



LFT

VOLUME 4 NUMBER 2

NEWSLETTER

APRIL 1990

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cover photo by Rogde for the play Merchants of Love produced by Gwendolyn

CINEMA AND THE SEX TRADE

AN INTERVIEW WITH GWENDOLYN

BY GARY POPOVICH

G: I've been a stripper for fourteen years and I've been a prostitute off and on for longer than that, since I was 16. I was also involved in organizing stuff like the strippers union at the end of the seventies. Then around '84, I organized a variety show that had twenty different acts. It was just for girls in the business. It was called Professional Bad Girls and Painted Ladies Present Pot Pourri, and it was a



Gwendolyn working on first film PHOTO: John Poirer

party in celebration of ourselves—to counteract what the women in the sex trade were feeling, that internalizing of the negative attitudes that everybody else has towards them. It got pretty heavy around the time of *Not A Love Story*. Feminists saw sex workers as part of the problem and some feminists even to-day have a lot of difficulty between what's explicit and what's exploitive. I thought *Not A Love Story* scooped somebody out of her environment and took her to New York City and dumped her into this horrible, horrible stuff. The thing that pissed me off the most was the scene where Bonnie Sheer Klein has Fonda Peters/Linda Lee Tracey get up and do the cunt shot for the magazine. My attitude was, if the director wanted to show that she should have gotten up and done it herself because that wasn't Fonda's show. She wasn't used to showing her cunt. As far as I'm concerned there's nothing wrong with showing your cunt. Nothing wrong at all. But I felt that the filmmakers were incredibly manipulative, they wanted her to feel degraded. Whose doing the exploiting here?

G.P.: At the end of the film she's wearing that lei and trouncing around on the beach feeling all liberated and refreshed and renewed by the experience; she's turning over a new leaf. It's a very patronizing

attitude on the part of the filmmakers.

G: Very patronizing and very middle class. I don't know where these women came from that made that movie, but they didn't come from my world. At the time all of this was going down, our town was hot with pornography debates and feminists were marching in Take Back the Night Marches standing in front of strip clubs and demanding that they be closed, there was no dialogue between the sex workers and the women's movement. You had to renounce the devil and come and sit on their knee.

G.P.: How do you feel about those charges then, that those involved in the sex trade are being exploited by men's desires and attitudes, and by the business around it?

G: First of all our working conditions are often difficult, but if there's any real change going to happen then it has to come from within the community. You can't have outsiders coming in and saying you shouldn't do that and you should do this. What we needed was feminists saying: We want to help you make changes that you want. What do you need us to do? How can we help? But the basic attitude of the feminists was, "This shouldn't

be happening". They didn't want to help empower us to have control in the industry. They wanted the industry stopped.

There's nothing wrong with satisfying needs. Sex is a basic need. Unfortunately some people have more access to sexual gratification than others. And some people have more need for sexual gratification. Sometimes

people get fucked up and are obsessive and they can be a sex addict. Some guys that go to prostitutes are addicts and they blow their money the same way someone might blow their money drinking or gambling. But, for a lot of guys it's just satisfying a basic, healthy need. May be the guy's new in the country. Or new in town. Or he loves his wife and he doesn't want to have an affair, but he hasn't been laid in awhile; or they always do everything exactly the same for 25 years; they always fucked in the missionary position. Maybe he wants to try with the girl on top. I mean, I've had guys pay to just look at my cunt—they've been married, their wife had given them children, they love each other, but she won't ever let them do it with the lights on. We live in a very sexually repressed society, so naturally, sometimes fulfilling people's sexual needs becomes somewhat perverted or obsessive or fixated. But the basic right to have sexual gratification should be as obvious as people not being homeless.

G.P.: But do you feel that there is any aspect of it, as it exists now, that is exploitative?

G: Yeah, the working conditions are awful.

G.P.: How would you change that?

G: Worker control. It's as basic as that. When I organized the Professional Bad Girls and Painted Ladies Party it was in reaction to this anti-stripper, anti-sex worker stuff. Each girl could bring one friend. I'd spent a couple of months in one particular club making posters and encouraging girls to make posters, pictures, of their families, of things they loved, and stuff they didn't like. It was to help foster a sense of community and a sense of pride and a sense of history, and a sense that we're all in this together. So, I've been involved in this kind of thing and doing stand-up on the sex trade, political stand-up in bars and stuff like—I'm proud to be a prostitute. So when A-

Space did their thing exploring erotic imagery, they gave folks money to make films, erotic films. I was one of the people who was given five hundred bucks to make a movie. Other people made 10 minute movies, and we made a forty minute movie called *Out of the Blue*, subtitled *A Cozy Porn and Variety Slut Show*. And the reason why we called ourselves sluts is because we weren't paid to do it. There wasn't enough money to pay the girls to appear in the film, so they had to be sluts and work for free, for the pleasure of doing it. The premise was, "What do men and women in the sex trade find erotic?" So it was our personal pleasures rather than what the traditional audience wants to see.

G.P.: What was the reaction to that film?

G: Basically it was the arts community that came. It was shown at A-Space. Naturally they liked different things than what the girls liked in the movie. One girl that the arts community really liked was Annie, who jumped around in one of her costumes and made up little songs. It was sort of like a girl at play. And the artist people really liked her work, while the girls were saying, "What the fuck was Annie doing?" I showed it at A-Space, then in Buffalo at Hallwall's Gallery, then in

Toronto at Artefact for three shows in one night. I sold tickets up front to the girls, for them to come on this night. Some girls were disappointed because they were comparing it to a Hollywood film. It was rough, but



when I see what other people do for their first movies, I think mine was pretty darn good.

G.P.: How did you get involved in filmmaking. Were you doing other artistic activities?

G: I'd been doing stand-up, and I've taken clown classes, and I grew up doing kids magic shows. So I had a background of performance stuff. And stripping of course is perform-public good, because it's all safe sex. It's putting condoms on with your mouth, putting a condom on with your hand, showing how to cut up a condom and open it up over a cunt for eating pussy. So, I stayed up all night editing; as far as I'm concerned it was a disaster. I never even ran it through my projector. Another thing the cops had done...they probably didn't know how to show a movie and they broke the film and stuck it back together with masking tape in a couple of places. And I didn't know that, and as I'm rolling it, it goes into my projector with masking tape and bums up my freakin projector, so I hadn't even run my movie when I took it to the Purple Institution...and I had to do the voice-over live on a movie I hadn't even seen. And part of it was upside down and part of it was hairy, covered in cat hair. But out of that,

this boy, Brendhan, that I don't even know recommended me to go to an arts festival in England, and I'm going in May, and I'm representing Canada. It's called Edge 90.

G.P.: What's the project you work for called?

G: Prostitute's Safe Sex Project. We got funded from the city and from the province for this Outreach Worker Project to go around and give out condoms to other girls and talk about safe sex and stuff. Most prostitutes use condoms; so for them the message has to be a bit more sophisticated.

Girls want to know what to do if a condom breaks, how to stop your condoms from breaking, how to clean your needle, why not to share, don't use Vaseline for a lubricant on your condom, because oil will break the rubber...use a water-based lube. So, just real specific information. Prostitutes have a very low rate of HIV infection and wherever they do have it, they find out its from their personal life. They gave money to the gay community to develop their own educational programmes, so we're in the same boat. There isn't a heck of a lot of information filtering down to the street girls. Our attitude is that the girls are in a better position to teach people how to use condoms than anybody else. The health care workers say, "Use condoms." But the prostitute is the one that teaches the man how to use a condom. Most prostitutes can get the condom on before the guy even knows it's on. Go down on the guy and you'll get the condom on him. Just keep the condom in your mouth and slip it on him. Most men will wear a condom. But, it's only at the girl's insistence. I interview guys in the bars and do safe sex raps. That's part of my job. And the guys say, well, well, no I wouldn't want to insult her by wearing a condom, but if she asked me to wear a condom, okay. So, it's like, we have to do their laundry and pick up their socks

and we're the ones that have to buy the condoms, and make them wear it. If you look in the magazines, the ads are aimed at the women to buy the condoms. You don't want to wear a condom, fine, go wack off without me. There's a line from all those buttons we got from New York City: **Men, Use Condoms Or Beat It.** Because prostitutes see a lot of men and because they insist on condoms, they are the real front line workers. They show the guys you can have a good time—wasn't that a good come, and look at that, you wore a rubber, big deal. So, our attitude wasn't "We've gotta do something because these dumb broads are fucking up." Our attitude was, these girls are doing this good work all by themselves with no support. They deserve to have some credit and credibility and some free condoms.

G.P.: What do you say to them, what do you do?

G: I give them out condoms, talk about safe sex, answer questions, talk about the weather, talk about politics, talk about the sweeps, talk about getting prostitution decriminalized.

G.P.: How do they respond to you?

G: Well they think I'm an oddball, and they're glad to know I'm getting paid. If you have a stereotype of what a prostitute looks like or acts like, I don't fit it. But I've always been like that. I've been on the street doing this now since the summer, so now they're finally starting to know me—I stuck the winter out.

G.P.: How did the project get started?

G: That magazine I gave you, *Stilletto*, has got one article in there that says, "Who are these whores with the free condoms anyway?" The press was starting to blame prostitutes for the spread of H.I.V. into the mainstream straight population, into the heterosexual population. And in some places it was being used as an excuse for detaining prosti-

tutes. And the cops jumped on the bandwagon wanting more money to harass the girls more. Have you ever heard of a case where a prostitute held a gun to a man's head and said, you have to fuck me without a condom?

G.P.: How did you get involved with the NFB's 5 Feminist Minutes?



G: The girl upstairs was having a party on the rooftop, Sunday afternoon and I just happened to come up to say hello. A girl at the party named Meryn said, "Hey, Gwendolyn, you should apply for this." My Outreach territory is basically Cabbagetown and Church and Jarvis. There's two women doing Parkdale. So my 5 minute NFB film is the story about them doing Outreach in Parkdale, along Queen Street, talking to the girls.

I also got a Toronto Arts Council grant to do a new show called **HARDCORE**. It's going to be in this year's Fringe Festival. I had brought the Merchants of Love show from Ottawa here to Toronto for last summer's Fringe Festival and it went really well. I sold out all my shows and my proposal to do a second act received funding. It's going to have a movie in it too. I've been doing stuff since the early 80's. Suddenly this year...what a blessing. I got Trillium Foundation funding, then I got NFB, then I got Toronto Arts Council funding. I was stunned. Sheila has a line: "I'm not equipped for total acceptance." And that fit. It happened that this sexual contact that I'd had turned out positive for hepatitis. So I had to have a hep test. I figured if they're

going to suck blood out of me for the hep test I'll get an HIV anti-body test at the same time. I put it into my mind that I was probably positive. I got all this good luck, so I must be positive...divine retribution, whatever. You can't have everything. Then I found out I wasn't positive. Then I thought, oh, so my punishment is I have to do the work. It's like, 'you have to stick around and work.'

HARDCORE is about a therapist, psychologist here in Toronto who organized an anti-porn conference. He tried to bring in the Catholics, and the fundamentalist right-wingers aligned with the feminist community here in Toronto in an anti-porn front. It was at OISE and it was a day long event. **HARDCORE** is my experience of that day.

So it's a sex worker questioning the morality of the right wing in their anti-porn crusade.

G.P.: Have you had problems with patronizing feminists who are looking out for your good without understanding what you do?

G: It's 1990 and it's getting a lot better. There's Lynn suggesting Ottawa and Meryn suggesting I apply to the NFB. So now in the balance it's starting to be more equal. But there was a time when there was so much hostility, cause you were worse than the men, because you were collaborating with them. I've had women scream at me, "You make it impossible for women to walk down the street at night!" I walk down the street at night. So much hostility and so much anger and feeling so threatened by us. I'm not going to be bitter because change has happened. But it hasn't happened without us fighting. OPIRG, Ontario Public Interest Research Group, which was basically a university academic bunch, organized a conference on prostitution and pornography. That was at OISE too. They had all these academics and big-wing feminists talking about porn and talking about prostitution. And they invited prostitutes to be there, but instead

of putting them on the panels with the other 'experts', they had them scheduled to all be on one panel...like the freak show panel. 'If you wanna see a real live prostitute, come at four o'clock.' And the whores had to fight and say, "No fuckin' way. We wanna be represented on all the panels."

G.P.: Many of the women would be reluctant to work on a film that might expose them, or might make them vulnerable, wouldn't they?

G: It was beyond my wildest hopes the number of street girls who came through for this film. What really surprised me was how many insisted I use their real name in the credits. But the bottom line is, making this movie, giving out some condoms, it that performance mode again. The bounds are only the bounds of your own imagination.

G: Well the one thing I don't like about film compared to live performance is that, being a control freak, the thought of my movie being shown when I'm not there...I want to know if they're laughing, I want to know what they're saying in the lobby. That's what I like about showing these films with the live voices. It's like, "No, I can't send you my film, you have to bring me too." Another thing is that as a stripper you get applause every time you bend over!

G.P.: So you still get gratification in the performance aspect of being a stripper?

G: Oh ya. It's also communication. Cause I talk to the guys while I'm working with them. You basically work one guy, while the other guys become voyeurs watching you work with whoever you're working the moment. It's not just that though. It's also the wild times, it was the dope, the girls, come and go as you please, being on the fringe of society, fuck you all, we're special, we're different. Fourteen years of stripping...you go through changes.

I started out like a little puppy dog that wanted everybody to love me. You get pretty tired fast. That's when you realize you have to pace yourself. You don't do every guy in the audience. You pick and choose. And I pick who I want to work with. That's one of the fucked up things that therapy did...for awhile it made



me ashamed of what I was doing, and angry at myself. Then you hate the guys too. If you hate it, get out...or change yourself, or change the space so that it's better.

G.P.: Do you see indications that positive changes are more likely now, that things are changing?

G: Times are hard in this town. I

wouldn't want to be working on the street today, and I wouldn't want to be a new girl starting stripping today. It was easier when I was younger. We were paid per show, there was more room for creativity and play; we spent more time in the dressing room with each other, so there was more time for comraderie.

Now everybody's out on the floor hustling tables, just to make your money. The cost of living has gone up, but the pay for sex has gone down. Everybody's working more and harder. I notice that a lot of the girls now are doing it for the money to get a down payment on a house or whatever. We were doing it for the fun.

G.P.: Why do you think there's less money in it now?

G: Because there's more girls doing it and less clubs. The city, club owners and agents broke our union by bringing in girls from Quebec. We had over 200 clubs to work in. And when they brought in licensing in the early 80's it went to 50. Three quarters of the clubs closed, at the same time they brought in all these girls from Quebec to work for \$5 an hour and hustle the rest of your money on tables. There are clubs today that don't pay the girl any





Gwendolyn in 'Merchants of Love' photo by ROGDE

thing; in fact you have to pay for the privilege of soliciting in the club that night. It's a lot harder.

G.P.: Do you feel that people are more aware of their conditions of work and are fighting for improvements?

G: Sex workers have always been aware and fighting, we just need organizing. As far as the Safe Sex Project goes, at this point there are only two Outreach workers—me and a guy. I'm supposed to do all of Cabbagetown, Jarvis and Church and all of Parkdale. Which doesn't even

touch the hotel strips and people who work inside. We can only reach so many people. That's why things like the films are good...if they get shown.

The LIFT Newsletter
 Volume 4, #2
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The Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto is supported by its membership, The Canada Council, The Ontario Arts Council, Metro Toronto Cultural Affairs Division, The City of Toronto through the Toronto Arts Council, The National Film Board of Canada, Telefilm, The Ontario Film Development Corporation, The Government of Ontario through the Ministry of Culture and Communications.

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