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MICHAEL POWERS

Give her an inch

Meet **Ally Sheedy**, sexual outlaw. *High Art* made her a lesbian icon. Now she's giving *Hedwig* a second sex change **By Michael Giltz**

Ally Sheedy has been surrounded by strong, independent women all her life—and she's never appreciated it more than now, in the middle of her controversial run as the new lead in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, the off-Broadway hard-rock musical that had been a smash hit since its New York premiere in February 1998.

Soaring from the critical acclaim she garnered for playing the heroin-addicted photographer Lucy in *High Art*, the 37-year-old actress—whose career had been all but written off a decade earlier—was wooed to *Hedwig's* title role by the show's writer and original star, John Cameron Mitchell. Fearlessly she tackled her first musical, portraying an East German boy who's had a botched sex-change operation, which leaves a one-inch reminder of Hedwig's former gender. Less-than-kind reviews followed.

"It was really painful," Sheedy says. "Then Ute Lemper showed up, and then Tyne Daly.... These people do what I do for a living—and in my opinion do it much, much better—so when they come and give me the feedback I've been getting, I feel like I'm doing fine."

The actress also takes strength from the more anonymous women who "get" what she's doing. "When there are a lot of women in the house, the whole show rocks," says Sheedy, relaxing in her dressing room before a recent performance. "It's totally different. The women are *definitely* my audience. I've never known it more than now, when I'm onstage and I can really feel it."

Hedwig already had a strong gay male following, but it was Sheedy's idea to sign poster after poster and place them in lesbian bars all over the city. "When has anybody ever done that—changed [an audience's] sexual preference in the middle of a run?" she laughs. "No one."

Raised by her lesbian mom, Charlotte Sheedy, a literary agent known for repping firebrands like in-your-face lesbian poet Sapphire, Ally is used to taking the unconventional path. As a child she sat in on her mother's early meetings of the feminist movement; as a teenager she wrote articles for *Ms.*; and as an adult she battled back from obscurity with an "art" film that garnered more attention than the countless TV movies she had made for USA, the cable network Sheedy has drolly referred to as "my benefactor."

So she's especially appreciative of the lesbians who continue to support her, like the group who gave her the best compliment after seeing



High Art: They said she made "a good dyke."

"The fact that I've been accepted by the lesbian community is a huge thing to me because that is my mother's world and it was the world I grew up in," Sheedy says.

She vividly remembers the day her mom sat her down to give a coming-out speech—not the most shocking of revelations, given that Ally, then 18, had already figured her mom was a lesbian.

"She'd taken me out for tea, this special [lunch], and she said, 'Alex, I just want you to know I'm a lesbian and I'm in a relationship with so-and-so,'" says Sheedy. "The thought going through my head was, *How do I give her this moment, which I'm sure she's been preparing for?* I didn't want to take it away from her, but I'd known this for *nine years* or something. It's just like, 'Duh.' I told her later [that I knew], and she said, 'No, Alex, you did not know; you had no idea.' But really..."

Her mother's coming-out was one of the easier moments in her roller-coaster life. For, like the embattled Hedwig, Sheedy has fought for respect since she was a child, and not always successfully. At 6 she began dancing with the American Ballet Theatre—and soon her dance instructors were telling her she had to lose weight. She became bulimic, a condition aggravated by a "poisonous mix of studio execs, casting directors, and agents"

CAROL ROSEGG



Sheedy with the New York members of the Angry Inch—Hedwig's backup band—and in full cry as Hedwig

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when she began acting. (Sheedy finally laid her eating disorder to rest with the birth of her daughter, Rebecca, in 1994. "I just began to know too much about [bulimia]," Sheedy says now. "After a while I actually began to get bored of it. It just sort of felt like it began taking up less and less space in my thoughts.... It just stopped having the incredible control over me that it had.")

At 12 she wrote a very accomplished chil- ▶

dren's book called *She Was Nice To Mice*, about Queen Elizabeth I of England. Again there was a downside: Reporters could not believe she'd done it alone and asked her how much her mommy had written. Undaunted, Sheedy went on to write articles for *The Village Voice*, *The New York Times*, and *Ms.* while still in her teens.

Then her acting career took off. After starting out at age 15 in commercials for everything from Pampers to Burger King, Sheedy shot to stardom in her early 20s with the blockbuster success of *WarGames* and *The Breakfast Club*. And then the downturn: She was tagged as a Brat Pack member and soon found herself in bombs like 1987's *Maid to Order*. Steady if unspectacular work in cable TV movies seemed to be the end of the road, especially when an ill-fated romance with Bon Jovi guitarist Richie Sambora led Sheedy to a pill addiction that ended with her stay at Hazelden drug rehab center in Minnesota in 1989. (Her onetime cast mate Demi Moore led an intervention.)

Never a quitter, she returned to the

theater. While starring in an early play by Douglas Carter Beane called *Advice From a Caterpillar*, she met actor David Lansbury (nephew of Angela); they married in 1992.

The happy marriage was followed by the joy of a great part. Sheedy campaigned hard to play the high-strung, enigmatic Lucy in *High Art*—a character, she has often said, more like herself than any she has played. Having won a slew of national acting honors for that role, Sheedy went on to take parts in other independent films, including Allison Anders and Kurt Voss's recent *Sugar Town* and Adrienne Shelly's *I'll Take You There* (now making the festival circuit). She even has another children's book out to editors—this one about a dog named Betty who wants to act but doesn't want to play just "canine" parts.

Whenever Sheedy faced her own acting crises, she never hesitated to seek advice from others. Jane Fonda had long talks with the young actress urging her to develop her own material, and Robert Altman wisely advised

her to move back to New York. It's a favor she now returns for the next generation, chatting regularly with young actress Heather Matarazzo of *Welcome to the Dollhouse* and TV's *Now and Again*. "I wouldn't say that Heather asks my advice, because Heather would never ask anybody's advice about anything," Sheedy laughs. But they do talk often "about some of the traps of being an actor."

Despite the reviews, Sheedy sees *Hedwig* not as a trap but as a liberating return to her roots. "When [the lesbian] audience comes, it's particularly gratifying to me because I was given so much by these women," she says. "In a way, I feel I'm able to give a certain amount back when I perform because it's informed by the women who raised me as a group." ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to several periodicals, including the New York Post and Entertainment Weekly.



Find more on Ally Sheedy, *High Art*, and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* at www.advocate.com