

# It Takes a Femme

Two lesbian filmmakers tackle a different kind of gender identity in their new film

*FtF: Female to Femme.* | By Heather Boerner

When Elizabeth Stark came out as femme around 1989, she was going against everything her feminist mother had taught her. She had wanted Stark to play football, grow out her leg hair and not wear makeup — in not so many words, be butch.

“For me, it was a form of rebellion,” recalls Stark, now 35. “I remember being drawn to very traditional presentations of femininity.” Today, she wears a faux-wrap top in earth tones that compliment her shoulder-length dark hair. But for Stark and for many other femmes, they come to their skirts and heels and makeup (or boots and close-fitting jeans and tattoos — or some combination of the two) after careful thought about their gender presentation. Femme isn’t just a great way to catch a girl’s eye at the bar. It’s a gender, and, for Stark, becoming femme is just as thoughtful and complicated a process as coming out butch or trans.

Stark’s own experience, as well as those of some famous femmes like actor Guinevere Turner, author Jewelle Gomez and musician Bitch, are the centerpiece of *FtF: Female to Femme*, a documentary that had its world debut at the Frameline LGBT Film Festival in San Francisco in June. Co-directed by Kami Chisholm, *FtF* asks femmes to discuss their gender presentation using the language of transition. It’s one of the first of its kind, the filmmakers say.

The results, they say, are fascinating.

“Our documentary is a documentary in the same way a femme is a girl — yeah, that’s where it starts, but it does a lot more with it, and goes to more interesting places,” Stark says, grinning. “And like femmes, I think the documentary has to teach its viewers how to watch it, how to understand it.”

But it’s not all identity politics; Chisholm jokes that it’s “tits and theory,” since the documentary is full of burlesque as a form of femme expression and sexuality. And while it’s not about femmes in relation to butches, Chisholm, who identifies as butch, says her butch friends are as excited to see strong, interesting femmes as femmes are to see themselves in the film.

“What I hear from butches is a lot of excitement about the film because they love femmes. What I hear is, ‘Femmes, yes, I want to see anything having to do with femmes. Femmes are gorgeous. I love femmes!’” she explains, chuckling and hunching forward slightly. “For me, this documentary is interesting. On the surface, it seems like I’m making a film that isn’t about me. But ... what this film is doing is talking about gender issues that are so central to my being walking through the world. I’m not femme, but the issues of who assumes who is what gender and how, all feel very relevant to me as a butch.”

Indeed, the documentary is meant to open a new dialogue in the discussion of gender in the lesbian community. Both Stark and Chisholm felt the documentary was long overdue as the valorization of female masculinity has rendered female femininity all but invisible. Both women hope the film will start a discussion and inspire more documentaries about what it means to present oneself as femme.

Stark and Chisholm are great women to tackle this issue. They love



Feisty femmes head to the silver screen

femme, both in its personal and political forms. Stark is a novelist and author of *Shy Girl*, which came out in 1999 and was a Lambda Literary Award finalist. Stark teaches writing and has performed from New York to San Francisco. In fact, she got the idea for the documentary three years ago, when she convened a panel of “phenomenal femmes” for a one-night-only performance and discussion of femmeness. Currently finishing her second book, Stark has started on a third. Her next book, she says, will play with the line between autobiography and fiction, and was prompted in part by her experience making *FtF*.

Chisholm, a filmmaker who is receiving her doctorate in history of consciousness from UC Santa Cruz, teaches about gender, sexuality, and queer

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and feminist studies at San Francisco State University. In 2004, they made the short documentary *Conversations with Elizabeth’s Father*, about Stark’s father’s failing health. After *FtF*, Chisholm is setting her sights on making a short fictional film about butch and trans identity. She’s drawn to that, she says, because so many documentaries have plumbed the depths of butch or trans experiences, but few films have tackled the subject together.

“I’m interested in what isn’t getting explored and what isn’t getting documented,” she says.

As for *FtF*, Chisholm says she hopes people will think it’s funny and sexy and makes them think.

Stark adds, “Kind of like a femme.” ■