

A NOT SO ITTY BITTY FILM

A gang of lesbian superstars team up for the next big thing: POWER UP's *Itty Bitty Titty Committee*.

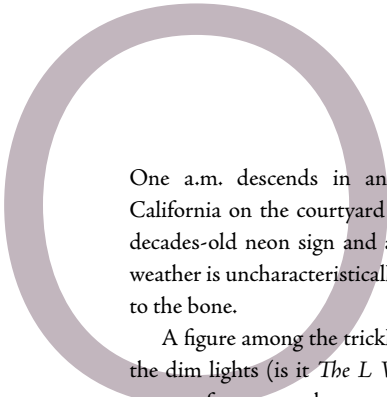


By Candace Moore • Photography by Elisa Shebaro



Stylist: Faranak DaCosta
Makeup artist: Jon Hennessey
Hair stylist: Shannon Hoover

From left: Jamie Babbit, Carly Pope and Daniela Sea
Jamie is wearing an Alexander McQueen cardigan from Holt
Renfrew, and pants by Mandula. Carly is wearing Alexander
Wang, skinny jeans by Paige both from Holt Renfrew, and
Miss Sixty ankle boots. Daniela is wearing a Japanese
hand-died T-shirt by Mandula, pants and trainers her own.



One a.m. descends in an industrial stretch of Southern California on the courtyard of a seedy motel, the type with a decades-old neon sign and a Bates Hotel-ish anonymity. The weather is uncharacteristically freezing, a cold that goes straight to the bone.

A figure among the trickling-down mist and moths circling the dim lights (is it *The L Word*'s Daniela Sea?) juggles three oranges from a snack cart with a kind of Zen aplomb. Off to the side, crew members huddle around a heat source; cords and a trail of film equipment lead to a curtained-off hotel room. Through headphones, I hear warm sounds from inside that contrast with the outside scene, small moans and the intimate mouth-on-flesh sounds of two women beginning to negotiate sex. A third woman's voice delicately interrupts to breach questions of position, how the actors will look on camera and how they feel in the scene.

No, this is not the set of *The L Word*. I haven't overheard any mid-bliss references to Shane or Bette. The film being shot late into the night, *Itty Bitty Titty Committee*, is the first feature-film release from POWER UP, and it boasts a bevy of female talents and lesbian icons. Likely to be the next big queer thing, it's helmed by Jamie Babbit, director of 1999's super-cute and sarcastic teen flick *But I'm a Cheerleader*.

Centering on a feminist group that stages radical actions and the love affairs that ensue while they feverishly protest misogyny guerilla style, *Itty Bitty* offers us riot-grrl redux, restyled for the new millennium.

"I've been wanting to make this movie since 2000, about

that we had at college, were really platforms for lesbians to meet other lesbians and hit on them. That's where the comedy came into play."

Guinevere Turner (*Go Fish*, *The L Word*) concurs, "I think there's a process we have to go through to be extreme in order to find out what really matters. I was in ACT UP and Queer Nation and at that same age was very much in the streets, chanting 'We're here, we're queer,' and participating in kiss-ins. The things we would do in the name of politics! Like pose naked for T-shirts and all kinds of things. [This film] is definitely making fun of those kinds of politics, but I think that it's also pointing to being political, what that means and what the subtleties of that are."

Babbit's new coming-of-age comedy boasts a great ensemble cast that includes Sea, Turner, model Jenny Shimizu, Melanie Mayron (*thirtysomething*), Carly Pope (*Popular*, *Dirt*), Nicole Vicious (*Half Nelson*, *Last Days*), professional skateboarder Lauren Mollica, Melonie Diaz (*Raising Victor Vargas*), and Deak Evgenikos (*Hung*, *Hummer*). Face it, it's been a while since we've seen so many ladies starring in one lesbian-themed film. Not since 1994's *Go Fish*, perhaps, has there been an amusing, refreshing portrayal of queer-female community on the bigger, rather than the smaller, screen. Lately cable TV seems leaps and bound ahead of independent filmmaking in terms of depicting our lives in edgy and honest ways. Chalk it up to lackluster funding and support for LGBTQ material in an industry focused on box office returns. POWER UP, the only nonprofit, gay women's film production company and educational organization, seeks to correct some of that discrepancy, by putting money and concerted grrl power behind this queer, feminist vision, producing the organization's first feature-length film.

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a girl that becomes political," Babbit says of *Itty Bitty*. "There's this universal experience where girls come into feminism and either reject it or get excited about it that usually happens in the early 20s. [The main character] Anna is a 'Dinah Shore weekend' lesbian who just likes to party and go to GirlBar, because I think it's important to show that just because you're a lesbian doesn't mean that you know one single thing about feminism. She works at a McJob as a receptionist in a plastic surgery office and meets a very political Smith graduate named Sadie, who has this micro-action feminist group."

Babbit explains that she wanted to capture the radical turn common especially to dykes new to adulthood, without losing a sense of humor in the film. So she played up the "hooking up" that often happens alongside the consciousness raising: "I wanted to explore the idea that a lot of the political groups that people became a part of, like the 'Take Back the Night' rallies

Turner, who cameos as TV personality Marcy Malone in the movie, picked *Itty Bitty Titty Committee*'s title, after the sing-songy name "we called girls who had no tits in seventh grade." The message of the film's radical girl group, Clits in Action, a.k.a. the CIA, however—and an underlying message of the film itself—is to appreciate all types of women's bodies. Anna becomes inspired to join the girl gang after the CIA tags the windows of the plastic surgery clinic where she works. Nicole Vicious (who plays Sadie, leader of the gang) described executing the CIA's mixed-media methods: "The CIA goes out and defaces property and takes action through art. We'd go to film in



Daniela in a T-shirt by
Kenzo and some hot
jeans by J. Lindeberg.



Jamie in her own T-shirt, jacket by Olmar and Mirta, pants by Mandula and necklace by Shereen Derouseau.



places like the city mall, so we'd literally be running around and doing it the way they would. We were carrying these papier-mâché huge statues under garbage bags and running into stores and changing the whole mannequin display. Changing these mannequins in bikinis to all different shapes and sizes of women, that was fun!" The gang's home base and crash pad is a downtown L.A. loft where the CIA's resident artist, Meat (Deak Evgenikos), works and rooms with comrades Shulamith (Carly Pope) and Aggie (Lauren Mollica). Evgenikos describes Meat as fearless. "We all are fear based, and that kind of goes out the window with Meat. She's based on her passion, not only as an artist but in the way that she loves. Meat is having this coming of age in learning that love is very fluid."

Just as it offers assorted characters to relate to, *Itty Bitty* offers differing portrayals of lesbian love and sex and a sincere look at relationships motivated and shaped by the perceptions (and sometimes hangups) of each individual involved. The film also depicts intergenerational love. While age differences between coupled women are not a topic often covered in most queer films, Babbit says that she "wanted to explore that because I think it is a very typical lesbian thing. We've all heard the stories about Rita Mae Brown and all these amazing women in our community, and a lot of them do date younger women."

Melanie Mayron, who portrayed a woman with a younger boyfriend in *thirtysomething*, again gets to play the hot older woman, a feminist figurehead named Courtney. Says Mayron of Courtney, "Like Patricia Ireland, the head of NOW, she's the head of a feminist organization that's active in Washington and very by the book, working the political arena the way it has to be worked. She's got a younger girlfriend, Sadie, who's involved in a radical, younger group, and she's critical of how her girlfriend is doing things." Drama also hinges around Sadie's conflicting feelings of security with Courtney and her new interest in Anna. "Courtney was a guest lecturer at Sadie's school," Vicius says. "She really looked up to her. Sadie's vulnerable underneath that strong façade; she's still trying to find her way. She gets confused because she gets involved with this other girl [Anna] and yet she's still really tied to Courtney."

Itty Bitty also shows gender as a spectrum, portraying characters who are feminine, masculine, in between and transitioning from female to male. Daniela Sea plays Calvin, a bomb specialist who

recently returned from Iraq, whom the CIA gals pick up and recruit while she's hitchhiking. Sea describes her character as a tough girl who is "pretty boyish, but I don't think Calvin intellectualizes like I am genderqueer. Maybe she'd go down that road."

Skater Lauren Mollica takes on her first film role as Aggie, a transitioning FTM whom she describes as "super mellow."

"[The CIA is] hardcore, and none of it's his idea, but he's going with it. They're cool, and he wants to roll with them."

The CIA try to "raise the consciousness of the general public about how the public space is dominated by heterocentric imagery and male images of women," Babbit explains, "how all these images around us at all times are making us feel like shit about ourselves." She believes the film's lightheartedness and grungy, Super 8 aesthetic will keep things more comedic and upbeat, rather than didactic, in the spirit of queer and feminist punk rock. "If you look to bands like Le Tigre, they're able to be really funny and [play] dance music but [appear] hardcore feminist.

community seem to characterize *Itty Bitty*, both on screen and behind the scenes, especially given that the cast and crew were primarily women. POWER UP's mentorship program also provided support for talents new in the film industry to try on important roles in the making of the film. The script was written by Tina Mabry and Abigail Shafran, whom producers Andrea Sperling, Lisa Thrasher and Stacy Codikow found by posting ads at local universities looking for writing talent. As Babbit recalls, "We got a bunch of writers who were interested and weeded it down from the meetings and sample scripts they gave us. We gave them the treatment for *Itty Bitty*, had them each write three scenes, and picked two writers based on those

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The tone of their music is the tone of this film. The other genesis for the movie was my love of a record label called Kill Rock Stars [of Bikini Kill and Sleater-Kinney fame]. I wanted to make a movie where I could use all of that music."

Itty Bitty's look is as much an homage to underground ideals as its sound is. While Babbit says the aesthetic of *But I'm a Cheerleader* was modeled after the pinks of Barbie's Dream House, this film draws its inspiration from a grittier source, Lizzie Borden's classic feminist film *Born in Flames*.

Sea, too, talks of her appreciation for the subversive, spontaneous feel of on-location shooting. "This one day we were shooting on Super 8, so we were loaded into this big van and driving around locations in L.A. We went to the Greyhound station and got kicked out because we didn't have a license. It was a stripped-down crew and felt very DIY."

Both a do-it-yourself ethos and a goal of cultivating female

scenes." Fresh voices were complemented by cast and crew members at various levels of experience and responsibility who arranged their schedules and traveled into L.A. to work on a film they could stand behind. Evgenikos remembers that "we had a lot of people fly in from out of state, who put themselves up to do the film and that reinforced what I was doing every day, the impact that I could make on other people's lives because they felt impacted by it."

Itty Bitty Titty Committee, which won Best Narrative Feature Jury Award at the South by Southwest film festival (its American premiere) and Best Lesbian Feature Film Jury Award at the Q Cinema Film Festival, will be released theatrically in L.A. and N.Y. this fall. The flick is a rare breed indeed, a film with queer-female content that maintains its sense of humor while taking community-building politics to heart in its mode of production. ■



Outtakes from *Itty* (left and center), full crew (right)