

ANNA NICOLE

Director Mary Harron Balances Exploration and Exploitation

The Lifetime feature *Anna Nicole*, which aired on the cable channel toward the end of June, attracted as much attention for its director—Canada’s Mary Harron—as it did for its lurid portrayal of the model/tabloid star and her prodigious assets.

Harron, well known for her interest in society’s outcasts, directed the independent feature *I Shot Andy Warhol* in 1996, followed by *American Psycho* (2000) and *The Notorious Bettie Page* (2005), and in many ways *Anna Nicole* can be seen as a natural progression for the director. Television critic Brian Lowry wrote that the movie is destined to win an award for most convincing prosthetic cleavage, worn by Agnes Bruckner in the title role of Anna Nicole Smith. She’s flanked by a brilliantly cast Martin Landau as billionaire J. Howard Marshall and Adam Goldberg as Smith’s lawyer, Howard K. Stern.

Based on the 2011 *New York Magazine* article “Paw Paw & Lady Love” by Dan Paul Lee, the script was written by Joe Batteer and John Rice, and filmed in Georgia by Peace Out Productions and Storyline Entertainment in association with Sony Pictures Television. With fewer than 20 days allotted for production, cinematographer Michael Simmonds (*Man Push Cart*, *Project Nim*, *Paranormal Activity 2*) employed two Panavised ARRI Alexa cameras outfitted with Panavision Primo lenses to capture footage for the project. The production—ruled by the necessities of the makeup and hair department—was

Anna Nicole follows the swift rise and fall of Vickie Lynn Hogan, a Texas high school dropout and single mother with dreams of a better life. Realizing the power of her beauty, Vickie accepts a job as a dancer at topless bar, where she changes her name to Anna Nicole Smith and first makes her mark.



PHOTOS BY BOB MAHONEY

Agnes Bruckner as Anna Nicole Smith

Spotlight: MARY HARRON, DIRECTOR

Q&A

With your interest in objects of social stigma, had you been touched by Anna Nicole Smith's story before Lifetime came to you with the project?

Mary Harron: Yes, I was always intrigued by Anna Nicole. First because those early Guess photos were so amazing, and then because she went into these cycles of success, downfall and reinvention. I was always interested in the lives of beauty queens, having done a film about Bettie Page, and Anna's story was like [Marilyn] Monroe replayed in a more grotesque way for the reality TV age. I always found her likable and remember being very upset reading about the death of her son.

You've commented that Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* was willfully misunderstood as a work of satire. Do you think Smith is similarly willfully misunderstood?

I wouldn't say she's misunderstood in that way. However, people did delight in trashing her, and the way she was abused in the media was quite frightening, even if she was complicit in it.

How did you decide to tell Smith's story from her own point of view, and what were some of the benefits of that strategy?

The script was written from her point of view, with a voiceover, and it made sense to keep it that way. If you're telling someone's story from childhood to death, it helps to have their narration. More than anything, though, it was important to me not to have a cold and detached view of Anna, but one that was sympathetic and subjective, that showed these events as she experienced them.

When you took on the project, did you view it as a "guilty pleasure," as many are calling it? And how does that idea intersect with your desire to have audiences see Smith as a complicated and self-aware human being?

A guilty pleasure is just something that people enjoy but for some reason feel they shouldn't! I try not to worry about that, and I don't really use those distinctions because that's like creative death. Stories are interesting, or they're not. I've certainly been offered more "respectable" scripts that I didn't want to do because they were boring or predictable. Which is something you could never say about Anna!

Anna lived a lurid life, which the film needed to show, but that doesn't mean she wasn't complicated or suffering or self-aware. Her self-awareness was one of the most interesting things about her. She was in on the joke and she definitely was very active in constructing her public image.

You've commented that one of your biggest revelations about Smith is that because of her traumatic childhood, her strongest personal relationships were non-sexual. Did you assume her personal relationships would be sexual

because she herself was sexualized, and how did you seek to portray this idea in the film?

No, I think being so sexualized as a public image probably makes you less interested in sex. And like so many sex goddesses, including Monroe and Bettie Page, she had suffered abuse while growing up. The film focuses on four main relationships: with her mother Virgie and her son Danny, and then with J. Howard Marshall, who was a combination father figure and sugar daddy, and her lawyer, Howard K. Stern, who was not a boyfriend but a manager/partner who shared her obsession with her celebrity.

Your filmmaking style has been called "restrained," which can perhaps be seen as criticism but can also be viewed as a technique for creating structure. What were some of the constraints of this project, and how did they end up shaping the film?

Well, the biggest constraint was having only 20 days to shoot on a tight budget. The whole shoot took place in Atlanta, which had to stand in for Texas, Los Angeles, the south of France and a Greek island, so that was challenging. One of the reasons I wanted Michael Simmonds to shoot the film was because he had done beautiful work on minute budgets in his films with Ramin Bahrani, often working only with available light.

I think my favorite scene visually was one shot in the bathroom of a pizza parlor where Anna passes out from drugs. It was tiny, we only had an hour or two, and yet what Mike did with the camera was so interesting and trippy that it feels like a visual effect.

And, inevitably, what is your advice for aspiring female directors?

Try and develop a thick skin for criticism and rejection—which is hard for women, I know—and don't give up.



Adam Goldberg (foreground left, next to Anna Nicole) plays lawyer Howard K. Stern



Martin Landau as octogenarian millionaire and Anna Nicole's husband J. Howard Marshall (seated)

kept on the run with multiple locations and minimal time for prep.

"The Alexa is the number one digital camera available," Simmonds comments. "It's the easiest on skin tones, and it has the greatest latitude for bright skies and deep shadows. Even though the Alexa has a lower resolution than some competing cameras, it's by far the more ergonomic, and it is so much easier to use as an operator."

In addition to the project's tight time frame, working with prosthetics proved to be a significant challenge for the production. "It was a real prosthetics show, so everything was on the fantastic hair and makeup department's back," Simmonds relates. "I had plenty of time to light because it would take, like, two hours to put the breasts on. And once the actress is on set, it's film, film, film, because she can't go back."

Between the scheduling and makeup, the production was a house of cards. "You have to respect the prosthetics, including how long they can hold up once the actress is on set," Simmonds explains. "It's not like an independent film, where everything's based on where the sun is or a celebrity's schedule or something like that. This is literally based on wardrobe, hair and the prosthetic process. Those things had to come first. Photography and lighting were completely second to that."

The use of prosthetics forced the production to compromise in other areas as well. "The truth is, in that type of time frame, you can only get it so good," Simmonds admits. "You can only go so low with lighting, and then after that it's just going to have to be touch-ups on the computer in post." **dv**

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