

Doris Wishman

**Indie Filmmaker,
1912-2002**

by David Rosen

Doris Wishman once said, "After I die I will be making movies in Hell!" And she probable is.

Wishman is the mother of modern filmed pornography. Born on July 23, 1912, in Manhattan, she died on August 10, 2002, in Miami, living a most adventurous life. She was a self-taught independent filmmaker who wrote, produced (and found the money!), directed, cast, edited and acted in nearly all of her 30 films.

Her films ranged from "nudies" to "roughies" to "chesties" and, finally, to "slashers," her works expressing the underground, cult porn scene of the '60 and '70s. A film critic once opined, "Doris Wishman is not merely the Grand Dame of bargain basement exploitation films, she is the Godard of low-budget genre films."

Wishman stood all of 4', 11" and, for half-a-century, was a woman making films in an overwhelmingly male-dominated sex-exploitation movie business. Not only were men the primary audience, but they made the movies and ran the grindhouse circuit of small theaters that showed them. While rejecting calling herself a feminist, she ran her own business, made her own movies and cut her own deals. Ever resourceful, she was not above using her husband's name if faced with the need to appear more traditional. Her film credits include a

host of pseudonyms like Louis Silverman, Dawn Whitman, Doris Chasnik, Dee Ess, Luigi Manicottale, O. O. Miller, Lazarus Volkyl and Doris Wisher.

The Queen of Sexploitation grew-up in Forest Hills, Queens, attended Hunter College, studying acting. She hoped to become an actress and, in time, found roles in her own movies. Later in life, she reflected: "I'm a frustrated actress — very frustrated. I went to dramatic school with Shelley Winters, and I was far better than she. I know that doesn't sound right, but it's so." Through her cousin, who was a partner with the movie producer, Joseph E. Levine, she got her first job in the "business," a secretary in a film distribution company. She married Jack Abrahms, an advertising industry executive, and moved to Florida. Shortly after relocating, Abrahms suffered a heart attack at age 31 and Wishman was left a widow.

"One minute we were together, and the next he was dead," Wishman mourned. "And really, I just wanted to do something that would take my mind off this tragedy." Moving back to New York, she looked for "something to fill my hours with." In 1954, Walter Bibo had released *Garden of Eden*, the first nudist picture. The movie screened in 36 cities across the U.S., but was found obscene by New York's SUNY Regents, which then had authority over such matters.



At the time of the movie's release, pressure from an activist nudist movement championing nakedness as part of a healthy lifestyle was gaining traction. Bibi fought back and, in July 1957, Judge Charles Desmond of the Court of Appeals ruled: "There is nothing sexy or suggestive about it ... nudists are shown as wholesome, happy people in family groups practicing their sincere but misguided theory that clothing ... is deleterious to mental health"

Wishman saw an opportunity and took it. "I thought, well, I know distribution, I'm going to produce a film," she recalled. She took an introductory filmmaking course and, in 1959, made her first movie, *Hideout in the Sun*. To finance its costs, she borrowed \$10,000 from her sister, Pearl. With no experience but plenty of gumption, she shot her first flick. "When I saw what I had — oh brother, it was horrible," Wishman recalls. "I'd just go to bed at night saying, well, if I spend the rest of my life paying my sister back ten dollars a week ... but that was healthy thinking, because I used to go to bed pretending I had a date with Jack, which is sick thinking."

This is classic indie filmmaking 101, "friends and family" financing, and she would go back to this well many times in her long and prolific career. Her more mature films are reported to have costs only between \$50,000 and \$70,000 and many still generate royalties.

During the late-'50s and early-'60s, she made eight "nudie cuties," including *Hideout in the Sun* (1960), *Nude on the Moon* (1961) and *Blaze Starr Goes Nudist* (1962). Under post-World War II obscenity laws, a form of "skin-censorship" had been in force that, as one source put it, "stopped people from showing floppy, bouncing breasts or juicy, mouth-watering

behinds on the big screen." The Supreme Court's 1957 landmark *Roth* decision helped foster a new porn aesthetics. According to one estimate, between 1957 and 1963 "dozens of nudist camp movies played across America." In these movies, "viewers were treated to endless scenes of nudists playing volleyball, nudists practicing archery, nudists performing on the accordion and nudists doing pretty much everything except what you want to see nudists doing - having sex."

Nude on the Moon is an early example of Wishman's sly, subversive sensibility. The movie shows two male astronauts building a rocket, flying it to the moon and discovering a planet inhabited by nearly nude bathing beauties. Damsels decked out in bikini bottoms and sporting makeshift pipe-cleaner antennae poking from their bouffant hairstyles welcome the explorers. Half-naked men and women populate the extra-terrestrial nudist colony and as they frolic, dancing and tossing a ball around, the space-suited astronauts, in true '50s scientist style, diligently take notes. The movie was banned in New York State where the court insisted that showing nudists in a nudist colony was permissible, but showing them on the moon in a sex-exploitation film was obscene.

"After a while, nudist pictures were passé," Wishman later admitted. "So there was calm sex, you know, very slight sex, not too hot. I went along with that. And then sex became ... hotter, shall we say? But I couldn't bring myself to do hard core, not that it's anybody's business if people want to see it, but I couldn't do it. So I just kept making films." Her works of this period were known as "roughies," suggestively hardcore, and included *Bad Girls Go to Hell* (1965) and *The Sex Perils of Paulette* (1965). *The Sex Perils of Paulette* is a porn-melodrama.

A country bumpkin moves to Gotham and finds herself participating in a wild orgy; unable to find a job, she turns to prostitution; finally, she rejects the nice guy who falls for her.

Where nudie movies were innocent, roughies marked more extreme representations of both women and men. Women were cast in stark terms, either good or bad, and, quite often, good women gone bad. Men were more misogynistic, depicting increased violence against women. These characterizations are found in *Bad Girls Go to Hell* in which women kill their rapists; *Another Day, Another Man* (1966) in which wives are forced into prostitution; *Indecent Desires* (1967) that depicts weird voodoo dolls that have strange sexual powers; and *The Amazing Transplant* (1970) that shows how male sexual fantasy can get out of control.

Two of Wishman's movies exemplify the roughie phase. In *Bad Girls Go to Hell*, which some critics consider her best work, the main character, Meg, is assaulted in her apartment stairwell by the building's maintenance. Failing to rape her, he slips a note under her apartment door insisting that she have sex with him or he'll lie to her husband that she consented to have sex. Peggy Ahwesh, a filmmaker who teaches film at Bard College, considers *Bad Girls* to be Wishman's finest work. "Bad Girls is about a woman who is literally lost, wandering around on the run, sort of a lost soul," Ahwesh explains. "It has all the classic Wishman devices: sexual tension, men anxious about women's power, women anxious about their sexuality and what they want to do with their lives."

The Amazing Transplant, a color film, chronicles the saga of a young man, Arthur, who undergoes a unique medical procedure; he has the penis of a dead man grafted onto his groin. The surgery transforms not only his

genitals, but changes him from a mild-mannered youth into wild rapist and, in sequence after sequence, he attacks one woman after another. Such was Wishman's judgment of male sexuality.

In the '70s, Wishman "discovered" the Polish stripper known as Chesty Morgan, a woman with an (allegedly) all-natural 73-inch chest, who characterized a new aesthetic phase, the "chesties." As obscenity standards further relaxed, porn makers began to actively depict scenes of sexual intercourse. This led to a flood of more hardcore movies, many lacking story lines.

Wishman did not go in for the depiction of hardcore porn and released two more softcore spy spoofs, *Deadly Weapons* (1973) and *Double Agent 73* (1974). Among *Deadly Weapons* co-stars was Harry Reems who had gained celebrity status in the 1972 classic, *Deep Throat*. In *Double Agent 73*, after Chesty's bust size, she plays a secret agent who has a camera implanted in her breasts and goes after a ring of Commies selling heroin.

By the late-70s, the sex-ploitation market was changing, offering ever-more hardcore movies. It was not Wishman's sensibility. In rejection of this development, she made *Let Me Die a Woman* (1978), a dramatized pseudo-documentary about transsexuals. Most stunning, the film includes candid, disturbing, scenes of actual sex-change operations. Her era eclipsed, she went into semi-retirement only to reemerge, brassier than ever, with *Satan Was a Lady* in 2001 and *Dildo Heaven* (also known as *Desperate Desires*) in 2002. At the time of her death, she was doing post-production on *Each Time I Kill*.

For more information:

Eddie Muller and Daniel Faris,
*Grindhouse: The Forbidden World of
"Adults Only" Cinema* (Charlotte, NC:
Baker & Taylor, 1996).

Videos

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h8QcOe8I-kI>

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLu3Na2nPWaYkAMEahv9x7P6DNNn-jeBZj>