

GIRLS' TALK

WANDA JAMROZIK discovers what's on the minds of teenage girls.

IT STARTED on the day Adrienne Mitchell and Janis Lundman noticed the teenagers in a Toronto shopping mall.

"They were speaking a language we didn't understand," Mitchell, 31, recalls. "They were dressed in clothes that didn't make any sense to us at all. We just woke up one morning and found that a whole world was cut off from us. It was absolutely time to dive back into that culture."

Four years later, the two producer/directors are in Sydney with their film, *Talk 16*, a 100-minute immersion in the lives of five Canadian teenage girls that will open at the Valhalla this evening. The film-makers followed the five from New Year's Eve, 1989, when they were all 15, to December, 1990, by which time they had all turned 16. Along the way they talked and talked and talked — about everything, but mostly about sex.

Boys are the absent presence throughout the film. They are the object of everyone's daydreams, everyone's desires. In most other respects, the five girls are as different as could be imagined.

Rhonda, the only black girl, is obsessed with theatre and dance parties. Erin, the private-school girl, dreams of money and glamour. Astra, the bleached-blond rebel, talks about drugs and "scamming". Helen, the Korean-Canadian overachiever, is concerned with God and getting ahead. Lina, the daughter of Russian Jews, is hungry for experience, painfully conscious of impending adulthood.

It is Lina who speaks for them all when she begins the film by telling us that she wants to devote the year to finding a boyfriend. Finding a boy, they all seem to think, will

make them complete. Lina almost manages it too, but with certain unexpected side effects.

For adults, watching *Talk 16* is like receiving messages from a foreign culture zone. The language is weird, for a start. Try "FOBs" (rough-looking black guys, as in "fresh off the boat") "mushed crackers" (daggy guys) or "brownners" (people who study a lot and have no social life). And the sense of self-absorption, while vaguely familiar, seems overwhelming.

Most of all, it's hard to reconcile the oft-made calls for individual freedom and respect with the slavish conformity to subcultural norms.

They're all as bad as each other: Astra going out with jailbirds and ex-junkies, Helen undergoing full immersion baptism with her deeply Christian parents watching from the poolside, Erin gushing about her latest boyfriend, pausing only to note that he's "just so materialistic". The lack of subtlety is breathtaking, and very funny.

"We think we remember what it's like, but we don't really," says Lundman, 40. "Most adults don't understand the pressures the girls are going through now. They don't listen."

She and Mitchell point out that all of these girls have a vast knowledge of the social world, culled from soap operas and talk shows.

"Rhonda would sit there with her friends and watch Oprah and, afterwards, talk about what they would do if their son came home and said he was homosexual, or whatever. Really heated discussions, sometimes." But none of them has a wide range of experience. "There's a kind of gap, between what they know and what they've actually done."

It's gripping stuff, alternately depressing and hysterically funny. "Real teenagers. Real lives," the film's distributors reckon. They could have added: "Real young."

Talk 16 screens at 7 o'clock at the Valhalla tonight. The directors will introduce the film, tonight only.



Adrienne Mitchell and Janis Lundman ... "It was absolutely time to dive back into that culture." Picture by SAGE