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"Showgirl Is My Yentl": The 145-Minute Showgirls Sequel That Could

By Sherilyn Connelly Thursday, Sep 19 2013

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Written, produced, directed, and edited by Rena Ruffel, who also reprises her role as Penny from the original *Showgirls*, *Showgirls 2: Penny's From Heaven* has been available on VOD for at least a year but now is being released on DVD from Wild Eye Releasing, thus conferring onto it the legitimacy that physical media somehow still offers. The promised DVD extras include a behind-the-scenes doc and director's commentary, but the screener copy provided did not include any of the extras, so we're left to ponder the film as it is — as well as its torrid history, which is no less entertaining than the final product.

Before criticizing the film too harshly, it should be pointed out that *Showgirls 2: Penny's From Heaven* — henceforth referred to as *S2: PFH*, so we can ignore the fact that the title looks like a typo — is practically an auteur work by Ruffel, a woman who is, by the standards of the youth-obsessed film industry, past her prime. Ruffel already had a career before the first *Showgirls* in 1995, and she's continued working since, including appearing in David Lynch's *Mulholland Dr.* For that matter, *S2: PFH* isn't even her first directorial effort, having already made 2009's *Trasharella* (which is pretty much exactly what it sounds like, and a musical to boot). And considering how deeply *Showgirls* was informed by the male gaze of director Paul Verhoeven and writer Joe Eszterhas, so much so that you can feel their sweaty palms on every frame, it's a minor victory that the closest thing we'll get to an official sequel to *Showgirls* — even if the marketing materials are careful to refer to it as a "unofficial follow-up" and an "homage to the *Showgirls* legacy" — is the work of one of the women who was on the receiving end of that gaze. When champagne is poured over Ruffel's bare breasts in *S2: PFH*'s lesbian pool-sex scene, it's all happening on her own terms. While *S2: PFH* is not exactly a feminist statement (though that would make a swell pull-quote, wouldn't it? "Not Exactly a Feminist Statement!" — *The Village Voice*), the act of Ruffel making it was.

All that said, *S2: PFH* is an absolute mess on a technical level. That budget was in the neighborhood of \$30,000, and it doesn't feel like a penny (ahem) of that made it onto the screen. (\$5,108 of that budget came from a Kickstarter — which, in 2010, meant Ruffel was ahead of the curve.) The credits claim it was "Shot on 35mm film, 8mm, and the Canon 7D," but it's safe to say the majority of the ungainly 145-minute running time was shot on the Canon digital camera. Most scenes rely on the existing light of the given indoor or outdoor location, and although the end credits insist that there was a boom operator, the dialogue sounds like it was recorded by the camera itself. There's plenty of room echo and outside traffic, and the ambient sound often changes when the scene cuts between different shots.

This is hardly the first low-budget movie to commit these crimes, of course, and while the go-to comparison for incompetent filmmaking is *Ed Wood*, *S2: PFH* more resembles the work of Ray Dennis Steckler (*The Incredibly*

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Rena Riffel: Writer, producer, director and editor of *Showgirls 2: Penny's From Heaven*.

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the only attempted *Showgirls* sequel, but this is the one that made it to the mainstream market — and, therefore, it wins. The history is fascinating.

Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies, The Hollywood Slasher Meets the Skid Row Strangler) or *Doris Wishman (Bad Girls Go to Hell, Deadly Weapons)*. Actually, Riffel is a far more competent filmmaker than Wishman, who never really cared about the movies she was making. This is clearly a labor of love.

Pamela Chelin at *LA Weekly* wrote a blow-by-blow summary of the film if you're so inclined, but no description of *S2: PFH* can really do it justice. It's intentionally silly and lurid and not meant to be taken seriously — very much unlike the original, as Verhoeven and Eszterhas believed they were making *An Important Movie (Than Can Also Be Jerked Off To)*. This is a ready-made cult film, the cult being people who know the first film by heart. That's problematic for the movie's shelf life, as the technical issues can make it difficult to watch for people who aren't rabid fans of *Showgirls*, and films that set out to be considered "cult" seldom work. (It's why you don't hear much these days about the *Rocky Horror Picture Show* sequel, *Shock Treatment*.) And, again, wow: *S2: PFH* is two and a half hours long, 15 minutes longer than the original, and an hour longer than it has any right to be. Just because it's cheap to shoot on digital doesn't mean that everything that should be used. David Lynch, who's thanked in the *S2: PFH* credits, did the same thing with his shot-on-video *Inland Empire*, which also went on for an hour longer than it needed to.

When I've mentioned this movie, people tend to respond with an incredulous, "*Showgirls 2* exists?" Of course there's a *Showgirls* sequel. The only part that should come as a surprise is that it took this long. What's more, this isn't

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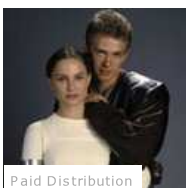
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