



VALENTINE'S DAY IN JAIL: Adam Beach and Torri Higginson in an episode of the series *Bliss*.

By women, for women

New literary, Canadian erotica on TV wants to explore female sexuality

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There was a moment, during the shooting of one episode of a new series of erotic stories for television, when actor Peter Wingfield felt like "an absolute piece of meat."

"I was lying there, practically naked on a bed, and the director and the female lead were having a conversation above me. They were talking about what the actor would feel comfortable doing, and they were completely ignoring me," says Wingfield, a Vancouver-based Brit who plays the male lead in "Guys And Dolls."

Also starring Canadian actress Jenny Levine, it's a story about a female lawyer who gets involved in a purely sexual relationship with a man she meets in a bar, and is one of eight 30-minute installments of *Bliss*, a Canadian-made series aimed at women. Four episodes will air back-to-back on The Movie Network starting tomorrow at 9 p.m., and

another four will air the following Thursday.

"It did feel safe," continues Wingfield. "But I felt like I was on the outside of it, and I suspect that's kind of what it's like a lot of the time for female actors in comparable situations. It was kind of a wakeup to me," he says.

Perhaps Wingfield's uncomfortable feeling was a result of the fact that the series of erotic fiction was created by women, for women, by executive producers Janis Lundman and Adrienne Mitchell, known collectively as Back Alley Productions for their hip series *Drop The Beat* and *Straight Up*.

As far as Lundman and Mitchell are aware, it's the first time female-centric erotica has been created for television in North America. There had been a series called *Women: Tales Of Passion* on the American network Showtime in the late '90s, but it was changed from erotica to soft porn thanks to a last-minute change of plan by Playboy, which was producing the series.

Late-night television and video-store back rooms are flooded with sexy shows, most of them aimed at men and commonly called pornography, but Mitchell and Lundman wanted to focus more on plot and character than on hard-core sex scenes and body

parts.

"It seemed like everything that was out there was either wishy washy or had bad acting and bad lighting and no story," says Mitchell.

So the pair set out to create a new genre for television, one that included sexual content but put story and craft ahead of "vayas," a phrase Lundman uses to describe the graphic elements of porn.

"There's been an explosion of erotica written by women in the last five years," explains Lundman. "We were talking with friends and family about the erotica that they had been reading, and it seemed like there were magazines that were really interesting there."

The pair spent about six months reading more than 100 books of erotic literature, and eventually chose eight stories for their series.

"There were images that you would never see in erotica written by men," says Mitchell. "There were women turning the roles around, asking their partners to be the whore. You might see a woman making love with a young infant in the background. There were brave stories that explored women's submissive roles and how they deal with

Aiming for high production values

Continued from F1 60627

power dynamics. And they were as willing to go to dark places as men are.

"In men's erotica, you see women there to play a servile role," she continues.

"They're always beautiful, and everything is there to serve a man's pleasure.

"But in women's erotica, everything is there to serve a woman's pleasure."

After pairing with Montreal co-producers Galafilm and selling the idea to the Movie Network, Lundman and Mitchell hired female writers and directors, as well as a female camera operator and a female production designer.

Then they put out the casting call across Canada, making it known they were aiming for high production values and

wouldn't ask actors to do anything they weren't comfortable with.

It was all part of the process of creating stories that would pique the sexual interest of women, and that meant creating a set that was tuned into what women want.

"It helped in shooting the erotic scenes because it created a certain respect on the set, and the actors were able to feel comfortable," says Lundman.

It also translated to fewer body shots — there's no full frontal in the series — and more "exploration of what the woman is feeling during an erotic encounter," adds Lundman.

"Each episode has an erotic dilemma, and the character has to work it through. The challenge is to balance the erotic elements and the plot."

In spite of the short format, each episode follows a set of fully developed characters through a short but complex conflict, climax and resolution.

For example, in an episode called "Valentine's Day In Jail," directed by Holly Dale and based on a story by B.C. writer Susan Musgrave, a woman visits an inmate in prison and has a spontaneous sexual encounter under a table in the middle of a room filled with people.

"Women seem to need relationships in their sex," says Musgrave. "But I think a lot of men will like (the series) too," she says, insisting that men and women have much in common.

"A lot of men are bored by the kind of movies that are made for them.

"I think it's a myth that sex is all men want, and women don't initiate.

"I think women are just as motivated by sex as men are."

Musgrave's opinion about the episode based on her story might represent a certain percentage of the female population who will find the series a bit light on, well, sex.

She says: "I wanted to see more bodies."