

Pioneering playwright

Local fund-raisers held to help finish filming story of Jane Chambers

By Pru Sowers

BANNER STAFF

Some journeys never end. Others circle back, pulling you in just when you thought you were through.

For Alison McMahan, the director of a documentary film on the life of lesbian playwright Jane Chambers, her journey has begun again. For Beth Allen, Chamber's life partner and manager, it will never end.

Chambers died of a brain tumor in 1983 at the age of 46, cutting short a writing career that spanned the theater, television and books. But it is her plays where her legacy still has power. Chambers was one of the first, if

not the first, female playwright to put positive lesbian characters front and center. At the time Chambers was writing, the usual course for a gay character — male or female — was tortured angst, drugs and a descent into emotional hell. Chambers' characters were the opposite: cheerful, funny, sexy, courageous and ultimately victorious. Think of Pat in "A Late Snow" or Lil in "Last Summer at Bluefish Cove." Chambers broke ground not only theatrically, but politically. She ultimately made television shows like "The L Word" possible, and she broke ground for playwrights like Wendy Wasserstein and Cheryl Churchill.

Her pioneering work is the focus of a documentary film, "The Eight Faces of Jane," being shot in Provincetown this week. Clips from the film, as well as Chambers' one-act play, "Quintessential Image," will be shown at two fund-raising events this weekend at the WOMR Performance



Actors Jere Jacob, left, and Julia Campanelli in a scene from "Quintessential Image," by lesbian playwright Jane Chambers. The play will be shown at two fund-raisers this week for a documentary film about Chambers.

Space, 494 Commercial St.: one at 1 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 14, and the other at 11 a.m. Sunday, Oct. 15. Suggested donation is \$25.

Director McMahan originally began work on the film in 1983, shortly after Chambers died. After shooting interviews and oth-

er footage for two years, she had to abandon the project for lack of funding.

McMahan eventually left filmmaking altogether in the intervening years. But in 2003, she had an opportunity to direct a documentary film about a

Cambodian cooperative village composed primarily of disabled veterans from both sides of the war, "Bare Hands." Her cinematic journey had begun again.

"I felt really grateful to be able

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Jane Chambers & Beth Allen, 1971

The Eight Faces of Jane:

THE LIFE AND WORK OF JANE CHAMBERS

a documentary by Alison McMahan

www.8facesofjane.com

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to do this again, to make films again, as I'd had a 15-year hiatus as a filmmaker due, in part, to motherhood," McMahan says. "When I started thinking about what film I would make once I completed 'Bare Hands,' I remembered the faith Beth Allen, Jere Jacob — Jane's dear friend and an actress in many of Jane's plays when they were first produced — and Nancy Johnson, the healer that worked with Jane in her last months of life, had place in me when I was just 23 years old."

McMahan tracked Allen down and proposed taking up "The Eight Faces of Jane" again. The title refers to the eight female characters — all gay but one — in "Last Summer at Bluefish Cove," Chambers' groundbreaking and most successful play. It's about eight friends coming together for a summer reunion at a beach modeled on one in the lesbian-centric Greenport, Long Island, where Chambers and Allen had a weekend home. A staging of one scene from the play done on the actual beach will also be shown at this weekend's fund-raisers.

"It's just as timely today as

when it was written," Allen says about "Cove." "My best wish is that they [documentary audience] would go away with the understanding that a woman put herself on the line. She wanted her life recognized and validated and therefore she wanted it validated for other lesbian and gay people."

Allen's journey has never ended. As executor of Chambers' estate, she holds the rights to all of Chambers' writing. She has worked consistently to get the work produced, printed, filmed, any way she can to get Chambers' positive messages of strength and humor out. She proudly relates a phone call she received recently, from a high school drama department inquiring about getting the rights to produce "Cove" at their school. This is not just about Chambers' work, she said, but about the footsteps she put on the theatrical moon for gay people.

"It's not that I had a partner that died," Allen says about her continued efforts to produce Chambers' work. "I have gone on with my life. It's as if Jane and I had babies. I have these babies and I have to take care of them. That was my job to do and I've

done it well."

"These women are so unapologetically strong," McMahan says about the characters in "Cove." "They are so unapologetically themselves, unapologetically going after what they want. And that's still really, really unique. Jane overcame these conventions 25 years ago. Nobody did that for gay characters at the time, either in theater or film."

"The Eight Faces of Jane" will contain interviews with Allen and others who played roles in Chambers' life and writing. The film will focus on the various phases of Chambers' life, the key loves and key works, including plays, novels and poetry. The singer Suede will also sing a song composed for the film at the Sunday fund-raising event.

Filming this week will focus on Nini Lyons, the owner of the shop "Remembrance of Things Past" on Commercial Street, who was Chamber's lover before Allen. McMahan also hopes to interview others who knew Chambers or who have been impacted by her work.

"We have to remember the people who made the path for us," said Allen. "The young people today have to remember the footsteps on the moon."