

# Alt. Sex. Documentarie

## Cristine Richey's *Tops & Bottoms* By Cynthia Amsden

In 1994, the Canadian film industry acquired international notoriety with the film *Exotica*. By 1996, the reputation peaked with *Kissed* and *Crash*, but it has flagged slightly since then and is on the verge of being classified as missing in action. While *The Five Senses* is worthy of international acclaim, it's far from scandalous. But Canada may be back on the map again, thanks to Cristine Richey, director of *Tops & Bottoms*.

In any other country, Richey would just be a documentary filmmaker, but here, she's made herself a point of controversy by selecting for her latest subject of inspection, sado-masochism. Upon its theatrical release in October 1999, but before the televised premiere on TVO's *The View From Here* (February 16, 2000), *Tops & Bottoms* became the whipping boy of critics. But you have to look at it this way. It's been four years since *Crash*, so eventually someone is going to do something outrageous. *Tops & Bottoms*, the socio-politico-economic-religious (and, oh yes, sexual) romp is the second documentary effort from Richey, whose first work, *In the Gutter and Other Good Places* [also on *The View From Here* in February], focused on the homeless in Calgary. *In the Gutter* premiered at the 1993 Toronto International Film Festival, and earned an armful of awards including the 1994 Genie for Best Feature Documentary. What it also gave Richey was the credibility to finance her investigation into the realm of what she regards as "the human condition."

There are conditions and then there are "conditions." The ones this former TV news reporter enjoys are from the darker side of the human-foible buffet and a little bit of controversy helps. Add a touch of the fringe, the disenfranchised, and you'll be hard pressed to find an underdog she doesn't want to feed or at least

scratch around the ears. Richey tried the news story route. At 4:30 p.m. one afternoon in the early 1990s, while working for CBC, she began an interview with a woman dying of bowel cancer during a doctors' strike. Two thoughts were playing simultaneously: "I'm never going to see this woman alive again and I hope she gets really emotional in front of the camera. It was disgusting."

The cognitive dissonance of the experience was stultifying. Richey finished the story, quit her job and turned to documentary filmmaking. It was her solution to the superficiality of news coverage. *In the Gutter* took four years to make while *Tops & Bottoms* took five. "Investigating a subculture empowers me because I am seeing things that most people wouldn't want to see." She is also seeing things that require time to be seen properly. *Tops & Bottoms* approaches S&M ideologically, first from a historical perspective, working its way up from the flagellating monks in the Middle Ages, through the 1700s and the Marquis de Sade, the 1800s and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Dr. Krafft-Ebing and the Victorian concept of corporeal punishment in schools, along to Hitler and Eva Braun and ending with an analysis of the feast of capitalism. The narrative is complemented by the theories of Erich Fromm, University of Toronto's philosophy professor and media guru Mark Kingwell, Brother Leo Callahan from St. Michael's Academy in New York and Dr. Paul Fedoroff of the Clarke Site of the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health. To avoid being completely theoretical, Richey follows the relationship of one specific master/slave relationship, Robert and Mary Dante, and their slave-in-training, Mercedes, which vacillates between *ménage à trois* to *fromage à trois*, depending on one's viewpoint.

It's a very bright October morning on Queen Street West in Toronto, positively the wrong time of day to conduct an interview with the documentarian on this subject. But the truth of the matter is that by interspersing bits of pierced genitalia, the message can be obscured (blotted out occasionally) and it is best to see if the material can stand up under the full logic of day. Finding her way into this world "was one of those serendipitous moments," Richey recalls about her original inspiration for *Tops & Bottoms*. "I was editing *In the Gutter* in Toronto and I was looking at this loft space at the same time as another gentleman. The landlord was showing us the 'show suite' and opens the door to a loft that contained just a bed, the largest vat of Vaseline I'd ever seen in my life and two very large women with three telephones. It was a phone sex business." The memory of the image still makes her laugh. "Anyway, I ended up going for coffee with this man, and he spent hours telling me about his sex life and brought me into this world. It was another year before I finished *In the Gutter*, but I realized, this was my next project. I did see him two years later at a party. He was dressed as a little girl."

Rudy Buttignol, creative head of documentaries at TVO and commissioning editor of *Tops & Bottoms*, threw down the

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gauntlet to Richey. "People avoid pain at all costs," he surmised. "Pharmaceutical companies are making a fortune because of it. So why are these people paying for pain?" Richey took up the challenge and waded in. At first, she admits to touristizing the scene. Armed, initially, with a video-cam, she began to reconnoitre around fetish parties, but the camera was quickly taken away. It offended the dominants who liked their illusion of control. She became a spy in the house of perverse love. "I'd wear a data recorder with a microphone in my rubber suit with a little hole cut out. It became a game to get great conversations. I have thousands of tapes of voice-overs that I'll never use."

The S&M community understood Richey's agenda, and while their compliance was consensual—a pivotal concept in the scene—there was also the unspoken understanding that one day the filmmaker would cross the line and participate. At one private party she arrived with notebook in hand. Guests jokingly suggested they had devised the appropriate torture for her. "Put her up in shackles with her pen in one hand and her pad in the other," Richey recalls. That was also the party where push did come to shove and her refusal to participate resulted in Robert Dante excommunicating her from the scene. It took eight months of supplication to reestablish her contacts, but she never traded her backside for the story.

Masochism must be, at least in part, a component of any filmmaker's character particularly when it comes to finding the financial backing for a project. "The idea was originally pitched in June of 1995 to ARTE, the French/German television network. That took two and a half years to get signed. TVO came on board as soon as Buttignol read the opening quote from Eric Fromm about how, in times of social anxiety or insecurity, sadomasochistic character structures develop in society." Reportedly, TVO had to do continuous handholding with ARTE to keep it in the game. The subject of S&M was, evidently, the source of some nervousness. Once those components were locked down, Richey was able to go to Telefilm, Showcase, WTN and the NFB et al to put the money together. Financing was an ongoing ordeal for four years.

Indeed, the initial shock/schlock value of S&M does cause a knee-jerk reaction. Few, if any, would react with a yawn. Upon investigation, Richey did discover a form of sexual ennui. Months of fetish parties gave way to the realization of performance sex, which then splits into the "S&M bunnies" and "straw dominants" versus the dyed-in-the-wool "sexual outlaws." Now that fetish parties have gone mainstream, all the hardcore people have gone back underground. However, if the clubs are the stage, then who wrote the script for these pilgrims? The answers were not to be found in the thwacking soundtrack of bottoms being paddled,



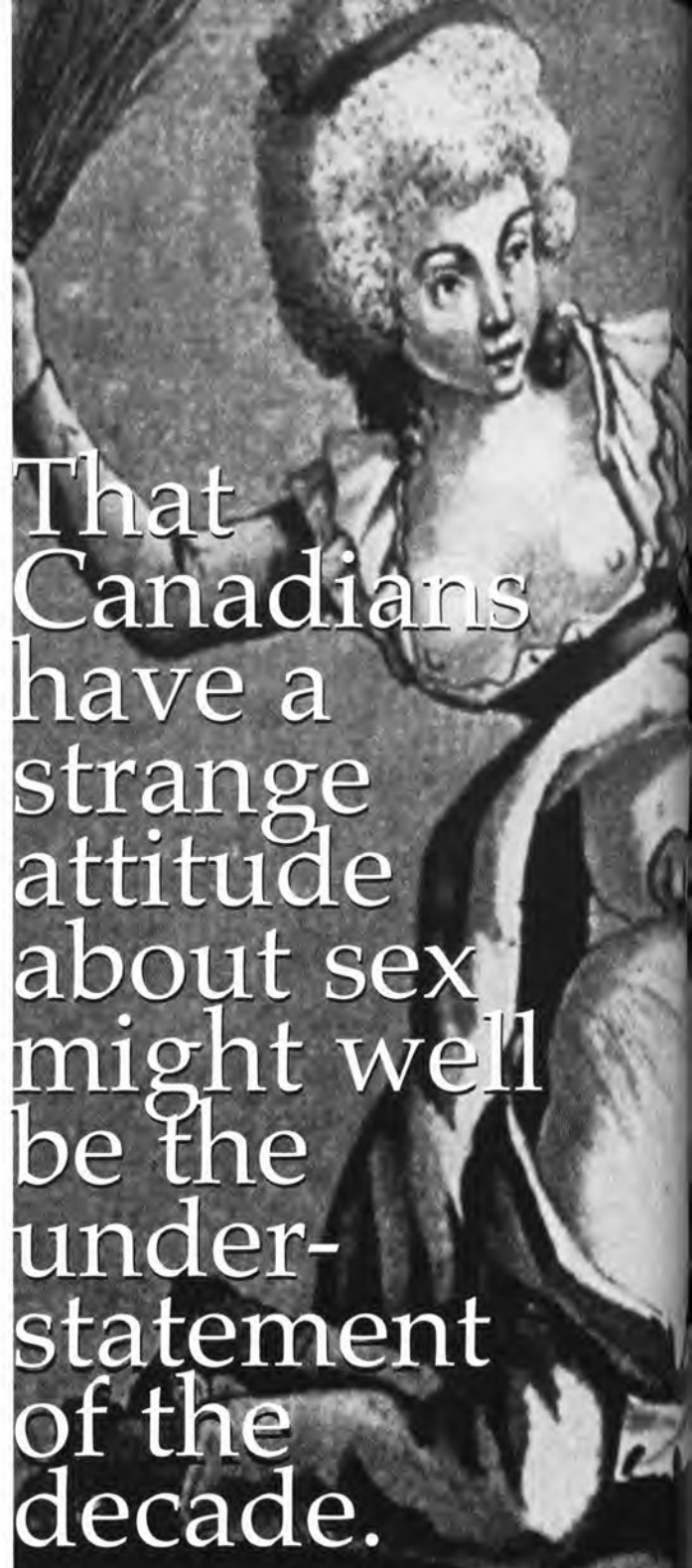
so Richey headed south to Washington, D.C. to do archival work. It was the most gratifying portion of the project. The historical, while informative, is *de rigueur*. It's not until the documentary moves into the 20th century and Richey invokes Hitler and Fromm that she simultaneously covers new ground and upsets most people.

The source of controversy is two-fold: details and grand theories. The first starts with the Second World War and Adolf Hitler's sex life. "The editor, Jack Morin, and I had some disputes about the section on Hitler. He didn't feel comfortable going in that area because there wasn't any real proof. Spears in his biography, says that Hitler liked to be kicked by American movie stars. He was a very submissive being around them. Leni Riefenstahl (Hitler's documentary filmmaker of choice) said the same thing. There was a report that she slept with him and that he liked to be kicked in the bedroom. But with Eva Braun, he was a switch (having the capacity to dominate; whereas with others, he preferred to be dominated). He liked to enlarge himself and dominate a meek, mild woman, make her wait all the time. She never had any money and she'd have to wait outside for three hours while he was having dinner. There was a discussion in the editing room about how far we'd like to take this, but now I see there's a book on Hitler's love life discussing these aspects."

Moving from the details of Hitler to postulating theories underlying the success of capitalism was as risky as tackling the Catholic Church. Capitalism is sacred. And it is powerful. It is what ultimately felled the Berlin Wall. "When I first started this I took my proposal, including the capitalist theories, to the S&M community, but they didn't buy it." The dominant/submissive theory of capitalism, which is rife with alpha males—rulers of the universe snapping at each others heels, ready to bury the loser as part of the public spectacle of the almighty "win"—interfaced with the submissive consumers, happily ready to offer up their financial soul to what Fromm calls the "anonymous authority," whether it be the media, advertising, the Nike "swooshstika," Tommy Hilfiger or IKEA. You name it, and they kneel in supplication.

Rather than taking the S&M dynamic and applying it to economics (as some interpret her efforts), Richey addresses how details such as the dominant urge to conquer and the submissive hunger to kneel remain "similar" regardless of what magnification level they are viewed at in human nature. Fractal sociology, as it were: lovers, citizens and their political leader, worshippers and the Church, consumers and corporations. Instead of looking for causal reasoning, Richey presents an inventory of behaviour patterns, showing them in varying degrees, scaling up from two people to millions of people.

The Canadian mainstream film critics responded with all the predicability of well-trained submissives. More, please! "Not enough whips and chains." "S&M has never been so dull." Prior to *Tops & Bottoms*, documentaries on anything sexual were more titillation than information. "Part of the problem with the subject," Buttignol explains, "is that everyone comes to it with heavy misconceptions. The subject was originally taboo, so filmmakers who have worked the subject before have been so superficial that the prurient value has appeal to a lot of people. What Cristine has done, to her credit, is taken the film and tried to make it definitive. It's quite a serious take on the subject and people coming to the film, looking for its prurient value, are going to be disappointed."



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We're more enthusiastic than the Benny Hill "No O-b-v-i-o-u-s Sex Please, We're British" philosophy, and less flagrantly *Baywatch* than the American palette, which has a decided appetite for the bouncy-bouncy, silicone-enhanced girl next door. Consider the obvious. We have Cronenberg sex, which wins audacity awards while at the same time as it distressed media mogul Ted Turner so much that he tried to buy and burn the negs for *Crash*. We have Egoyan sex showcased in a troika of films (*Exotica*, *The Sweet Hereafter*, *Felicia's Journey*) about corrupted young girls which the director palms



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off as the career exorcism of a tormented adolescent romance. We have Stopkewich sex with corpses that launch the careers of actors like Molly Parker. Transgressions-R-Us. Yet, we shimmy away from it. "The Canadian sex scene isn't," Buttignol asserts. "We go from zero to Jerry Springer. In Canadian cinema, sex scenes show the lead up and then cut away to two hands clasping."

Is Richey sex causing knickers to knot up because it is neither an art film nor skin flick? Possibly. The compulsion to watch it is not the traditional hope for more footage of weird sex, but the hope that it will provide a viable explanation. Richey's take on the experience was the honesty of the participants, how they approach the taboo, surmount the taboo and go on to negotiate their needs up-front and in so many words. "I was never trying to support this in any way, just to present it. By bringing the philosophy of Fromm closer to the person who would say, 'this is not who I am,' I put people side by side and say, "yes, in fact, you are like this"; except these people are being more honest with the roles of top and bottom. It takes honesty and courage to transgress. So this documentary is for the people who are more curious and see themselves in this film." •



Director  
Cristine Richey