

## Man, Woman, Woman

'Intimate Chaos' features a male character who has trouble accepting that two women prefer each other to him.

Wednesday, November 7  
By Anthony Stockert

Cheril N. Clarke can often spot a movie or television show featuring lesbian characters that has been written by a straight male without reading the credits. Too often, portrayals of gay women reflect male fantasies and flamboyant gay men exist for humor without delving into what their actual lives are like.

"What about life, what about us going to work and paying taxes and raising our kids, because we're really not that different," Ms. Clarke says during a telephone interview. "The only thing that's different is who we live in love with, everything else in life is the same. We have kids who go to daycare and we go to work like everyone else."

As a novelist and new playwright, Ms. Clarke aims to write accurate portrayals of gay women, particularly African-American gay women. She has written four novels and has adapted 2003's *Intimate Chaos* for the stage. The play will premiere at the Academy Theatre in Bordentown for a two-weekend run starting Nov. 9.

Obviously, Ms. Clarke is aiming to attract gay (and gay African-American) readers and audiences by taking honest looks at gay characters and their experiences, but she and director Stephen Stahl see a larger audience as well. *Intimate Chaos'* main character, Sadira (played by Tiffany Barnett) is feeling ignored by her partner, Jessie (Tanya Randall). Sadira soon meets and is instantly attracted to Kenya (Nicholle P. Nichols), who accidentally knocks on her door one lonely evening. At the same time, Sadira is discovering how her childhood has shaped her (she was raised in foster homes after her parents died and her twin sister was adopted).

"Even though the two lead characters are women and are in love with each other, the core of the story really has nothing to do with their sexuality," Ms. Clarke says. "It's about exploring their childhood issues of abandonment and fear and having issues with commitment and wanting to be loved. The actual story itself is something universal regardless of whatever gender, orientation or religion people may be." "It's about love and relationships, whether gay or straight," Mr. Stahl says. "It's about human beings who are always looking for something that can't be fulfilled and how you meet that challenge and bond."

Despite tackling such serious issues as childhood abandonment, *Intimate Chaos* has a lot of laughs. Many come from the character Devonte (Walter DeShields), Sadira's co-worker and best friend who has that straight male fascination with lesbians (in one scene he asks Sadira personal questions based on what he saw in an episode of *The L Word*).

"A lot of humor comes from Devonte and his fascination with the women that (Sadira is) dealing with and how two completely feminine women can completely ignore him," Ms. Clarke says. "A lot of the humor is him saying, 'What is all this going on? You have all this man here and you're fighting over each other.'"

The writer and director met online when Ms. Clarke, the producer, was seeking a director. Mr. Stahl, whose credits include a London production of *Lady Day*, for which he was nominated for an *Oliver Award*, was drawn to the play because it was funny and well written, and because he believes there's a market for lesbian- and African American-themed theater.

"I looked at it as a female piece for gay women," Mr. Stahl says. "This is something that hasn't been done and it truly shows what a relationship is like."

"When we met in person, it was an instant click, we really liked each other and worked well together," Ms. Clarke says. "I like what he's done with my work. We've made changes, of course, since the first draft and over the last six weeks of rehearsals things have been changed, but I love the direction that it's gone in. He's tried to bring out a bit more humor and I think he was successful in that and that's going to make it stronger and more entertaining."

Ms. Clarke hadn't intended on writing a play, but when readers of the novel asked if it would be adapted to a film or play, she decided to give it a try. Changes had to be made — the action of the novel and the play's first draft featured three settings, an apartment, a nightclub and a subway station. Rewrites led to all the action taking place in Sadira's apartment.

With the Academy, one of the few smaller theaters close to her Mount Laurel home, Ms. Clarke believes she's found the perfect venue to premiere her play.

"I just liked the set-up on the inside, it's pretty intimate and cozy in there," she says. "It's a little hidden treasure."

Mr. Stahl also is happy with the theater, although he had doubts when he first saw the outside, which is located in a parking lot next to Mastros restaurant.

"I looked at the building and said, 'She's gotta be kidding me. This is an office complex,'" he says. That impression changed when he saw the inside.

"Central Jersey should discover this place because it's a gem of a theater," he says.

As much as they like their Bordentown spot, they're expecting to see *Intimate Chaos* performed on stages in bigger cities. Mr. Stahl envisions it being performed in various cities (Baltimore, Washington, D.C. and Atlanta) for three- to four-week runs and says a producer just might be interested in doing that.

*Intimate Chaos* will be performed at the Academy Theatre, 146 Route 130, Bordentown, Nov. 9-17. Performances: Fri-Sat 8 p.m., Sun. 3 p.m. Tickets cost \$25, \$15 students; (609) 870-1058; [www.intimatechaostheplay.com](http://www.intimatechaostheplay.com)

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