

# the village VOICE

## What fresh L is this? A new season turns down the titillation and dials up the nuance

The first few seasons of *The L Word* blatantly courted a broad audience, baiting potential male viewers with so much femme-on-femme sex, it was enough to cause nipple fatigue. Last year, an actual male Peeping Tom wormed his way into the plotline. A filmmaker specializing in *Girls Gone Wild*-style exploitation videos, he concealed spycams around the home of two lesbian characters. It was both an auto-critique of the way the series pandered to hetero voyeurism and a knowing wink to the viewer. But the third season unfolding on Showtime suggests that *The L Word*'s producers have plucked up enough courage to turn down the titillation factor several notches. Men may not be watching in huge numbers, but both gay and straight women are devouring its nuanced portraits of modern female friendship, work, and romance that are nowhere else to be found on TV at the moment. I was stunned by the number of female friends who flipped out when they heard I was in possession of advance tapes—a reaction I've never had with any other show.

*The L Word* now exudes a calm radiance. It's confident enough to feature more characters who actually look like contemporary lesbian archetypes and it even ventures to prick the dreamy sun-dappled bubble in which its self-absorbed and affluent creations exist, more or less insulated from the outside world. These new challenges come from within the dyke community and from without. On one hand, there's Moira (Daniela Sea), who looks like an escapee from *The Outsiders*—a gangly teen boy-girl with long, limp hair and a uniform of jeans and flannel shirt who pees standing up. She's Jenny's new girlfriend, brought to L.A. from the Midwest, where Jenny retreated after last season's nervous breakdown. The cosmopolitan ladies of *The L Word* don't exactly welcome sweet, unsophisticated

## LADIES WHO MUNCH

BY JOY PRESS



Photograph by Liane Hentscher/Showtime

Moira, and at a fancy dinner she retaliates with a priceless anecdote about the viciousness of female lobsters. Really, she does.

Other critiques come from the outside world: There's the NEA and Congress, which damns Bette's latest art exhibition as "unpatriotic filth," and closer to home, a blatantly heterosexist social worker (played by Cynthia Stevenson in a great cranky cameo) who may or may not approve Bette's application to adopt Tina's baby. As

Mia Kirschner, Alan Cumming, and Daniela Sea

the wheelchair-bound social worker rolls around Bette and Tina's chic bungalow, she sharply skewers the couple's trendy mothering pretensions like attachment parenting ("Uh... you have a six-month-old baby and you don't have a crib?" she chortles) and the lack of any baby-proofing or brightly colored toys (which apparently offend Bette's aesthetic sensibilities). But the thing that most bothers the bureaucrat is the lack of a man in their daughter's life. "Will she ever rub her cheek up against a scratchy, unshaven face... or play with the curly hairs on his chest or his back?" the woman says, hilariously trapped in her own reverie.

She's right that men now exist in *The L Word* as part of the scenery. The few that remain are either gay, like Billie, the deliriously decadent manager of Kit's club (marvelously rendered by new cast member Alan Cumming), or soft-edged metrosexuals like Angus the "manny" (male nanny), hired by Bette and Tina at least in part to mollify their social worker. The male gender has faded in prominence this season now that scripts focus less on the characters' nonlove lives (jobs, families) and more exclusively on affairs of the heart and loins—an unfortunate reduction of lesbian life to sex and relationships.

Whatever the reason, characters' careers seem to be taking a backseat. Alice is still a riveting figure (Leisha Hailey has some of the best, loopiest comic timing on TV), but she's so flaked-out by her recent breakup with Dana that she's on the verge of losing her radio job. Tennis star Dana has health problems, Shane the hairdresser is rarely seen, clasping clippers, and Kit seems

to have handed most of her duties at the café over to Alan Cumming. It's a shame, because the most interesting plotline this season involves the shifting power dynamics between Tina and Bette. Fired from her top position at an L.A. contemporary-art museum, Bette now deals with humiliations like having her spending habits questioned by Tina. Formerly submissive and bovine, Tina has become the family breadwinner, working as an exec at a new movie studio run by her former lover, rich bitch Helena Peabody, and she clearly enjoys the turn-about, lording it over the crestfallen Bette at every opportunity.

Power and privilege also play out in the friction between Moira and the gang. Out of place in their *Sex and the City* world of chic clubs and designer yoga, Moira's old-skool butch manner and working-class toughness both amuse and disturb them. Only Bette even tries to sympathize: "She comes from

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a place where you have to define yourself as either-or." Clearly our luscious libertines feel this sort of identity politics is behind them; Moira figures as some sort of unwelcome flashback to a prehistoric past of dyke struggle, whereas they can live with a more fluid sense of gender. Yet Moira herself is quickly plunged into L.A.'s slipstream of self-reinvention, encouraged to explore her transgender fantasies. *The L Word* remains a kind of impossible dreamspace, our latest take on the idea of California as the utopian state, the end zone of American possibility. As one artwork in Bette's dissident exhibition proclaims, "Eating pussy is the ultimate patriot act."

TV

VOICE CHOICES JANUARY 18–24, 2006