

Dougherty and Singer's 'Joe-Joe'

Joe Orton's Double-Dyke Life

by Erin Blackwell

British playwright Joe Orton had an irreverent imagination, but he probably never in his wildest dreams imagined himself as two lesbians. It took the subversive sensibilities of videomakers Cecilia Dougherty and Leslie Singer to split the gay icon in two and make him the female leads of *Joe-Joe*, a 50-minute experimental video to be shown this Saturday at the Art Institute.

People who saw director Stephen Frears' 1987 film *Prick Up Your Ears*, a straightforward biopic showing Orton's rise to fame, taste for sex in the loo, and sudden death by hammer at the hands of his longtime companion, Kenneth Halliwell, can no longer kid themselves that they know all there is to know about the lesbians beyond the legend.

Joe-Joe's rolling introduction establishes Singer and Dougherty's outlandish premise: "Imagine that we are totally and fabulously popular. Imagine that two young working-class lesbians can capture the core of a nation's appetite for humor and can act as our literary conscience and can do it without selling out." So-called lesbian chic notwithstanding, the whole idea is pretty ridiculous. And

that's the point. *Joe-Joe's* improbability accuses the literary/artistic star system twice over: by positing an out — and outrageous — lesbian as a world-class iconoclast and then making room for two such mavericks at one time.

Sex Aplenty

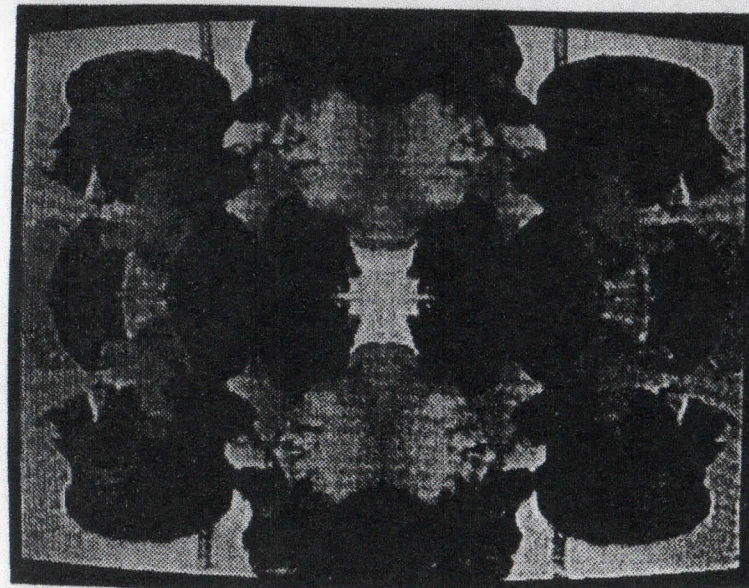
That's the idea, anyway. But you don't have to be a deconstructionist to appreciate the inanity of laconic femme top, Dougherty, and baby-faced butch bottom, Singer, doing a desultory *Waiting for*

remain original, unlikely, and disturbing. They also have plenty of sex, solo and duo, in black-and-white and living color, on bed and toilet seat.

Singer, 30, an accountant for a delivery service, and Dougherty, 41, who's teaching video and art theory at U.C. Irvine this semester, were lovers at the time of filming. They are now friends. Interviewed separately by telephone, the two seem to think as one about a lot of things, including the fallacy of queer community.

"I thought queer had peaked," said Singer, who feels a community splintered along ethnic and color lines also has to face its sexism. All that the new Queer Film accomplished, in Singer's opinion, was to create real jobs for gay men making feature films, leaving lesbians holding the label.

After years of watching gay filmmakers get more attention than their lesbian colleagues, Dougherty said it "started feeling really good" to incarnate media darling Joe Orton. "The men and women's community is always lumped together for politics and the purposes of the media," she said. "But the community is male-dominated, and it's hard for women to get attention. It's like the



Two-faced Joe Orton: Cecilia Dougherty and Leslie Singer as the late British playwright.

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Godot in matching Ortonesque T-shirts and black leather caps. Whether they're eating macaroni-and-cheese TV dinners, getting dressed, taking a trip to Santa Cruz, or accepting an award for their play *Joe Orton's*

Lesbian Supremacism

Joe-Joe, which Dougherty calls a sarcastic fantasy, redresses the gender balances without necessarily aspiring to the vacuity that mass media induces in its objects. Singer says the video promotes lesbianism by showing that "we can be the center of attention as much as anyone." Sounds like evolving lesbian separatism has taken a U-turn at queer and re-entered our lives as lesbian supremacism.

Such overweening lesbian pride will surely infuriate some people while delighting others, which is sure to set the audience against itself, in the good old Orton tradition. The form all this controversial content takes is equally

equipment, Jill Garelleck's camera affords a rarely stationary gnat's-eye-view of *Joe-Joe's* worlds. Music by Cactus Motel runs from Bryan MacLean's mindless "Orange Skies" to the lovely and unintelligible Indonesian folk song, "Warung Pojok." In other words, this is the stuff cult videos are made of.

Saturday's screening, co-sponsored by Cinematheque and Frameline, will feature the two lesbians in question, in addition to Roberto Friedman, Cliff Hengst, and Monique Nobo, who will read passages from the singularly original Joe Orton's diaries and the first act of his real-life award-winning play, *Loot*. ▼

Joe-Joe
Art Institute, Oct. 9
568-8129