

What do women want?

TORONTO

There's a fine line between porn and erotica. And two Toronto producers, who are behind an edgy, provocative TV series called *Bliss*, believe they've created a sensual prototype that will arouse you, make you squirm a little bit.

But mostly, it will make you think, and rethink, how women view sex, their sexuality and the places and situations in which they choose to live out their deepest fantasies.

Bliss, an eight-part anthology that begins airing tonight on The Movie Network and Movie Central, takes an intimate, hard look at how women deal with issues of submission, role-playing, even fetishes. It is an amalgam of half-hour tales that involve gay, straight, bisexual, transgendered couples and a threesome. It explores themes such as partner swapping (for the over-50 age bracket) and (mild) sadomasochism.

Many of these stories aren't easily digestible. (In one scene in *Voice*, two women make love while an infant sleeps in a nearby car seat.) But they will gnaw away at your conscience and subconscious.

Bliss has been called thinking women's porn. But according to the production team of Janis Lundman and Adrienne Mitchell, who came up with the idea and have slaved over the series for the past four years, it's much more than that.

This program, which would never stand a chance on mainstream TV, challenges you to think outside of the traditional, male-made erotica box. These are shows, say Lundman and Mitchell, in which the drama comes before the undressing. The emotion before the eroticism.

Lundman, who along with Mitchell at their Back Alley Film Productions has produced such acclaimed television dramas such as *Talk 16*, *Drop the Beat* and *Straight Up*, says *Bliss* is erotica that is made for women, by women, and revolves around women.

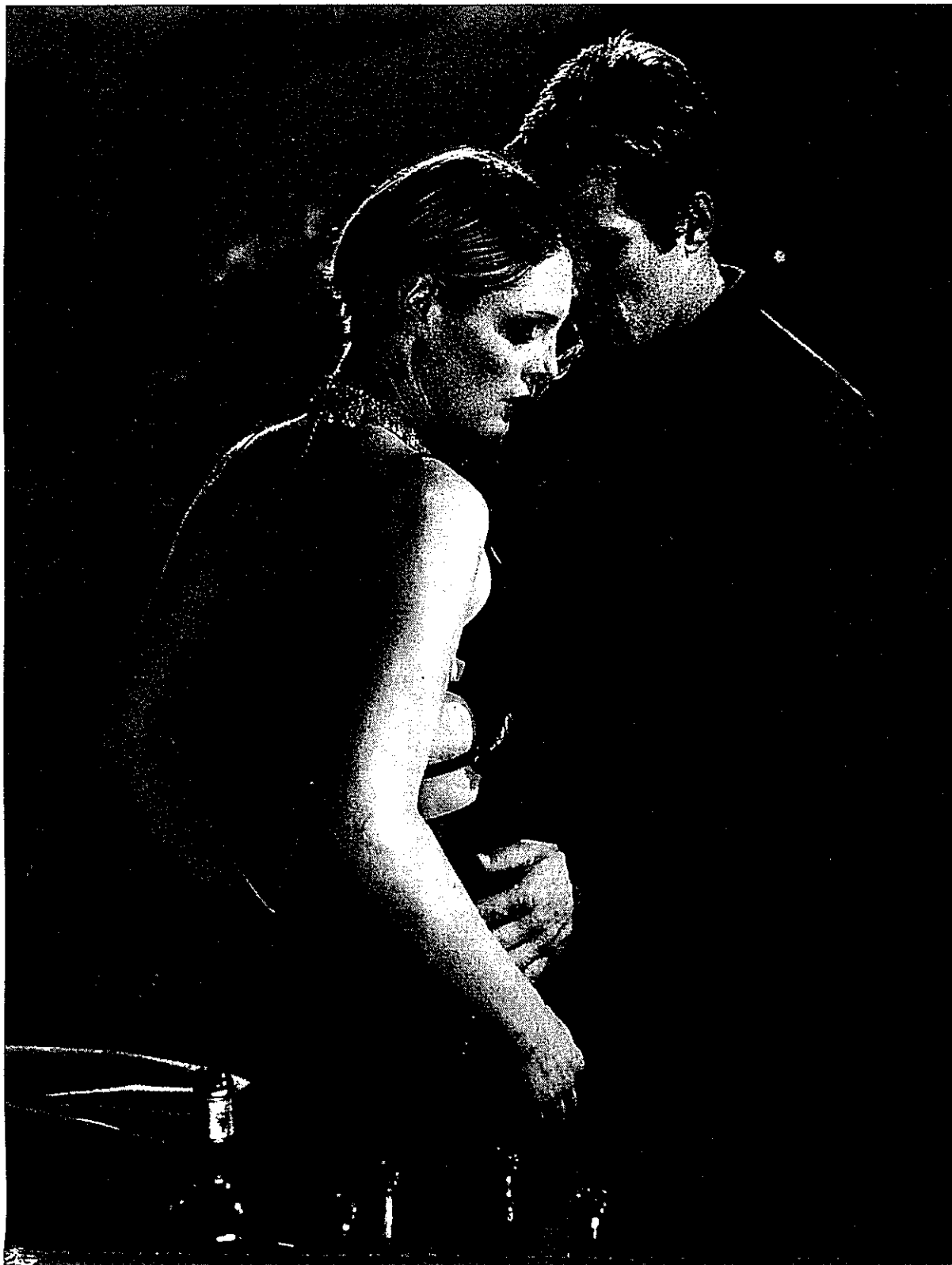
"When women make erotica, the mind is the largest sexual organ," she explains. When men do it, she says with a laugh, genitalia tends to be the star. (There is a reason one of the most famous male porn stars is called Long Dong Silver.)

"Erotica celebrates sexual desire and is sensual," Mitchell adds. "Pornography exploits sex. Women, sexually, are usually portrayed as good women or bad women. There's the virgin. The whore. The mother. The wife. No one person is usually just one of those things. This series explores this whole idea of contradictions. All the different parts. In erotica, it's easy to fall into cultural traps. *Bliss* works against that, which is hard."

Lundman and Mitchell, who worked alongside Montreal's Galafilm Productions for the series, say they were inspired to do it by some "crazy friends" who kept sending them erotic anthologies written by women. "The experience was like finding buried treasures," Lundman says. "Finally, there were stories out there that told women's secrets, fears and fantasies about their sexuality in a candid, bold and thought-provoking way."

The end result is a program — the first four half-hours will run tonight, followed by the last half on March 28 — that includes acclaimed Canadian directors such as Lynne Stopkewich (*Kissed*), Holly Dale (*P4W: Prison for Women*) and Mitchell. The shows are based on erotic stories by writers such as

Producers behind TV's *Bliss* think they have the answer, at least when it comes to erotica, **GAYLE MacDONALD** writes



Mikela J. Mikael, left, and David Lovgren in a *Bliss* segment called *Voice*: Stories to make you think, and rethink, how women view sex.

Canada's Susan Musgrave, Carol Lazare, Sharon Riis and Laurie Finstad Knizhnik.

"For me, erotica is the exploration of sexual journeys through complex characters," says Mitchell, who directed one episode called *Valentine's Day in Jail*, which was based on a short story by Musgrave. "It isn't about wall-to-wall sex, or where the main purpose is to masturbate until you reach orgasm, to the neglect of the story and the emotional dynamic of the character. Erotica is at its most captivating when it involves characters who have conflicts, goals, challenges; and the sexual scenes become more than an act of sex — they become the vehicle through which we can get an insight into who they are and what they are fighting for."

Musgrave, who was in town recently to see the finished version of *Valentine's Day*, which was based on her real-life relationship with her author/bank-robber husband Stephen Reid, says she was pleased with how her words came across.

In this particular show, a woman (Torri Higginson) visits her partner (Adam Beach) in jail. The two end

up grunting under a table, in a prison gym, while a movie is playing. They get caught. He gets punished. She is ashamed, and then not. It is raw, painful and brutally honest.

"I must say I wondered how on earth they could make a drama out of sex under a table," Musgrave says. "But I like to see the transformation of something you write. It shows your work has its own life separate from the creator. Angel's character [played by Beach] was smouldering, sexual. Perfect. He had a lovely thigh and a lovely smile. The actor who played me reminded me of me, when I was younger, of course."

Musgrave declines to say whether the segment was based on an actual, covert event. "I watch it now and think, 'Why would anyone put themselves in a position like this?'" she says coyly. "But at the time, I was so much younger. I'd do anything. Women need to embrace who they are. Revel in it." This series, she adds, is important because it celebrates real women as they are, not as society wants or expects them to be.

Jenny Levine, who stars in another episode called *Guys and Dolls*, says the nudity and sexual role-playing wasn't easy. But the calibre of directors, producers and crew helped put her at ease.

In her story, Levine plays a straitlaced banker who gets mistaken for a hooker by a tall, good-looking businessman (Welsh-born Peter

Wingfield). Levine's character opts to go along with mistaken identity and act like one. What results is gluttonous sex, the unabashed, indulgent sex of people in the beginning of a relationship.

The upshot of this particular episode is that Levine's character goes from pinstripes to fuschia. Asked if it's a realistic female fantasy, Levine says she found it to be a "very raw portrayal of this experience. It's kind of brutal in the telling," the 30-year-old actor says. "It's kind of sad. And there's a loneliness in both these characters that is undeniable. For me, the sexual nature was just a part of this whole character, who was so complex. I've never had to convey so much with so little dialogue."

For Levine, the most interesting aspect about this role is the way it typifies how people are judged in society by what they do, what they wear, where they live, who they're married to, or how much money they make. "None of these things really define you," Levine says. "What defines you is your heart, your passions. No one ever asked this woman what her fantasies are, what she dreams about. This episode tries to get behind this."

Wingfield agrees the sexual nature of the show comes second to the more ethereal, empowering and emotional issues all the stores are trying to get at. "When you're doing something like this," he says, "you pray for someone opposite you who can act, because if either of you appears uncomfortable in any way, you are lost. And for someone overseeing you who can direct. It's a huge risk for everyone concerned, because the slightest miscalculation and you are into Porno Land with Bergitta and Sven, the burly plumber."

Ian Whitehead, a 31-year-old producer with Galafilm and the self-described token male on the set, says the P word was verboten on the set. "The F word was okay," he explains. "Because you can't always make love, right?"

"But we didn't want the word 'porn' associated anywhere near us. *Bliss* is all about looking at erotica from a uniquely female perspective. It's something that has been chiselled out mostly by men for a long, long time," Whitehead adds. "And we're saying, 'Okay, women, now chisel your own statue.'"

"It's not a drop-your-pants kind of series. There is a great deal of investment, emotionally. ... If *Bliss* gets people talking, gets people thinking, we'll be happy."

Bliss premieres with four episodes tonight at 9 p.m. EST on The Movie Network and at 9 p.m. MT on Movie Central. The second instalment (four half-hours in a row) will be broadcast March 28 at 9 p.m. in the respective time zones.

ON-LINE & MAIL ORDER SHOPPING

Advertisers please call:

Toronto John Sotiriou (416) 585-5056;
Allison Bourne (416) 585-3374; Neil Kelly (416) 585-5460;
Montreal (514) 982-3050; Vancouver (604) 631-6637

ADVERTISEMENT

The truth about
reverse mortgages
for seniors.

Receive cash tax-free to make You could even use the money to