

The thinking woman's prime-time erotica

Producers push the envelope with a TV series exploring a range of sexual scenarios with a frankness rarely seen in prime time

BY MATTHEW HAYS, MONTREAL

Pausing momentarily in between takes, co-producers Janis Lundman and Adrienne Mitchell try to appear convincing as they discuss the setting for the inspiration for their erotic TV series *Bliss*. "Airports," Lundman says, "really, we'd been doing a lot of travelling."

The cold, dreary and mundane aura one usually associates with airports may not seem a likely birthplace for a brainchild as sexual as *Bliss*, but with some explanation, it begins to make sense.

"About three years ago, Adrienne and I had been doing a lot of travelling," Lundman says. "We wanted to find good things to read while moving around. We realized there'd been an explosion of women's literature of erotica."

"When we came home from one of our trips, we started researching and tossing ideas around. We realized there was a lot of sex on TV, but most of it was from a male perspective. Would anyone be interested in a women's erotica TV series? We came up with a bunch of different ideas over the next six months."

As it turned out, those ideas did prove highly intriguing to other producers and broadcasters. Arnie Gelbart, and his Montreal-based Galafilm (*Lilies, The Hanging Garden*), came on board, as did Showcase, along with Mitchell's and

Lundman's production company, Back Alley. The result, *Bliss*, will air on the Movie Network next year, and on Showcase in 2003.

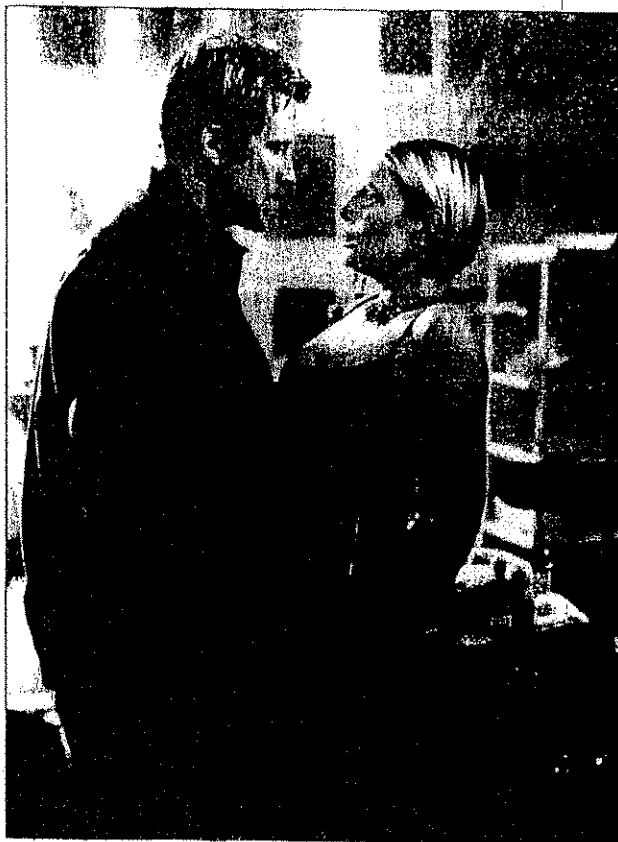
The trick was to create a diverse and realistic range of stories, while avoiding the clichés inherent in so many sexual representations on television.

"A lot of the sex I see on TV is the late-night, really hard-core porn," Lundman says. "And that really doesn't interest me. Or these titillating background scenes that aren't really developed at all."

"We wanted to come up with something that was more reality-based, and explore the characters and what happens to them as they go through this erotic moment. This is the focus of the story, the characters and how these things change them — most of the time it's glossed over."

The team behind *Bliss* has managed to collect an impressive array of talent, from thespians such as Adam Beach (*Mystery, Alaska*), Torri Higginson (*The City*) and Callum Keith Rennie (*Last Night, Due South*), Daniel Pilon (*Dallas, Suspicious Minds*), Jennifer Levine and Quebec pop sensation Mitsou, who will all appear in various episodes, to writers such as Sharon Riis, Carol Lazare and Laurie Finstad.

"To us, it was important to pull together as many different, varied female voices as we could," says Mitchell, who is also directing one



David Lovgren and Mikelika Mikaela appear in an episode of *Bliss*.

of the show's eight 30-minute episodes. Directors also include Lynne Stopkewich (*Kissed*), Penelope Bui-tenhuis and Holly Dale.

And if the talents assembled

seem varied, consider the plot lines — a spectrum of sexual scenarios that could probably only appear thanks to the proliferation of cable channels such as Showcase. It's

hard to imagine one of the main networks, Canadian or American, approving this project. Tales involving gay, straight, bisexual, transgendered and threesome set-ups are all being shot, as well as themes of cybersex and sadomasochism. Dialogue calls for actors to utter words that are far franker and saucier than your average prime-time language.

Fans of poet, journalist and novelist Susan Musgrave will undoubtedly want to tune in for the episode she penned, in which a woman writer visits a man she's enamoured with in prison on Valentine's Day. The two end up making love clandestinely underneath a table, until they are caught in the act and punished by prison guards. After this experience, the female protagonist must decide about the future of her relationship with the prisoner.

"I think it might be based on a true story," Lundman speculates. "But I don't know."

Fittingly, the episode will be directed by Dale, who co-directed (with Janis Cole) the landmark 1981 documentary feature *P4W: Prison for Women*, an institutional profile of what was then Canada's only women's prison.

The creators of *Bliss* concede that they'd like to make it as envelope-pushing as possible, something that's not always feasible in a medium as conservative as TV is — even cable TV.

"Both Adrienne and I would like to push it a lot more," Lundman says. "But the broadcaster wants to air this in prime time. And, absolutely, we want this in prime time, so people will see it. But there are restrictions in terms of the Broad-

cast Act and what people feel comfortable showing.

"Also, we have wonderful actors here and I don't want to take them to places they're not comfortable. It's not about taking off your clothes and exposing your body — it's about exposing your mind and your vulnerability and your emotions."

Laura Michalchyslyn, with program development at Showcase, says there were limits, but they were reasonable and not intended to constrain creativity.

"We've had lots of dialogue about how far the directors can go," she says. "We said that they should use their judgment and think about the same integrity their film work has shown."

"We do abide by the Canadian Broadcast Act. There are certain limits we have to recognize: no bestiality, no use of minors, no penetration. We showed them the list, but it was meant as nothing more than an FYI."

Which is an indication of the fine high-wire act the women behind *Bliss* are walking. On the one hand, this is intended to be a no-holds-barred exploration of the erotic; on the other, it shouldn't come across as B-grade sleaze.

"This isn't just about sex," Mitchell says. "This is a series which really explores emotional and psychological journeys."

"The thing we don't want to touch are soft porn, stories that aren't about three-dimensional characters. . . . Contentious subject matter can be done just as long as there's insight into character and depth of story."

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