

MOVER + SHAKER

BY SARAH DILEO



ELLEN HUANG

ELLEN HUANG of QUEER LOUNGE

ELLEN HUANG, FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT OF QUEER LOUNGE, IS BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN LBGT CINEMA AND MAINSTREAM AUDIENCES—ONE PARTY AT A TIME.

In her days as a Hollywood film executive working for showbiz heavyweights like **Hans Zimmer** and **Helen Hunt**, Huang traveled to numerous film festivals across the country and noticed that despite the fair number of gays and lesbians working in the film industry, there was a surprising lack of networking going on within that community. Huang was inspired to create **Queer Lounge**, which launched at the **Sundance Film Festival** in 2004 as a networking hotspot and the only LGBT organization sanctioned by the Festival. In their first year, QL attracted over 4,000 visitors—10% of Sundance's crowd—and quickly became known among festival-goers for not only their wild parties, but their popular panel discussions and networking events.

Though Huang originally envisioned Queer Lounge as a space for LGBT filmmakers and industry execs to congregate and network, she quickly realized her brainchild had much broader potential. Huang explains, "Queer Lounge was able to leverage the celebrity and the press at such a high-profile festival to bring more awareness to the LGBT-themed films in general." This gives gay filmmakers the chance to mingle with not only their queer peers, but also with a full range of mainstream industry power players who have the influence to actually get a film made. This kind of exposure means elevated opportunities for LGBT films and filmmakers, and hopefully, Huang notes, the de-ghettoizing of queer cinema.

Huang is encouraged by 2005's many LGBT-themed breakout hits, most notably **Brokeback Mountain**, in addition to **Transamerica** and **Capote**. All three films received prestigious awards at the recent **Golden Globes**. Huang says "Brokeback is just the tip of the iceberg" and believes the success of these and other LGBT films reflect "more mainstream acceptance of our stories...that broad audiences are able to see beyond the sexual or gender-orientation issues and recognize our humanity." She also notes that

it is a significant step forward to see major stars and respected filmmakers taking on still-controversial gay stories. Huang tempers this with the note that it is unlikely we will see any big-budget risks on gay material, but still feels it is a great lesson to the studio decision-makers that these films do in fact have an audience, and it is not solely a gay one.

Queer Lounge's line-up for Sundance 2006 was its most exciting yet. The program at this year's Festival included panel discussions with **Rosie O'Donnell**, **Gus Van Sant**, and **Armistead Maupin**; parties honoring the documentary **Wrestling With Angels** and the **GLAAD Media Awards** nominations; and its infamous "Homos Away from Home" party, featuring celebrity DJs **John Cameron Mitchell** and **Shannyn Sossamon**. In the past, their parties have attracted celebrities with **Naomi Watts** to **Paris Hilton**, and with sponsors like Absolut Vodka, Intel, Q Television, Bud Light and Volkswagen, the buzz factor is continually high. Media attention garnered by these and other stars is exactly what Queer Lounge is after: "That LGBT filmmakers interact with...celebrities whose involvement in a film can help get it financed or major press who can get the word out on their projects."

Of course, between parties, there are the films. This year's buzz-worthy lot included **The Night Listener**, adapted from an Armistead Maupin novel and starring **Robin Williams** as a gay radio host; **Wrestling With Angels**, a documentary about **Angels in America** playwright **Tony Kushner**; **All Aboard!** **Rosie's Family Cruise**, another doc about the first-ever gay family cruise created by Rosie O'Donnell; **Puccini for Beginners**, a lesbian romantic comedy starring **Gretchen Mol** by the director of **The**



SUNDANCE 2006: (T) HUANG WITH FURNITURE DESIGNER BARCLAY BUTERA AND ACTRESS DANIELA SEA. (B) THE TEAM BEHIND PUCCINI FOR BEGINNERS PAYS A VISIT TO QUEER LOUNGE

Incredibly True Adventures of Two Girls in Love and the producer of *Kissing Jessica Stein*; and **Small Town Gay Bar**, a Kevin Smith-produced doc about, you guessed it, gay bar patrons in a small town. On the wilder side, there's also a flick called **Kinky Boots**, starring **Chiwetel Ejiofor** (*Dirty Pretty Things*) as a drag queen who saves a shoe company from financial ruin by creating high-heeled boots for men.

What's next for Huang and Queer Lounge? As the only full-time staff member, she has her hands full year-round securing sponsorships, running the website and preparing for the ten-day long extravaganza each January. And based on their success at Sundance, Queer Lounge will be launching a second hub at the prestigious **Toronto Film Festival** this September, allowing them to reach more people than ever. As Huang says, "Movies are a language that everyone can understand," and it's a language she's using to make a major difference in the lives of LGBT filmmakers and audience members.