When a writer goes in search of the great auteur of the golden age of porn, she gets more than she bargained for.

BY TONI BENTLEY

Photography by Marius Bugge
As a professional ballerina, I barely finished high school, so my sense of inadequacy in all subjects but classical ballet remained adequately high. In the year since I became a writer, my curiosity has roamed from classical literature to sexual literature to classic sexual literature. After a few months ago, I decided to take a much-needed break from toiling over my never-to-be-finished study of Proust, Tolstoy and Elmore Leonard to bone up on one of our most interesting cultural phenomena: pornography. I had heard of this long-ago era called the “golden age,” so I thought I would start my education at the beginning, often—though not always—a good place to start.

In 24 months, Metzger made five hardcore Henry Paris films, of which Misty Beethoven is the crown jewel. The golden age of porn has an undisputed point of entry: Deep Throat. It’s 1972 and Linda Lovelace—God rest her unhappy soul—has her clit in her throat, giving an absurdly, and pernicious, feminist veneer to an entirely chauvinist story. While the film’s premise is a frustrated woman’s search for pleasure, it is in reality the ultimate fellatio: porn reliably delivers. This may be a downside, depending on your expectations, but more likely you will be delighted as you realize this is hardcore like no other—the hardcore we never knew to desire, Howard Hawks hardcore.

In Paris, the real one, nighttime in a sodden Pigalle, and the notorious flesh peddlers the Mitchell brothers. (Jim eventually murdered cokehead brother Artie.) Starring Marilyn Chambers, who had previously modeled as a young woman on the famous Ivory Snow detergent box, this film sports the conceit of a normal and respectable young woman who becomes the centerpiece of an orgy—she is devoured—every thrust a bona fide civil-service worker. She is devoured in front of a sizable audience; the Ivory Snow girl is eventually coupled with an African American man, boxer Johnnie Keyes. This film is the first notable porn flick to feature an interracial couple. This film is the first notable porn flick to feature an interracial couple.

As they walk, Dr. Love asks her name. Constance Money, née Susan Jensen. This young woman’s bright blue eyes. The good doctor is both intrigued and appalled by this “sexual civil-service worker.” He books a session with her at a nearby massage parlor. A nearby movie theater and encounters a cute, $5-hand-job gal played by Constance Money, née Susan Jensen. This young woman’s bright blue eyes. The good doctor is both intrigued and appalled by this “sexual civil-service worker.” He books a session with her at a nearby massage parlor.

Top: RADLEY METZGER IN HIS PRIME. Circa the late 1960s. Middle: A SCENE FROM METZGER’S TETO MOVIE THE LICKERISH QUARTET FILMED IN ROME IN A STUDIO MADE FAMOUS BY Fellini. This shot features two LOVERS IN A LIBRARY; THE FLOOR A GIANT BLOWUP OF A DICTIONARY PAGE. Bottom: A SCENE FROM METZGER’S LOVE STORY THERESE AND ISABELLE. Right: A COLLAGE OF METZGER MOVIE POSTERS.

When Misty arrived in my mailbox days later, I placed the disc in my DVD player with considerable skepticism, but a girl has to pursue her education despite risks. I pressed play. Revelation.

First off: The Opening of Misty Beethoven is an actual movie, not an extended loop of in-and-out close-ups. In fact, the film is so good, so funny, so sexy, that you will not be tempted to press pause after the usual 12-minutes-to-orgasm, time-for-a beer routine that porn reliably delivers. This may be a downside, depending on your expectations, but more likely you will be delighted as you realize this is hardcore like no other—the hardcore we never knew to desire, Howard Hawks hardcore.

What’s next? The fourth title that kept showing up on best-of lists of the golden age was The Opening of Misty Beethoven by Henry Paris. Who? Searching my favorite porn site, Amazon.com, I found that this 1975 film was just re-released in 2012 on DVD with all the bells and whistles of a Criterion Collection. I placed the disc in my DVD player with considerable skepticism, but a girl has to pursue her education despite risks. I pressed play. Revelation.

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In the years since I became a writer, often—though not always—a good place to start. When I reached the golden age of porn, I proceeded to Damiano’s second hit and far more imagina-
begins the great ride that is The Opening of Misty Beethoven. Wearing a T-shirt with Bhutanese Express and Mastercard logos on its front, Misty states her rules: “I do a sex scene—shot at Cinecittà studios in Rome,歧视 the George Washington Bridge before committing suicide by jumping into the water."

Metzger learned to walk that un-

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Carmen, Baby

The film premiered in 1975 to rave re-

and accessibility, dubbing it into English, The T wilight Girls ("that obra-defeated, dimly lit bar on New York City’s Low-

And God Created  Woman,

New York Times,

The Private Afternoons of Pamela Mann,  Naked

Audubon $3 million.

The Outer Rooms of Pamela Mann was shot over for more than two years with full cour-

back hard-core "fils," as he calls them, all released in the 1970s. It is these films on which Prior is known now, rather errone-

Linda Lovelace’s Deep Throat.

The film has real hard-core sex, showing a sexy off-Broadway play (in which an unknown Sylvester Stalone played a randy East Side playboy)."

the film. He bought it for $5,000, and after his usual dulls and edits, the film was released in 1966 with the tagline “It is entirely possible to make excitation a way of life.” By 1966 standards it was hot and edgy. It became a sensation, pulling in an unprecedented female audience to help the nascent Mitchell and adding spurring taglines for the ad campaign. It was a winning formula at just the right time: pre-hard-core censorship of any age of Aquarius in full swing.

Audubon—

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wist erotic film released in the 1960s, and the sensational 1957 French import

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Shooting on a Sunday morning—"Every independent filmmaker's best friend," says Metzger—the crew, director and actors were onboard for hours as the bus cruised up and down the avenue, the tourists below oblivious to the events on the top deck.

Within two years, however, Metzger abruptly stopped making hardcore. "I'd done everything I wanted to do. I was done," he says. Shortly thereafter he stopped making films altogether. He cites one factor that played a role in his filmic disappearance: the long, painful death from cancer of his production partner at Audubon Films, Ava Leighton, who had been with him from the beginning. By then, the mid-1980s, the industry had changed, Metzger says. "And when she died, all the fun went out of it. Her death left a great void."

Unlike so many of the players in the early days of hardcore who sold their films for a pittance, losing out on future millions, Metzger retained full ownership of his. (Distripix currently distributes all the Henry Paris films in remastered form.) Since that time, he has played on the fringe with ideas and scripts and insists he may have another movie in him. Who knows?

There is a common theme to Metzger's films, both hard and soft, uncommon in a genre designed to sexually excite: classic love stories of separation and reconciliation. The Wrong Girls, The Alley Cats, Score, The Image, The Private Afternoons of Pamela Mann, Naked Came the Stranger and of course Misty Beethoven all feature this conceit. Unlike most Hollywood love stories, the journey of separation in Metzger's oeuvre inevitably involves sexual adventures that not only are given full play but, more often than not, are the actual catalysts for the couple's reconciliation. All the fun and games take place in sophisticated, rich (no one works for a living in Metzger's world) and exotic settings. "Who wants to see sex in a den?" Metzger says. Sex is portrayed as a unifying, guiltless, happy indulgence—the utopian dream that was the promise of the sexual revolution before the unforeseen consequences of the 1980s sent fornication to condoms and condoms.

Although Metzger is best known for Misty Beethoven, I believe his masterpiece came earlier, with his 1968 film Thérèse and Isabelle, in which love and sex meld so deeply and cling so close to the bone that even Metzger the master jokester surrendered to the only serious tagline of his career: "A love story." And so it is.

In keeping with his usual practice of basing films on works of literature—"I came from the editing room, and I wasn't very secure in creating narrative story structure"—Metzger bought the rights to a novel by the cult French writer Violette Leduc. He remembers the one thing she said to him before he made the movie: "Don't make a dirty picture." And he didn't—and in doing so, Radley Metzger (not as Henry Paris) made his most erotic film ever.

Shot outside Paris in somber, velvety black-and-white by the great Hans Jura, with an evocative original score by Georges Auric, the film is a haunting, lyrical tone poem starring the luminescent Essy Persson as Thérèse and Anna Gael as the delicate but rebellious Isabelle. When I ask Metzger what he wanted most in a female lead, he doesn't miss a beat: "Innocence." He found it in spades in these two young actresses. Using an abandoned monastery as a boarding school, the film tells the story of beautiful schoolgirls who fall in love under the scrutinizing gaze of parents, schoolmistresses and, most critically wicked of all, their own peers.

Thérèse and Isabelle make scrambling, passionate love in a bathroom stall, on the stone floor of the stark sanctuary with a crucifix looming above them and, finally, outside the school walls, alone at last, at twilight on the shore of a river, their naked bodies gliding into each other like merging shadow selves.

Metzger's allegiance to his source had him layer Leduc's exact prose over the lovemaking scenes, a risky cinematic confection of text and image to extract erotic effect. But it works. Leduc's stark text evokes the intense, dreamlike, anarchistic experience of discovering sexual pleasure as a foreign land. It seems only fitting that it was during the shooting of Thérèse and Isabelle that Metzger fell in love himself, married and had a daughter.

Called the "finest commercial feature about adolescent lesbian love," the film was popular at drive-ins—but only with an added-on ending (not in the book) that Metzger despises. The entire film is a flashback told by Thérèse, who visits her childhood school as a woman; in the drive-in version, at the close of the film she is seen climbing into a waiting car with her...husband. What a relief—not a lesbian after all.

"A 100 percent gay story was a very frightening concept in 1968," says Metzger. But in the intervening years, he has located every single print with the heterosexual ending and, with considerable satisfaction, they are "buried in an unmarked grave."

For me the film stands alone in Metzger's oeuvre—and in the ever-evolving genre that attempts to depict the complexity of female eroticism. He miraculously melded an unapologetic, graphic depiction of female sexual excitement with that most underrated erotic component of all, the thing that sexually explicit films refuse in their headlong pursuit of male sexual excitement: love.

And there it is, that one memorable moment—as Jean Renoir pointed out to Metzger—that makes a film. I remember the absolute wonder of Thérèse's face, close up, bursting beyond the edges of the giant screen, as she endures Isabelle's relentless lower ministrations. It is one of the most beautiful, intimate extended images I have ever seen on film. And somehow, miraculously, the more pleasure Thérèse inherits, the more innocent she becomes, and the beauty and pain that is the deepest pleasure a woman can know is revealed.

Thanks, Radley.