents saying, 'I don't know why you keep sending my son these movies, he's not gay. I'm going to put a restraining order on you if you keep it up.' Just a few months ago we got a father call us and he said, 'My son really loved that surf movie that you have. Thank you for being such a positive resource for him. I'm wondering if I could get a poster for his room.'"

"If you could read the love letters that we get, people telling us they felt so isolated and alone before they found the access to lesbian and gay movies... That's what keeps us going." ♦



There are more good movies being made and we have lesbian and gay movies that are breaking into mainstream like *Brooklyn Museum* and *The Kids Are Alright*. These are huge movies playing all over the country."

For a woman with around 500 DVDs in her private collection, who lives and breathes film (she receives around ten submissions a week) she won't be easily drawn on what her favorite