

by Fritzi Rogers

PENELOPE SPHEERIS:

Penelope Spheeris is among the most promising of the young, independent film makers. As a graduate student in UCLA's Motion Picture Division she made I DON'T KNOW, which was featured at the Los Angeles International Film Festival (FILMEX) in 1971. I DON'T KNOW is 20 minutes of fiction in which a lesbian and a male trans-sexual fall in love. In the end, he goes back to his boyfriend in New York, and she consoles herself by dancing topless in a bar.

HATS OFF TO HOLLYWOOD (her master's thesis, soon to be released) explores the relationship between the same trans-sexual and a male homosexual. Their mutual love, hate and dependency are played out against the background of easy "dope" and hard going in Hollywood, 1972. HATS OFF TO HOLLYWOOD is the work of a mature professional with a firm grasp of the art and technology of film making.

Penelope Spheeris is 26 years old, lives in Venice, California, and has a two-year-old daughter.

FR Tell us where you got the ideas for your two recent films.

PS The concept for I DON'T KNOW came from my observation that there were coming to be more and more gay people. I thought it would be perfect if a gay man and a gay woman could get together, if the man could find in the woman the things that turn him on sexually, and vice versa. I DON'T KNOW is essentially a love story between a man who thinks he's a woman and a woman who thinks she's a man. (These two do not know who they are, or at any rate have no wish to be who they are.)

HATS OFF TO HOLLYWOOD is about a relationship between a male homosexual and a trans-sexual (a man becoming a woman via hormone injections and eventually surgery). Here are two very dear people who are very fucked up, whom I feel a great deal of compassion and love for, and a lot of hate and disgust sometimes. All these feelings have to be good makings for a movie. What I tried to do was translate my knowledge of them as individuals, as my friends, into film; to show how these people exist, what their lives are like. It was really difficult because I know so much about both of them. I had to reduce it to the most important, the most poignant, meaningful things about them. But I think it happened; I think the film is good.

Their lives are incredibly comical at times, and incredibly tragic. Somehow the tragedy always wins out. The film is funny and you laugh yourself sick sometimes; but then you stop and say, "Wait a minute. This isn't funny, this is horrible." What I think I'm doing is making a sociological statement about a certain group of people in a certain time era. These people are degenerated personalities in a degenerate society. It's the kind of topic that doesn't really get any attention from scholars and historians until it's over.

FR Your films have a special realism, like peeking into a murky bathroom. How did you come to it?

PS I've done a great deal of thinking about style in film making, about form and how it relates to me as an individual film maker. I know that I want more than anything to create a feeling of reality. Reality can evoke real feelings. I don't want to evoke fantasy. I don't want the audience to get off fantasizing; I want them to feel the reality.

The obvious way to go about achieving reality is to take a documentary film form, either traditional or whatever. But that can be unentertaining. What I want my style to be, and hope that it is, is a compromise between achieving solid reality and still maintaining an entertainment factor. That's not to say that documentary films can't be entertaining--but maybe it is.

FR Do you have a name for your style?

PS I think of it as being Semi-documentary or Pseudo-documentary or Dramatic-documentary because what I do is observe what's happening in real life and translate it into film, but not directly because I think there is no such thing as a pure form documentary. The fact that it is two-dimension eliminates that immediately.

All film is fiction; so I don't try to be a purist about it by any means. I put as much of my own interpretation on it as I want, to the point of telling the actors what they're going to say when I ask them questions about themselves. Maybe that's presumptuous of me, to think that I know how to answer a question about a person better than the person himself does, but I think that in terms of making the entire film better that I just might.

FR Tell us how you go about directing a scene.



FILMAKER

PS First, I know what I want the entire film to say. The entire film is made up of specific scenes which are a progression, obviously; and I know what has to be said in a scene to make that progression happen. Sometimes if I'm lucky I can get it just by turning the camera on, not having told the actor anything, and get an answer. But most of the time that's not true. When you don't have any money you can't afford to do it ten thousand times until you get the right one spontaneously. So what I do is tell them what I'm going to ask them and give them to answer what they're supposed to say, or tell them what's happening.

Sometimes I write it in the morning. I'll write from 6:30 to 8:00, everyone gets here at 9:00 and we start shooting at 10:00. Maybe we get to the set, and I've got the scene already worked out, and the actor tells me, "I've been to the doctor and I've got syphilis," and I forget entirely about the scene I was going to do, and do a scene about the fact that the guy's got syphilis, or body lice, or whatever the current disease is among my star actors.

But the main thing is to have an overall view of what I want to say. And it's really hard to get that together, because I know so much about them that I have to reduce it. I haven't made a complete statement about these people but I hopefully have made a statement about the most important thing: their tragic situation.

FR How did you get into making movies?

PS I studied art and ceramics and painting for about two years and couldn't really deal with all the abstracts and total non-accomplishment of it all. It didn't mean anything to me. I overreacted and started studying psychobiology, and got hung up in a lot of chemistry and math and decided: gee, it would be nice to have a lot of abstracts in my life. What happened was, I followed a man. I shouldn't say that; it's ridiculous. I was interested in doing something different; I wasn't sure what it was. When I thought that films had a technical aspect as well as a creative, artistic aspect to it, it had a lot of appeal. I was at Long Beach State College at the time, and there was a boy there by the name of Bill. I was starry eyed over him, and he went away to UCLA to make films and I said, "That's where I'll go," to satisfy my technical urge and my creative urge and any other urges that came along.

I've been making films at UCLA for five years, which is about two years too long, except for the fact that they have an overabundance of very wonderful equipment and facilities that I love, and that's why I'm there. And that's the only reason I'm there. I think the faculty is ludicrously inept. The only thing they ever teach you is to teach yourself, because no one else will do it.

FR What does it cost to make a film?

PS I'm making the cheapest films that can be made. I have about a two-to-one shooting ratio in the film I've just finished. That's ridiculous. Why doesn't someone give me some money. I deserve it.

I DON'T KNOW cost about \$500 to make, which was raw stock and processing for a very small amount of footage. It had its rewards: it won first prize at the Monterrey Film Festival, won prizes at the Dallas Summer Arts Festival, won Foothill College Festival prize, won Ann Arbor prize and went on the Ann Arbor tour. It did very well, and was finally sold to Genesis Films for \$1500. It was in color, and it's 30 minutes. The other one was 20 minutes. That can happen only if you know exactly what you want to do, how you want to cut every scene. The only way is to be extremely familiar with your material. Then your shooting ratio just drops and drops and drops.

FR Where do you get the money to make your films?

PS From my salary as a teaching assistant at UCLA I saved the money for I DON'T KNOW, which in turn payed for HATS OFF TO HOLLYWOOD. At this rate I'll be making little films all my life and when I'm dead I'll leave a pile of little films sitting in my back room unless--by some work of God--I get a break in that obnoxious side show they call the Motion Picture Industry.

Ida B. Wells
TO RATHER GO DOWN IN
LIFE NICELY VIA DEATH
GOVERNMENT THAT IT HAS
DASTARDLY THING THAN
BY TAKING BACK WHAT I

Louise Michel
IN REBELLION ALONE WAS
STAMPED OUT BOTH PRE
ALL INTELLIGENT WOMEN
LATER RISE IN REBELLION

Virginia Woolf
INSTEAD I WOULD VENTURE TO GUESS
THAT ANON WHO WROTE SO MANY
YEARS WITH IT SUCCEED THEM WAS
OFTEN A WOMAN -1929

Lucretia Mott
THE QUESTION ASKED BY
WOMAN WANT MORE THE
ANSWER SHE ASKS NOT
BUT AS RIGHT SHE IS SER
GOVERNED BY LAWS IN THE
WHICH SHE HAS NO VOICE

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WOMEN HAVE BEEN ERASED FROM THEIR
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