



# Playing at happy families

Daphne du Maurier was married with three children. But, as BBC2's new biographical drama reveals, she had a lesbian affair. Its writer, Amy Jenkins, tells **Andrew Pettie** about du Maurier's double life

Daphne du Maurier was an extraordinarily complicated woman. On the surface, her life read like the final chapter of a fairy tale. "There is a strong public perception of her as this celebrated romantic novelist living an idyllic existence with her husband and three children in Cornwall," says Geraldine Somerville, who plays her in *Daphne*, a revelatory new biographical drama on BBC2 on Saturday. "But the reality is very different."

For starters, du Maurier secretly wanted to be a boy. Her intense, overbearing father, the actor and theatrical agent Gerald du Maurier, also wanted her to be a boy – and repeatedly told her so. Perhaps as a result, she dressed with an almost alarming mannishness. "She was very masculine," says Somerville. "I couldn't believe it when I saw Pathé newsreel footage of her wearing these huge men's trousers. She even walked like a man."

Du Maurier's tomboyish wardrobe was one of the few outward signs of a volcano of suppressed emotion and confused sexuality rumbling and bubbling beneath the surface. "She was very much

a product of her time," says Amy Jenkins (the creator of *This Life*), who wrote *Daphne* after reading Margaret Forster's celebrated biography and studying du Maurier's private letters. "In the end, she couldn't really allow herself to be a lesbian. She was very conflicted." As Somerville's du Maurier concedes to herself at one point in the drama, "My life has been one long lie for as far back as I can remember."

Du Maurier frequently described herself as a "boy in a box". Yet it was this sad, trapped spirit that inspired her fiction. "I don't think she ever accepted that she was a lesbian," says Somerville. "But whenever she got really frustrated and uncomfortable in her own life, that's when she felt compelled to create. At least out of this terrible inner turmoil she was able to produce some great literature."

Amy Jenkins's tense, absorbing drama charts the brief period after the Second World War, and the return of her RAF officer husband, Tommy (Andrew Havill), in which the volcano finally erupts. While visiting New York to defend

herself against unfounded accusations that she plagiarised the plot for her best-known novel, *Rebecca*, du Maurier becomes hopelessly infatuated with Ellen Doubleday, a rich, glamorous heiress and the wife of her American publisher. Despite the pair's intense friendship, the heterosexual Doubleday (Elizabeth McGovern) does not reciprocate.

Du Maurier is devastated ("You'd wrecked my life more completely than any atom bomb ever could"). But she channels her pain and frustration into a play, *September Tide*, about a young man's forbidden love for his mother-in-law. The plot, though few people realised it at the time, is a cipher for her own predicament.

Then, in a twist that would have Freud and Jung high-fiving in excitement, du Maurier begins a passionately physical fling with Gertrude Lawrence (Janet McTeer), the brassy actress who is cast to play the mother in *September Tide*. Lawrence is also, in another Oedipal coincidence, a former mistress of du Maurier's father. Frank and fun-loving, Lawrence is the polar opposite of the flawless,

**A family outing:**  
*Flavia* (Meg Dixon), *Tommy* (Andrew Havill), *du Maurier* (Geraldine Somerville) and *Kits* (Elliot Naylor)

imposing Doubleday. As she tells an uptight du Maurier on the night of the premiere, "You know what you need? You need a really good... [long, loaded pause] time."

Yet even Lawrence's seize-the-day attitude to sex fails to satisfy du Maurier, who, despite enjoying their physical connection, treats the relationship with a frosty dismissiveness. "In many ways Daphne was infuriating – her own worst enemy," says Jenkins. "She had the chance of something very happy and real with Gerty and she kind of threw it away."

Daphne du Maurier, it seems, never got to the bottom of her own sexuality and the conclusion of her relationship with Lawrence, like Jenkins's drama itself, remains blurry and open to interpretation. This, according to Somerville, is one of the drama's defining strengths. "I think her story is very true to life. It's not neat. It's not black and white. And it was certainly no fairy tale."

✦ *Daphne* is on BBC2 on Saturday at 9.00pm