

In Bliss, sex is only part of the story

New anthology series takes female point of view and focuses on moral consequences

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Canadian Press

TORONTO - Erotic fiction, but from a woman's point of view, is promised in *Bliss*, a new anthology series that debuts Thursday on The Movie Network.

Which raises the question: how does it differ from good old-fashioned men's erotica?

"All of the female characters go through a journey of some kind, and they're changed by their erotic experience," said Janis Lundman of Back Alley Films, one of the creators and co-producers of the eight-episode series, shot in Montreal.

In other words, after the sex there are consequences, unlike the traditional wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am approach.

Take the episode *Valentine's Day in Jail*, directed by Holly Dale, starring Torri Higginson and based on a semi-autobiographical short story by award-winning B.C. author-poet Susan Musgrave.

Kate (Higginson) visits her drug-smuggling boyfriend, Angel (Adam Beach), in prison. They have a furtive but steamy sexual coupling under a covered table in the visitation room, but they get caught. She is humiliated by the guard, who informs her that Angel has plenty of other girlfriends, too.

Adrienne Mitchell, Lundman's partner, explains that unlike hard-core porn dramas, which are usually soft on story, *Bliss* offers a more holistic experience.

"We want to bring more interesting,



CP
Torri Higginson and Adam Beach star in *Bliss*, shot in Montreal.

fully fleshed-out, developed characters and interesting stories that are thought-provoking," she said. "You can't just say the sex is here and the emotions are over here - you can't compartmentalize it like that. These are dramas with an erotic dilemma."

Mitchell hopes couples will enjoy watching *Bliss* together. But will guys sit still for a sexual drama with moral consequences?

"As long as his wife's got him tied up to the chair!" joked Musgrave, who admits her original story was much heavier on consequences, in that Kate got pregnant and Angel was killed in a prison riot.

She agrees it makes for better TV if the couple spends more time under the table and less time suffering.

But Lundman and Mitchell fervently deny that their erotica moralizes or portrays men as heels, even though in two of the series' other sizzling instalments available for preview, the women seem disappointed when they learn their lovers are married with children.

Hardly Blissful.

Mitchell stresses that their stories are directed, written and produced by women and while they might not always be "as easily digestible" as those created by men, the women are just as liberated in their sexual encounters.

"There are areas where you are going into the dark recesses of a character's mind," she said. "That's how the sexuality ties into that."

Higginson admits to being somewhat prudish about doing sex scenes, especially in dramas where the women are usually objectified. But she says she saw beauty and vulnerability in the *Bliss* script "and realized that the sexual content could, in a way, take a back seat."

But won't that be a problem in a show ostensibly about sex?

"Sex is always good in the back seat," said Musgrave, who dismisses the old perception that men just want sex while women prefer to be wined and dined first.

"I don't like the wining and dining if I'm just lusting after someone," she said. "Sometimes I've been with men and I just wished they'd shut up."

Conversely, Musgrave suspects many men are more complicated about sex than their stereotype image indicates, and perhaps are left with a hollow feel-

ing by the meaningless sex portrayed in traditional porn.

"It depends on the guy," Mitchell added. "There are some guys that find pornography extremely dull and maybe this is wonderful for them."

Although they are airing on pay-TV, the half-hour episodes - co-produced with Montreal's Galafilm Productions - were designed for airing on a com-

mercial channel like Showcase, and so run about 22 minutes each. Mitchell is optimistic about the series's chances at both renewal and export sales.

"This is a high-quality series," she said. "These are expensive shows to make. They're not cheap."

✦ *Bliss* debuts with four episodes Thursday on M1, beginning at 9 p.m.

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