

# But I'm a Cheerleader

USA | 1999 | 85 minutes

## Credits

<b>Director</b>	Jamie Babbit
<b>Screenplay</b>	Brian Wayne Peterson Jamie Babbit (story)
<b>Photography</b>	Jules Labarthe
<b>Music</b>	Pat Irwin

## Cast

<b>Megan</b>	Natasha Lyonne
<b>Graham</b>	Clea DuVall
<b>Mary Brown</b>	Cathy Moriarty
<b>Hilary</b>	Melanie Lynskey
<b>Mike</b>	RuPaul Charles

## In Brief

Megan is a happy popular teenager who is on the cheerleading squad, with a jock boyfriend. So what if she is a vegetarian with a penchant for Georgia O'Keeffe bed linen and a giant poster of Melissa Etheridge in her room? Suspicious friends and family stage an intervention and send her to a deprogramming camp for gay teens.

Director Babbit, whose mother runs a halfway house for young people with drug and alcohol problems, wanted to make a comedy about rehab and 12-step programmes, but after reading an article about a man who had attended one of these camps, she decided to combine the two ideas. Unbelievably there are 200 of these camps in the United States.

In Kirby Dick's 2006 documentary *This Film is Not Yet Rated*, Babbit talked about feeling discriminated against by the MPAA (US board of censors) for making a gay film, while she received an NC-17, the strongest rating, it's contemporary American *Pie* which featured similar sexual acts but among straight teenagers, achieved a milder rating.

## Thinking Pink

review by Cynthia Fuchs, 28 July 2000

Check the fabulous pictures of Natasha Lyonne and Clea DuVall in the recent cover story for *Out* magazine. These hip young film stars appear to have it all, though not in a traditional sense. To promote their participation in *But I'm a Cheerleader*, one of the few plainly lesbian movies to have even limited mainstream distribution this year, the magazine's photo spread has them showing off new glamorous blond hairstyles and tastefully luscious sexy outfits, posing seductively while chatting openly about their straightness and whatever deals they've been cutting with Hollywood in order to make interesting movies at the same time that they're making a living. Ask anyone in the business: this is no small feat.

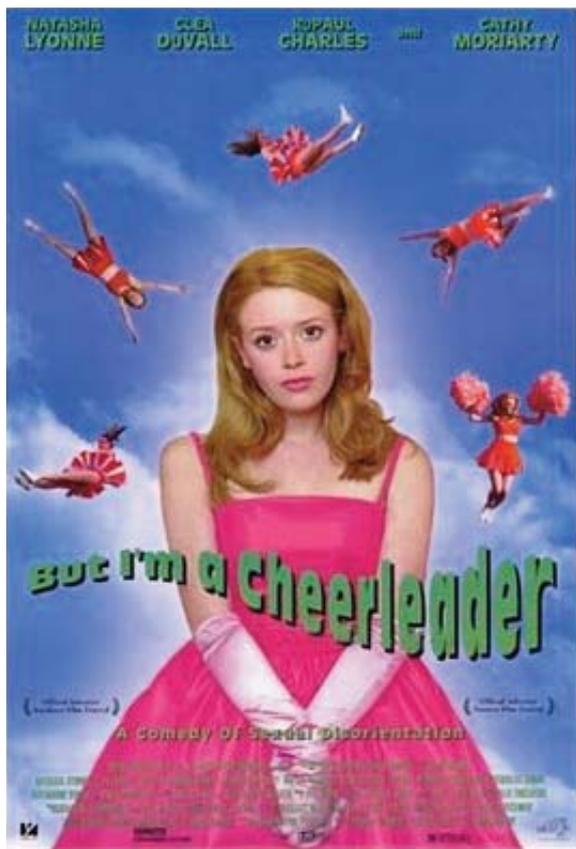


So far, the girls have enjoyed close-to-charmed careers, landing respectable-yet-attention-getting start-up roles -- Lyonne in *The Slums of Beverly Hills* and *American Pie* and DuVall in *The Faculty* and *Girl, Interrupted* -- and, happily, they're demonstrating healthy self-confidence and appropriate lack of respect for ancient industry rules for starlets, like "don't leave the house without makeup," or "don't play a lesbian." In fact, they're just fine with their girl-on-girl action in *Cheerleader*; though, according to director Jamie Babbit, she agreed to tone down the sex scene via judicious shadows and cuts, so they wouldn't have to show too much of their naked bodies and still create an erotic and emotional few moments in the midst of a lot of campy excess. But what Babbit and her crew considered toned down was apparently not so for the MPAA ratings board, which famously -- at least in indie film circles -- slapped an NC-17 on the picture for its salaciousness.

Compare *But I'm a Cheerleader* to popular R (or even PG-13) rated films featuring heterosexual teens having fairly explicit sex with each other -- and apple pies -- and it's clear that the fact that it was two girls having sex that troubled the ratings people. Truth be told, it probably didn't help matters that the movie is a broad satire of anti- and ex-gay proselytizing, or that it suggests masturbation is a fine thing, that girls not only have desires, but can also articulate and act on them without men, or that makes ruthless fun of the rigidity of straight culture all around. In fact, given ratings troubles endured by other filmmakers, including Tamara Jenkins, who made *Slums of Beverly Hills*, the anxiety can be generalized to sexualized independent-minded young girls more generally, not only baby dykes. As is illustrated in *American Pie*'s gender-sex categorizing, boys are still encouraged to engage in "risky business" and girls are still supposed to wait.

In addition, the movie features a terrific performance by DuVall and a refreshing, Citizen Ruth-like fairness in its satirical aim (the Christian Right gets theirs, but so do those folks who buy everything Rainbow -- cups, curtains, kitchen accessories -- to decorate their homes). It's a great thing, then, that *But I'm a Cheerleader* challenges such hoary thinking. However, the film -- written by Brian Wayne Peterson and based on a story by Babbit -- also makes its points in some graceless, even reductive ways, and so, viewers are left with a dilemma: do you support a film with its heart in so many of the right places even though it's not consistently excellent as art?

# But I'm a Cheerleader



Billed -- rather clumsily -- by Lions Gate (who picked up the film after New Line dropped it at the last minute) as "A comedy of sexual disorientation," *But I'm a Cheerleader* begins by introducing its titular hero, Megan (Lyonne), a small town high school cheerleader, whom you first see wearing her short orange skirt, leaping and splitting above the camera in lovely slow motion. Her parents (Mink Stole and Bud Cort) have become concerned that she's not very interested in kissing her boyfriend, eats vegetarian and keeps a Melissa Etheridge poster on her bedroom wall. And so, they devise an intervention with the help of camp counselor Mike (RuPaul playing a man), and send her off to True Directions, an Exodus-style camp where she will learn how to be straight once and for all. At the camp, Megan meets Graham (DuVall), also in training to be a good wifey, but it's clear from jump that they are meant to be together, at least as a way to end the film.

The camp is run by Mary Brown (Cathy Moriarty), a clean-and-tidy freak with a son, Rock (Eddie Cibrian), who spends his time raking leaves and posing with his chainsaw -- for Jack, who wears a "Straight is Great" t-shirt, slamming home the joke -- in tiny little short shorts. Mary believe him to be the bastion of straightness, and uses him as a model for righteousness when she's teaching her charges, teens (among them, *What Lies Beneath's* Katharine Towne, *Heavenly Creatures* Melanie Lynskey, Dante Basco, Joel Michaelly, and Richard Moll) whose self-concerned parents have sent them for a month-long regimen that resembles deprogramming. This process includes learning to abide by social conventions, like blue is for boys and pink for girls (production designer Rachel Kamerman's bright color scheme is cartoonish and, after a while, pretty ghastly), men chop wood and look at car engines, and girls make tea and diaper babies. Needless to say, the kids don't want (or need) to be so "healed," though some have reasons, such as Graham, whose wealthy dick of a dad threatens (abetted by her silent

mom) to cut her off unless she does the straight thing.

In order to survive, Graham is learning to do the closeted thing. During the day, she's a darling diaperer, and at night, she leads the True Directions inmates on excursions to the local gay bar, Cocksuckers. Here the lights are low and the music is loud, and everyone can act out. And here you see what the film might have been, without the spoofy expansiveness, and that is, a comic consideration of first love, namely, between Graham and Megan. Their initial attempts to connect are tender, pleasurable, and awkward, like any teen romance worth its salt. If only.

But instead, the film leans too hard on its bubble-gummy look and non-scary send-ups of homophobes, making everything so huge that no one who is phobic might recognize himself in the film. Babbit's previous experience -- directing independent shorts, as well as episodes of the WB's *Popular* and MTV's *Undressed* -- shows that she has a savvy, combinatory sense of style and politics. But *Cheerleader* doesn't tap into either of those strengths. Its most appreciative audience will likely be the converted (the film has been selected to close the gay and lesbian film festivals in Philadelphia and San Francisco, and appeals to teen girls, according to pre-release tests). But the audience who might benefit most from watching it either won't see the film or won't see the point. They can come away thinking that *Cheerleader* is retro and simplistic, that its concerns don't apply to their neighborhoods, but instead, those faraway outbacks where depraved individuals murder gay people (as in the case of Wyoming's Matthew Shepard or West Virginia's Arthur Warren) or the Boy Scouts win court cases allowing them to keep out gays out (closeted gays, of course, have always been part of the Boy Scouts, as they have the U.S. military, but, well, don't get me started). Sadly, the caricatures let everyone off the hook, making Megan's and Graham's emotional development look trivial because it's so couched in camp (though the film doesn't strike me as John-Waters-ish, several critics have made the comparison, perhaps because there are so few models for combining homosexuality and broad comedy in multiplexes). What gets left out of such criticism of the film is the important fact that homophobia and strict either-or gendering practices do prevail in today's "civilized" cultures, liberal and tolerant as they may seem to those who don't have to worry about such things.

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