

Comedian Rhona Cameron stole bottles of champagne in Scotland ("Until I was caught," she adds) and sold dodgy paintings door-to-door Down Under. (She'd followed a particularly appealing woman to Australia.) Now she wants to make a go of her first BBC sitcom, *Rhona*. Instead of police or skeptical art buyers, now all Cameron has to deal with are reporters who keep calling her show the British *Ellen*.

"It's not a lesbian sitcom," she says gamely, which is just as true as saying *Friends* is not a straight one. It is a show about Rhona, a video reviewer for a tiny London-based magazine, who wants to make movies. "My character is on a quest for happiness that she thinks she can get through manipulation, which goes completely wrong," explains Cameron. "She's like George on *Seinfeld*."

Right down to its charmingly dorky theme song, which she cowrote and sings, *Rhona* is a childhood fantasy come true for the 34-year-old comic, who grew up loving the "loose and fast and real" humor of America's *Rhoda*.

"I have to admit, I always wanted to be on TV and have my name on things," says Cameron, chatting at a café in London after a whirlwind of press to promote the show's late-July launch. "But I didn't really start seriously thinking about this show or working on it until three years ago, when we started pitching the idea. I just thought it was a natural progression for me. I asked an ex-girlfriend of mine who's been my friend for about 16 years to write the sitcom with me because we've shared sort of the same life and the same humor."

As with many comics, Cameron's early life didn't provide a lot of laughs while she was living it. British by birth, she was adopted by Scottish parents and raised in Edinburgh. Even though she had a perfectly nice boyfriend at the time, she lost her virginity to an older man living next door who kept pestering her. "I don't know why I didn't do it with [the boyfriend], though I did do it with him later," she says. And the sex? "It

was...nice. Like getting a foot massage. But I dumped him at 16 for this de-ranked girl that I had fantastic sex with all the time."

Cameron is quick to disabuse anyone of the idea that she had a happy, randy, angst-free childhood. "Oh, no, no, no—terrible angst," she exclaims. "Oh, God! Angst! I lived in a small Scottish fishing town, and when I hit puberty I was very badly bullied until my father died, and then I think people felt sorry for me. But I had a really bad time. I was spat on and beat up, and my back was drawn on in chalk."

"My mom was really rubbish when I finally [came out]," says Cameron. (American translation: Mom was no help at all.) "Then we went through three years of hell, and all of a sudden it became OK again. But I had strong feelings around about the age of 13 that I must try and not be gay. I used to write in my diary, 'I will not be queer. I will like David.'"

She laughs at the memory. "I have to say, I was so driven. My sexual desire was so strong, it pretty much dominated most of my childhood—apart from other nice things like death and loss and abandonment. When I wasn't dwelling on those three things, I was dwelling on my constant sexual frustration about women."

That led to her pursuit of the woman Down Under, which ultimately led her to London, where Cameron talked her way into a role for a "really bad women's cop feminist film." The movie was nothing, but a woman she befriended on it told Cameron to try out stand-up.

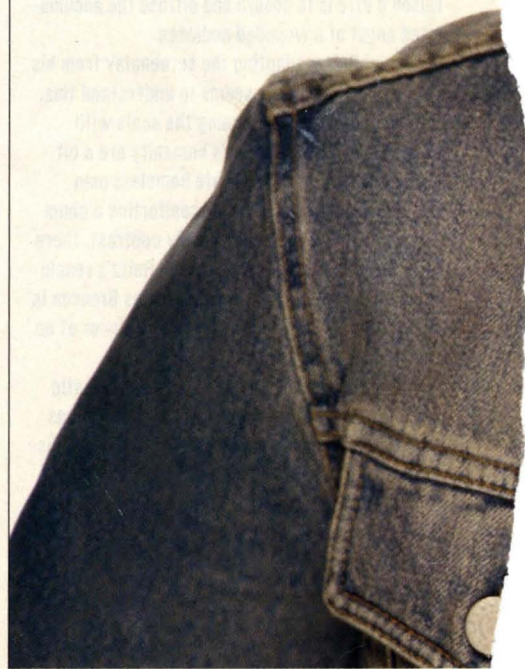
Now she's gone on to host or appear on countless TV shows, most notably four seasons hosting *Gaytime TV*, a fluffy chat show that gave her a chance to interview everyone from k.d. lang ("She didn't even notice me") to Martina Navratilova ("Now, we had a really good rapport"). It's also given her a chance to see how quickly and easily gay and lesbian celebrities—who've always seemed more open in the United Kingdom than in the United States—can push the boundaries of what's acceptable. In other words, *Gaytime TV* soon went from groundbreaking to old hat.

television

Lesbian comic Rhona Cameron plays the lesbian lead in *Rhona*, her new BBC sitcom. Is she England's answer to Ellen DeGeneres? By Michael Giltz

Show and telly

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"*Gaytime* TV got mostly panned," explains Cameron. "It was on BBC2 for four years, and the idea was an entertainment program for gay people, just as normal and regular as can be. There'd been an earlier show that was more agit-prop, and they wanted this to be light and fluffy, like daytime television."

The mix made for some awkward juxtapositions. "On the one hand, you'd talk about Take That splitting up, and then you'd talk about gay funerals. You'd talk to someone about dying of AIDS, and then you'd switch to gay bath towels. But other programs came on, like *Queer as Folk*, that took it so much further—where being gay was just matter-of-fact—that people felt *Gaytime* was a bit dated."

Now Cameron hopes to change the rules again by starring in a funny sitcom that, like *Will & Grace* in the United States, just happens to be about a gay character.

"In one episode called 'Birthday Girl,' I start dating a really beautiful middle-class solicitor with glasses. I've gone off her, but I'm keeping her for my birthday. I've speeded up the intimacy too quickly, but I've got to keep her for my birthday because she looks good for me. There's a line in it where I say, 'Just because I'm a lesbian I don't have to be deep.'"

What is deep, however, is Cameron's amazement at her own success. She's been in a relationship for about a year with a woman she wants to spend the rest of her life with. Her TV show is airing on the BBC. And now she's looking to tackle her favorite love: movies.

"It seems ridiculous to me because everything I've ever wanted is happening," she says. "If I can go from nothing to doing stand-up and then getting a sitcom with my name on it, why shouldn't I be able to write and direct a film? It's incredible. Sometimes I have three or four days without feeling despair." ■

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

Find more on Rhona Cameron and her sitcom at www.advocate.com

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