

A home of our own

By The Ad Hoc Committee to Support the Lesbian Herstory Archives

Eighteen years ago, lesbian history was in the closet. Today we are trying to move it out of Joan Nestle's apartment. On Sunday April 14, 1991 an ad hoc committee of local lesbians hosted a benefit for the Lesbian Herstory Archives Building Fund. "Preserving Our Past, Building Our Future" netted over \$1600 which will move the Archives that much closer to its dream of purchasing its own building, thereby vacating Joan Nestle's apartment where it was born and has grown to overflowing during the past 18 years.

After visiting the Archives last summer, members of the Red Shades Affinity Group were inspired to facilitate a Boston-based contribution to the archive's new home while giving Boston lesbians and gay men a taste of what the Archives is really about. Joined by the ingenuity and hard work of additional local lesbian activists, the Ad Hoc Committee to Support the Lesbian Herstory Archives brought to Boston's C. Walsh Theatre three women who are the quintessential finest of lesbian herstory.

Joan Nestle, co-founder of the LHA, writer, editor, teacher, activist, and legend in her own time began the afternoon program by reading an epic "Letter from a Stone Butch to her '50s Femme." The letter, sent anonymously to the Archives, recalls with humor, longing irony and excruciating pain, a long-gone lesbian love affair: the intuition of the two women's first meeting in the factory followed by their steamy recognition on their own bar turf; the incessant bar raids that sent the butch and femme dykes scrambling for gay male queen and butch dance partners in order to look respectable to the cops; the sadistic police beatings of the butch in front of her femme lover, and the femme's careful, adoring attendance to her butch's wounded flesh and soul; the lonely, angry nights spent in jails with no charges ever filed; the three articles of women's clothing butches were

required by law to wear.

The letter illustrates the degree to which being a lesbian in the '50s (even simply going to a bar) was a high-risk activity involving daily acts of resistance and bravery. It also points out the degree to which those forms of resistance have escaped recognition by many, more overtly political, modern-day lesbians.

The audience's silent rapt attention was broken only once during the reading when Nestle confided that she realized she was about to make love to the podium as the femme straightened her lover-to-be's tie, smoothed her slicked back hair and led her out onto the dance floor. "I can't send this letter to you because I have no idea where you are," the butch concludes. "So instead I'm sending it to a place where they keep women's memories safe."

Michelle Parkerson, a Black lesbian poet, teacher, activist, and filmmaker introduced her film, *Storme: Lady of the Jewel Box*. For 14 years the Revue's musical director, master of ceremonies, ringleader and male impersonator extraordinaire was Ms. Storme DeLarriere. Parkerson created her 20-minute film to feature Storme.

Parkerson brilliantly described her inspiration by the life and times of the famed Jewel Box Revue, a glorious troop of 20 Black, Hispanic, white and Native American female impersonators. They brought their extraordinary music, costumes, comedy and mime to Black, white, gay and straight audiences throughout the country during the racially segregated 1940s through the 1960s.

One experience Parkerson recalled from the process of researching the film was the irritation of an older Black librarian who disdained her interest in what he considered the worst and most shameful of Black culture.

By the end of the film the audience was on their feet as Storme, now 70 years old and as handsome, gutsy and charming as ever, came out on stage. Flanked by Nestle, Parkerson, and emcees Jenifer Firestone and Becky

Johnson, Storme was like a queen holding court, entertaining questions from the audience about her life and career. She told stories about flirtatious straight women who mistook her for a man and ignorant sheriffs who presumed she was white as well as male. She never passed, though, she said. "I always knew exactly who I was. It was the other folks who made the mistake."

The panel discussion was followed by a reception at the First African Meeting house, adorned by pieces from a larger historical photographic exhibition about African American lesbians.

We who organized this event are proud of the historical enlightenment and appreciation it brought to Boston and of the financial contribution Boston made to the Archives. We feel passionately about the inestimable value the Lesbian Herstory Archives holds for our lesbian and gay community. The Archives preserves, protects and shares with over 1000 visitors per year a rich variety of testimony to lesbian experience, culture and sentiment that mainstream institutions and even some of our own families would throw in the trash.

Building institutions that nurture and bear witness to our struggles is as important as the struggles themselves. Next time you are in New York don't just go to the Village. Check out the Archives. Consider sending materials (letters, diaries, photos, tapes, etc.) The Archives is interested in the documentation of *all* lesbian lives, not just the famous lesbian lives. Raise and/or contribute any amount of money toward the purchase of a permanent home for this vital resource. Tax deductible contributions can be sent to: The Lesbian Herstory Educational Foundation, Inc., P.O. Box 1258, New York, NY, 10116. (212) 874-7232.

Beth Enson, Jenifer Firestone, Becky Johnson, Louise Johnson, Gerry Thomas, and Jan Wilhoit are all part of the Ad Hoc Committee to Support the Lesbian Herstory Archives.