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THE LESBIAN MAGAZINE

Lea DeLaria

Comedian On Top

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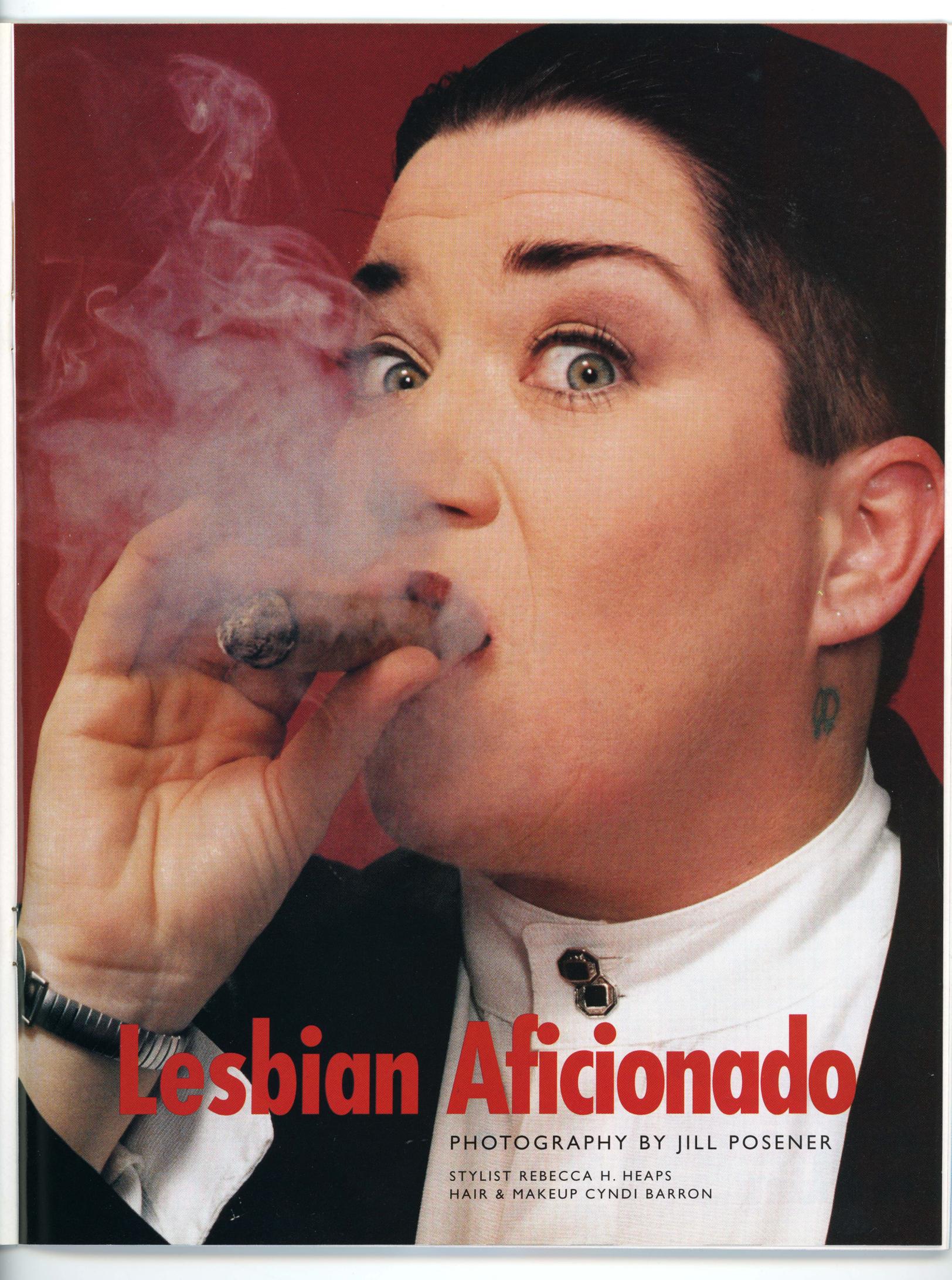
BY KATIE SANBORN BROWN

Downstairs in the bowels of the Great American Music Hall in San Francisco, Lea DeLaria is huddled at a mirror in a narrow dressing room. Alone in the rather gloomy room, she's applying her own make-up and appears eerily calm. There are no antics, no shouting, no profanities, no bouncing off the walls. Instead, she's lamenting the loss of her favorite Mac lipstick, which she left behind at a photo shoot the day before. She applies her eyeliner with precision, outlines her thin lips with a slightly pinkish tone that she says will at least "let people know I have lips," and dabs to correct her pancake make-up.

The band is hanging out in the next room; a couple of empty Henry Weinhard bottles are on the table. DeLaria wanders in wearing the front half of a red dress, which cracks up the band. Her piano player helps her tighten the Velcro fasteners on her opening costume. Pretty soon the band is gasping for air as DeLaria turns around to reveal the back-half of her costume: red boxer shorts and a holey, white T-shirt that proclaims, "can eat my dyke ass."

Upstairs in the ornate music hall crowded with cocktail tables populated with San Francisco dykes and gay boys, the MC announces, "*And now, strong enough for a man, but made for a woman . . . Miss Lea DeLaria!*" For the next ninety minutes the crowd is treated to DeLaria's classic mix of raunchy, biting political and sexual comedy and spectacular, inspired jazz singing — from torchlight standards, to be-bop scat, to blues. The crowd loves her, shrieking at her obscenities and swooning at her incredibly sexy, mellifluous and powerful singing voice.

Lea DeLaria



Lesbian Aficionado

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JILL POSENER

STYLIST REBECCA H. HEAPS
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deLaria's brand of comedy is rude and obnoxious. She got herself in trouble at the March on Washington in 1993 with her comment suggesting Hillary Clinton as an appealing sexual partner. She makes the mainstream gay movement leaders uncomfortable. And that's exactly what she is trying to do. Her new show is called "I Am Not a Role Model." And the response to the Hillary comment was part of the inspiration.

"There's a lot of ways to analyze why I got a lot of flak for that," says DeLaria during a telephone interview from her home in Los Angeles. "I think it really came down to a sense of internalized homophobia that we feel within our community. It comes from the mainstreaming element of our community, i.e., the people who want to make us palatable to the mainstream, so that we're supposed to behave in a certain way. See, we have to pretend to be straight. We have to act like them in order for us to become accepted by them. I don't go for that."

Public reaction to her comment was also influenced by sexism, she says. "A lot of it is lesbophobia. I think if a gay man had made a remark like that, I don't think anybody would have said anything about it," DeLaria explains. "Gay men are allowed to be a lot more outrageous than lesbians, because lesbians are women and women have to keep within this box of this normal way a woman is supposed to behave. And ladies don't spit and holler. Polite ladies don't say the 'F' word, much less in reference to the First Lady. And the fascist feminist element got very unnerved about that. I objectified the First Lady. And I just want to say to them that they'd look a lot prettier if they just wore a little make-up."

With that, DeLaria cracks herself up — moving seamlessly from the realm of serious political commentary on the movement to getting in a dig at the stodgy elements of the feminist movement.

DeLaria isn't out to make the gay community safe for Middle America. But she is out to make changes. She takes very seriously the role a comic plays in a political revolution: "As a commentator, I can't have my hands tied with role-model status. Because if you are indeed a role model, you have to be wary of what it is you say and what you think and what you feel — because you're trying to project a positive image. I'm trying to effect a change."

"I don't think it changes anything to drag people kicking and screaming OUT of the closet."



She's also concerned

with making us laugh, which she does almost effortlessly. During her show at the Great American Music Hall, she comments that veterinarians are now prescribing Prozac for dogs — a need DeLaria finds outrageous. “If you can lick your own balls and still be depressed, there’s no hope for you,” she declares. The boys in the crowd whoop in delight.

Then there’s DeLaria’s famous sex drive. She’s in her thirties, her sexual peak: “I’ve got a vagina from the *Little Shop of Horrors*: It’s going, ‘Feed me, feed me, feed me!’” More uproarious laughter.

And, of course, she takes on the politicians past and present. She rips off the Velcro-ed red dress to reveal a T-shirt that says “Jesse Helms.” Ah, so that’s who “can eat my dyke ass.” She wants to know: “When is he gonna die? He’s had prostate cancer forever. It’s taking too long — kick already! I can’t think of anybody’s dick I’d rather have fall off than Jesse Helms’s!”

And Ronald Reagan: “Isn’t it ironic that the man who said that ketchup was a vegetable is now a vegetable himself?” The audience tentatively laughs. “What?” screams DeLaria. “Sympathy for Ronald Reagan? I can’t believe it. Ronald Reagan is responsible for the deaths of more of my friends than anyone else! Sympathy for Ronald Reagan? I dance on his grave. I spit in his eye! I fist his wife!” The crowd laughs and hoots, but they’re still not sure of themselves.

Later in the evening DeLaria sings a beautiful rendition of “Lady Be Good to Me.” Her face is expressive, her hands rise and fall gracefully to match the pitch of the notes. The crowd is clearly moved by her musicianship and the glorious sound. She finishes the song, the crowd applauds sincerely and DeLaria grins and says, “OK, who wants to fuck me now?” And we’re back to the raunch.

Back during our interview, the subject of sex comes up — *quelle surprise!* But she doesn’t want to talk about her love life. Yes, there’s someone in her life, but DeLaria is cagey about who that person is. “I have someone who is very private in my life, and I’d like to keep it that way. I feel like I give my all in front of the camera; when I’m onstage I give my all. I think that is where my obligation to fans ends.” Gosh, that reply sounds a lot like the replies we get from closeted Hollywood stars. So, is DeLaria a closet heterosexual?

“It’s true. I’ve been living with Harvey

Feinstein,” she confesses. “Actually, it’s [gay comic] Scott Thompson. I forgot. I left Harvey for Scott Thompson, because he has the Thompson totem, as we all like to say. Scott is the most hung man in Hollywood! Put that in your lesbian publication!” She cracks up.

The absurdities of sex itself also have DeLaria’s attention these days. How about dildos in the shape of anything but male anatomy?

“There’s a group that wants to strap on a dildo, but they have trouble with it because dildos look like penises. So what they do is, they get a dildo in the shape of a beaver, with a tongue that moves,” she declares. “Always in that fetching lavender color. So check this out” — she’s laughing hard now — “here is a person who feels funny about strapping on a dick, but they’re going to strap on Charlie the Tuna, and that’s going to make them feel oh-so-much-more sexy and comfortable?”

The Nineties concept of men as sensitive creatures is another DeLaria target. “This idea that men are caring and nurturing and from Seattle — that’s why I read in the *New York Times* about a guy who got his penis stuck in a pool filter? *In an pool filter!* Because he was swimming by looking for an emotionally secure relationship?”

But women don’t escape her sarcasm either. “Women will [say] we are better because we don’t put our vagina in anything that comes along! Yeah, as a matter of fact, you lock up your vagina in a chastity belt and throw away the key. You’ve forgotten what it’s for! So my job, in a lot of ways, is to put the sex back in homosexuality!”

Hey! Lesbians have sex. Just look at the growth of lesbian sex clubs, right?

“Let me tell you this about that,” DeLaria begins, just getting warmed up. “I went to your San Francisco sex club. I’m watching a scene. I’m watching a girl get it from her daddy, right? She’s tied up. I’m in the back of a big group. This girl is being whipped. She looks up, points at me and says, ‘Hey! Aren’t you Lea DeLaria?’”

She is Lea DeLaria, and her career is expanding from stand-up to television and the silver screen. She may be making leaders uneasy, but she’s making Hollywood laugh. DeLaria has recurring roles on ABC’s *Matlock* and NBC’s *The John Larroquette Show*; she was a guest star in the lesbian wedding episode of *Friends* and on a Saturday morning kiddie show called *Saved by the Bell*.

Her film credits are sparse but growing. In May she heads for New York to film a scene in a new film called *First Wives*, star-

ring Goldie Hawn and Bette Midler. “I inappropriately hit on Goldie in a lesbian bar. I’m just a real pig. And Bette Midler tells me off,” DeLaria says, clearly delighted.

She also plays a role in a new independent film from Rhino Films called *Plump Fiction*, which is a take-off of Quentin Tarantino films. Also in the film are Sandra Bernhard and Julie Brown, among others. DeLaria plays the Mr. Purple role from *Reservoir Dogs*, but in *Plump Fiction* she’s the manager of The Independent Film Cafe. “All the waiters and waitresses dress like characters from independent movies. I have a black suit on, the sunglasses. I carry a nine millimeter. I actually shoot people.”

DeLaria is one of the few out comics who are making their ways in Hollywood. Things are changing, she says, but slowly. “Discrimination is just as real as it is in any other work place,” she says. “All my peers have their own sitcoms — people who were getting famous at the same time I was getting famous. People who were making their *Arsenio Hall* appearances at the same time I was. One of the heads of the networks said to *Time* magazine, ‘Yeah, she’s great, but what are we supposed to do, put her in a sitcom and cast her as a boy?’”

As for outing lesbian and gay stars? No, thanks. “I don’t think it changes anything to drag people kicking and screaming out of the closet,” she says. “People see that and say, ‘See how awful it is to be gay?’”

The excuse that the queer community wants to see its heroes come out is not valid. “Don’t we need to examine who our heroes are, then?” DeLaria asks. “People who remain in the closet and then come out [when they’re famous] are not my heroes. My heroes are Urvashi Vaid, Harvey Milk, Kate Clinton — people who have made that choice [to be out from the beginning].”

Back downstairs, outside her dressing room of the Great American Music Hall, the very much out, loud and proud DeLaria is conferring briefly with her publicist, the band and the MC who will introduce her. She scribbles a short script for the MC on a scrap of borrowed paper. They laugh and head down a dark hallway for the stage door stairs. She is left alone again, back in her dressing room. All is silent until the sounds of a singer warming up float down the hallway. In a moment the MC will say, “*And now, strong enough for a man, but made for a woman . . . Miss Lea DeLaria!*” ■

