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All Photos: Bunny Page

Sexual Utopia

Cynthia Roberts's

In the final showdown of Cynthia Roberts's *Bubbles Galore*, the film's heroines battle a nasty pornographer, who, in Roberts's own words, "gets flipped up in the air, and twirled around by his penis."

Not that *Bubbles Galore* has a bone to pick with pornography. On the contrary, Roberts's hyperactive new film is all over the world of hardcore like a puppy frolicking in a country field. The movie delights in its take on XXX-rated industry talk, paraphernalia, film production methods, and above all, the thing itself. "I think of the film as a sexual adventure," Roberts told me before the debut of *Bubbles Galore* at last summer's Montreal World Film Festival. "Often sex in films can be very sterile and serious, whereas the sex in *Bubbles* is mostly fun, a romp. It's a story about sex workers that entertains sexually in the same way a burlesque dancer would."

The eponymous heroine of *Bubbles Galore* is a superstar/producer of hardcore films played by Canadian XXX-rated actress Nina Hartley (*I Cream of Jeannie, Girls Will Be Boys*). Although *Bubbles* has taken her share of hard knocks, she's kept a firm grip on her enthusiasm for working either end of the camera, not to mention her private erotic pleasures. As the movie opens, the happy porn queen is about to dive into the challenge of shooting her new production, *Good Girl Gone Bad*, on an ultra-tight schedule.

Unfortunately, a cloud lurks behind the silver lining of Bubbles's life: her ex-boss and lover, Godfrey Montana (Daniel MacIvor), a megalomaniacal porn czar who wants Bubbles back, professionally and personally. When she greets his sweet talk and threats with disdain, he

terrorizes Buck Lister (Andrew Scorer), an ex-lover Bubbles is still fond of, into a plot to ruin her. Buck, the tragic figure of the piece, is a good-hearted former porn actor whose career has turned limp because he has. Meanwhile in a subplot, Bubbles falls for the enigmatic Dory Drawers (Canadian pin-up Shauny Sexton), an amiable blonde who aspires to a career in the sex industry. Dory's problem is that she's a virgin, not the best qualification for on-camera lovemaking, as Bubbles's jealous lesbian assistant, Vivian Klitorsky (Tracy Wright), reminds her boss. But Bubbles is smitten, and she takes it upon herself to initiate the ripe young virgin in carnal knowledge.

Times have changed since the heyday of strict fundamentalist feminism and the restrictive influence of institutions like the NFB on movie subjects considered appropriate for right-minded Canadians. If a woman had had the nerve to pitch a sexually explicit feature about the adventures of a happy-go-lucky porn star then, the interloper might have been rushed out the door to the sound of tisane cups shattering on the Afghan carpet. When the NFB women's unit, Studio D, embarked on the subject of eroticism from a female perspective, it came up with the ultimate denunciation of pornography, *Not a Love Story*, which Roberts saw when she was a young girl. "When I watched that film, I got excited by the imagery," she remembers. "And then I thought 'This isn't so bad,' and I wanted to see more porn."

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Roberts' picture, a follow-up to her harrowing AIDS drama, *The Last Supper*, does, in its own way, transmit feminist messages, and buy into the goddess mythology celebrated in women's films about pagan religion. Brushing aside the relentless sanctification this would suggest, the goddess in Roberts's movie is incarnated by porn-star-turned-sex-mystic, Annie Sprinkle, who appears throughout *Bubbles* in cheesy, trippy cutaways, romping like a plump Aphrodite.

How do men fare in this world presided over by Sprinkle's grinning female deity? The movie's take on them is apparent in its split between two kinds of sex scenes: those in which males appear, and those that depict the ladies enjoying themselves on their own. In the blue-tinted, gracefully choreographed scenes with women, the ladies pay close and loving attention to each other. Roberts portrays women kissing, laughing, trancing out on the nuances of sensation, and is especially fond of "the love scene where Nina sort of flips her leg back, and one of her stiletto pumps gently touches her own buttock." In stark contrast, most of the sex scenes involving men are robotically herky-jerky and cartoonist spoofs of run-of-the-mill porn, especially the adult pictures of the 1970s. You get the tacky couches on which XXX studs sit around getting serviced by mindless bimbos; the huge erections, which in *Bubbles* are sometimes grotesque prosthetics; the close-ups of guys in the teeth-gritting throes of their orgasms. Inevitably, sex turns violent when Godfrey and his thugs go to work on Bubbles and her friends, giggling moronically like a bunch of droogs.

When I asked Roberts about the costuming of a male character who

BY MAURIE ALIOFF

Bubbles Galore

Bubbles Galore

sports a pig mask on his crotch, she said with a grin that the mask reflects the way a lot of guys personify their genitals. Although I've never had this fantasy about my own soldier of



Annie Sprinkle

fortune, I can see her point that under the human male's wishful vision of himself as a conqueror lordling it over obedient sex slaves, there lurks the secret image of a ridiculous oinker.

During *Bubbles Galore*'s effects-laden climactic battle sequence, the porn queen and her crew deploy a blend of deadly force, and what Roberts calls "a kind of sexual energy emanating from heaven," to cleanse their world of piggy sex. A fan of Hong Kong action pictures, Roberts was thinking of Johnny To's all-girl *Heroic Trio* when she came

up with the "fantasy-adventure quality" of the finale. In H.K. films, the women are "very strong, loving, but quite fierce. The women in my film are also very loving, giving, and sword-wielding."

Once the movie's fireworks have ebbed away, the triumphant *Bubbles* is ready to continue pursuing her effervescently bisexual, porn industry life without even a hint of apology. Maybe because of her willingness to throw herself into her outlaw sexual identity, she ends up not only vanquishing the destructive forces around her, but achieving transcendent happiness, a guilt-free sexual nirvana where she can frolic to her heart's content.

Meanwhile in the real world, those who make their living in the sex-trade are so marginalized, they live the life of near untouchables. Roberts, who wrote her picture's script with sex worker Georgina Knight, clearly intends *Bubbles* to plead the case of people whose reality is far removed from the utopia attained by her characters. Echoing the only overtly political speech her heroine makes in the film, Roberts argues, "Of course, there are problems in the sex industry for women. But those problems

aren't there because of the work itself. They are there because the women are pushed into the fringes of society where they have nobody to turn to except people who are often criminal types. Instead of trying to save women from the sex industry, maybe we should be making it a safer place to work."

As for the argument that marketing sexual services equates with self-degradation, Roberts points out that "a lot of people in the industry would say that actually, it's empowering. The work really does involve a lot of professionalism, so all the more reason for respect." According to Roberts, society's loathing for whores and dirty dancers originates with "the



Daniel MacIvor as "Godfrey Montana" in *Bubbles Galore*.

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whole mind-body separation thing where the mind is higher, and the body is lower, so anything to do with the body is low-brow, evil. People don't take into consideration that those who work with their bodies might be doing some very sophisticated and intelligent work. Sex workers, whatever area they work in, even prostitutes, are performers and entertainers." Roberts is, of course, concerned about the sex workers who "don't really know any other options, or are exploited." But neither the exploited nor the empowered, who simply want to be the managers of their own industry, are going to be helped by everybody else saying, "This is bad, and we won't even be open to thinking about it in an intelligent way."

In her film, Cynthia Roberts sets up a sort of Platonic ideal of the sex worker: *Bubbles Galore* is both shamelessly raunchy, and as good-hearted as a *bodhisattva*. The casting of the bright, charming porn star Nina Hartley in the central role lends weight to the fantasy, provoking audiences watching this slaphappy comedy into thinking seriously about their attitudes toward people, especially women, whose bodies are the commodity they do business with. ■