

An Interview with Rena Riffel, Director, Writer and Star of *Showgirls 2: Penny's from Heaven*

by *Mike Habberfelner*
September 2013

Rena Riffel on (re)Search my Trash

Your movie *Showgirls 2: Penny's from Heaven* - in a few words, what is it about, and what can you tell us about your character in it?

It's about a girl who is going to risk everything to chase her dreams of being a professional dancer. I play "Penny Slot/Helga", Helga becomes her stage name and the name she hides under because she is running from the law and there is a warrant out for her arrest.

What drove you to revisit the world of *Showgirls* 16 years after the original movie, and your character in particular? And how did *Showgirls 2: Penny's from Heaven* get off the ground to begin with?

I felt I had more to tell, she went deeper than what I was able to reveal with this "character" in *Showgirls*... or *Mulholland Drive* or *Striptease*... all kind of similar Penny characters to me ;). And what drove me is the *Showgirls*-community and my fan base, I wanted to tell this story for them and I tried my best to make it inspiring and 2 1/2 hours of entertaining enjoyment. It was something I wanted to do since 95', before *Showgirls* was released there was a little talk of a sequel (but, maybe it was just a fantasy of a sequel, obviously, lol), and it was mentioned to me that it could be "all about Penny", which I said yes to. So, I was excited for this to happen. And when it never did happen, I thought, well, "it's now or never. That's what Elvis said."

(*Showgirls*) I started initially writing the script way back in 2004, and finally I sat down and focused on it and completed the script years later. But, Verhoeven didn't want to do it because he doesn't do sequels nor does he want to go back into *Showgirls* world, but he said he liked the script very much. I wrote it as a big budget film and it was originally titled "Stardancer". And I went out into the world trying to get investors, but it was just a waste of time. So, after this went on for two more years, and I kept having birthday after birthday, that's when I decided to make it like I had made *Trasharella*. I knew I could make the film, but the film wouldn't be the perfect slick big budget film I had hoped for. So, I did a rewrite on the script trying to make it simpler for a no-budget approach, but I couldn't change much because I was locked into certain story lines I wanted to keep which would prove to be very challenging to pull off locations and props on a micro-budget. I did a *Kickstarter* to raise money for the first week of shooting, which the campaign raised about \$5,100, minus the *Kickstarter* and *Paypal* percentages and rewards, I was left with \$4,200. Which totally got me through the first week and more, plus some magical things happened like the location for Penny's mansion and lots of help from friends. The producers pitched in to the micro-budget as a "fund as we go" approach to get the movie in the can.



What were your inspirations when writing *Showgirls 2: Penny's from Heaven*, and to what extent did you follow the spirit of the original movie?

A big inspiration was listening to the soundtrack to *L'Ors* by Philippe Sarde while writing, it's very melancholic and inspiring at the same time. I think the movie could have turned out a little less comedic if it was performed the way I wrote it and the way I saw it play out in my imagination. I followed the *Showgirls* spirit in a way of using melodramatic absurdity and blunt dialogue with a pay off (that was the goal anyways). But, I was also filling my head up with camp classics, watching *Sunset Boulevard*, *Valley Of The Dolls*, Marlene Dietrich films, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *Whatever Happened To Baby Jane*, and going into my *Mulholland Drive*-world. I was also very influenced by Brothers Grimm fairytales, *Wizard of Oz*, and *The Red Shoes* fairytale by Hans Christian Andersen. SG2: PFH is a cautionary tale of what not to do when chasing your dreams, a fable set in the competitive world of dancers.

How would you describe your directorial approach to the subject at hand?

I gave the actors very little direction, like for example, I directed Shelley (Katya) to play it like Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*, and then after that I just watched her unfold and let it be, embracing it all. Because of the circumstances, I decided to let things unfold as they wanted to and have confidence that it is meant to be this way... that meant I would have to "fix it in post". Which I did, and it was extremely exhausting and frustrating at the end of the day... but, also, it worked. I relied so much on my DP because I was in front of the camera, I would set up the shot, and then jump in front of the camera and go into character, he would be DP/1st AD. My DP (Rick Stevens) is my BFF, my angel, my everything, and was truly my knight in shining armor. ;-)





You also play the lead in *Showgirls 2: Penny's from Heaven* - so what did you draw upon to bring your character to life, and how much of Rena Riffel can we find in Penny Slot?

There is a lot of me in the character, of course.. or at least a part of me, not so much in the circumstances or who this character is, but the way I played it is "me". Like the possum line is something I would definitely say in real life, my friends call them "Rena-isms". I drew upon the desperation of wanting to achieve a dream that never did come true, kind of like making this film and setting out into the big bad world going up against every imaginable obstacle and somehow overcoming it. I did try to use an acting approach I would never had tried on anyone else's movie. And I studied how Elizabeth played "Nomi", the way she made "interesting choices" that may not be humanistic or truthful, but more theatrical and more entertaining. Which I realized I like this approach better than my Meisner technique I had been doing all these years.

these people?

What can you tell us about the rest of your key cast, and why exactly

I was lucky. The cast all just kind of fell into my lap. It started with Peter Stickles, he was the first person I cast. He was a big *Showgirls* fan, so he understood *Showgirls*, the seriousness of *Showgirls* and not to play it as a sitcom, it was a serious story of tragedy. I met Peter at a midnight movie screening of *Showgirls* at the New Beverly Theatre in Hollywood (Tarantino's theatre) where I was doing a Q&A with my friend and the editor of *Showgirls*, Mark Goldblatt. Then Peter came to the premiere at Lionsgate Theatre for *Trasharella* and he loved it, so he said since he totally loved *Trasharella* he agreed to play the role, plus he was a *Showgirls* fan, so, it was all perfect and Peter has also become one of my best friends so we have great chemistry together.



Rena with Peter Stickles



Shelley Michelle popped into my head for "Katya" and then by a stroke of luck I ran into her on a casting a few days later, she is also a trained ballerina and was perfect for the role, and a very good friend and a real sweetheart.

Paula Labaredas was perfect for the role of the maid, "Maria", it needed to be someone who Penny could use her Identification Card, so we had to have a somewhat similar look (blond hair and green eyes) she is also a very good friend and we get along great and I love working with Paula.

Shelley Michelle with Rena

I contacted my *Showgirls* pals and they wanted to be part of this film, Greg Travis, Dewey Weber, and Glenn Plummer. It was very special and meant a lot to me, and ultimately, meant a lot to our fans to see us all together again calling each other "whores".

Do talk about the shoot itself and the on-set atmosphere for a bit!

The shoot was scheduled around everyone else's availability and took about 4 months to complete the shoot, but shot only about 20 days in total. And we would shoot for only a few hours some days. I would always "make my days" (complete the shot list), so I feel confident in that regard that I can get it "in the can" under unfavorable circumstances. There were a few days I would have to complete 20 pages with dances and so many props and costume changes and many actors, and I am proud to say I always completed my shot list on those days as well. We were always happy, enthusiastic, but focused, and would always share a good laugh at least once or twice during the day, kind of cracking ourselves up to the point of uncontrollable laughter which made for good bloopers which I



think I added one of those moments to the DVD extras where Peter and I lose it after he accidentally pulls out a chunk of my hair sprayed helmet hair which had a radish stuck in it from Penny falling into the trash, a scene which I had to cut due to the 3 hour first cut of the film which people told me would be too long to sit through.



What can you tell us about critical and audience reception of your movie?

I didn't show the film to anyone except to Peter, because I knew everyone would have an opinion and then I would start to second guess myself and I just didn't want that. I wanted to just tell the story and edit as I thought was right. The first screening at Laemmle's Sunset 5 Theatre in West Hollywood was sensational. It was sold out, in fact people had to sit in the isles because all the seats were full. And my dear audience totally loved it! I was, of course, very nervous. I didn't know how they would react. But, they laughed at way more than I thought they would, they found humor in things I didn't know were funny, and they kind of shined a light on some humor I didn't even see myself, especially the very long "hot dog scene". The same thing happened at the Cinefamily screening in West Hollywood, it was just great, and for me personally, so rewarding. Basically, going through what you have to go through to make a film like this, and at the end of the day, that is the reward, that the people you made this film for like it and understand it. The critics (the professional critics) have all given it really good reviews, deep psychological reviews, which I think is brilliant and I am so grateful they understood it. I imagine it is easy to not understand this movie, the camp aspect, the low budget execution... I designed it to go further in this direction because of the way it was shot/made and actually was expecting to get "1 Star" votes to round out the whole **Showgirls**-experience, which I totally embrace and actually makes me feel like I did the job I was hoping for. And of course, there are some "user comments" which don't understand why the sound quality isn't as good as **Showgirls**, etc., and why technically it isn't a big Hollywood picture, and they don't understand the camp technique of acting, they think it's just "bad acting". The film's tag line is, *How BAD Do You Want It?*... it's a double entendre. My fan base understands what this means ;-).

Any future projects you'd like to share?

Of course ;-)! I made a new film, **Astrid's Self Portrait**. It's basically my recovery film, recovering from **Showgirls 2: Penny's from Heaven**. Instead of setting out to make an even bigger movie, I went the opposite way and made the smallest movie I could imagine. It's a self portrait and I use some flashback video footage which I have been shooting over the last decade. It's a story of a mysterious woman named Astrid, she is a film critic and an alcoholic but that isn't what the story is about. It is a story of peeling away her hardened shell until we see who she really is. She has been widowed 6 times out of 7 marriages, her only surviving ex-husband comes to help her make her own art film after she has been fired from her film critic job, she makes her avant-garde digital film as an art installation as a rebellious message to her Hollywood boss who fired her and has threatened her life, and it all spirals out of control and her film turns out to be a huge disaster. It's a film noir/mystery. And I am planning to carry this film out (for it's distribution and screenings) by showing it as the character of Astrid would have, as a digital media installation. So the film will be an extension of itself when it is viewed. I also have two other big movie projects I am putting together now, which I have written both scripts, one is a big romantic comedy and the other is an erotic thriller/horror film.



Let's go back to the beginnings of your career: You started out as a model at a rather young age, right? So what can you tell us about that part of your career, and how did you eventually get into acting?

Yes, I started out as a model with Elite Models in LA. I was in their New Faces division and I would see supermodel Cameron Diaz in the *Elite* offices and on castings, and other top supermodels like Naomi Campbell.

I had actually landed my first SAG acting job before signing with *Elite*, with director Bert I. Gordon who has a cult B-movie following for his sci-fi films. **Satan's Princess** was his last movie he made before retiring, starring Robert Forster and the beautiful French actress, Lydie Denier. But I had a boyfriend at that time who convinced me that Hollywood was a dangerous and bad place and convinced me to quit acting when I was 19. He was right, but after leaving my agent and quitting the acting biz, I got discovered by *Elite* while working as a hostess at Stanley's restaurant in Sherman Oaks.

Then I went back into acting class with Floyd Levine, and his daughter became my manager, and then landed the lead in **Art Deco, Detective** (with John Dennis Johnston, Brion James, Stephen McHattie, Joe Santos, and Mel Smith, directed by Philippe Mora). And from there, I finally got an agent after going with this film to Cannes Film Festival and met the agent through attending AFM and my first audition they sent me out on was **Showgirls**.

Can you still remember your first time in front of a movie camera, and what was that experience like?

Yes, I took it very serious. My first time on a movie set was as an extra in a film called **Second Sight**. It was in an airplane on a sound stage, I think I was at *Warner Bros* or *Universal*. I was so excited and also so nervous because I wanted to do a great job. **Satan's Princess** was my first time playing a character in front of a movie camera, and I went very method with my acting approach. My Mom was on set with me because I was a teenager who agreed to do a topless moment where my dress rips during the "death scene".





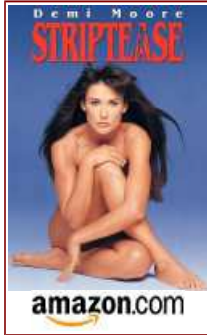
Highlights of your acting career?

I think my biggest and most popular films will always be **Showgirls** and **Mulholland Drive**. It's hard to top those two. Just getting to be in a David Lynch epic film and a Paul Verhoeven epic film is a highlight in my book.

And I think **Breaking Bad** is great and currently one of my favorite shows, so looking back, I am so lucky Bryan Cranston played my mafia boyfriend in the TV series **Land's End**, and I got to work with him, he is amazing... and so were the other actors on that show, including Fred Dryer and Jeffrey Lewis. I've gotten to work with lots of amazing actors, like in **HBO's Breast Men** with David Schwimmer, that was a highlight also (lucky to get that part thanks to the director, Larry O'Neil), and the list goes on and on really.

The all-star cast of **Striptease** was amazing to work with, Burt Reynolds, Demi, Ving, Robert Patrick, etc etc. And the episode I did on **The Pretender** was a highlight, and it was pretty awesome to work with Wayne Newton (Mr. Las Vegas), Leland Orser and everyone on that show.

Getting to be on the grand finale of **Married With Children**, that was a highlight, too. And, even though it was just a small little uncredited part, it was a highlight that I got to work on **Batman Returns** with Tim Burton, that was really cool, you can see me in their movie coffee table book, too. And so many more highlights, actually, your question kind of gets me going down memory lane. I should write a book on this question, lol ;-)



You have worked on both high and low budget movie sets - how do the two compare, and what do you prefer, actually?

As an actress, I prefer high budget films or TV series. They are more organized, they run smoother, more professional, better craft services :-). Better pay, better accommodations, and, from my experience, on bigger higher budget projects you get to work with people who are very experienced and know what the heck they are doing, which is important to me now and I appreciate that more than ever. This can apply to low budget, but the constraints of resources trickles down into other areas (for instance, like not having a trailer/honey wagon and instead having to pee in the woods). It was once fun for me to do low budget, but there are so many downfalls on that road, it doesn't interest me at all anymore. And I consider a film like **Candyman 3: Day Of The Dead** to be in the high budget and the films I have done in Prague with Lloyd Simandl are done the same professional higher budget approach... low budget to me these days means a hard road to travel, I have learned from experience.



What got you into directing eventually, and what can you tell us about your directing efforts outside of Showgirls 2: Penny's from Heaven?

Well, I directed some commercials back when I was starting out in the early 90's, writing, directing, editing them. And in high school I was a choreographer, which is like directing but with dance instead of acting. I also had a boyfriend (after the other one I mentioned) who was a great director and I learned a lot from him because I was there with him during 3 big studio films that he made. So, I learned a lot about the work flow that way, from start to finish. Directing is an extension of writing the story and writing the script, along with editing. For me, it all goes together. Like a favorite quote from Barbra Streisand when she is asked is it difficult to direct and act at the same time, she says, "it's easier, because then there is one less actor to direct." Lol. I eventually got into directing because it's a better way for me to be able to do the projects I want to do and make them the way I want to make them. I wish I would have started directing feature films a long time ago, the ability now to shoot in HD at 24f for a film look and FCP has made filmmaking affordable, before you needed 35mm film and hundreds or millions of dollars and the video back then looked awful so that wasn't an option to make a feature.

I directed **Trasharella** (an improvisational musical horror feature film), also titled in 2011 as **Trasharella Ultra Vixen**, and wrote/directed the short film **Showgirl** shot on 35mm film (which was made before **Showgirls 2: Penny's from Heaven**), wrote/directed/starred in my new film, **Astrid's Self-Portrait**, did the "Break Away" music video for my brother's band **Slow Fade**, and did a music video for my song "Deep Kiss" which was more of a co-directing effort.



How would you describe yourself as an actress, or as a director?

I describe myself as "A Filmmaker".

Actresses, filmmakers, whatever else who inspire you?

I am inspired by so many actresses and so many great filmmakers. I love old movies I watch on **TCM**, Bette Davis inspires me because she could play great roles after 40 and Hedy Lamarr inspires me being an actress who was also an inventor, she invented the Wi-Fi base technology. Thomas Edison's inventions inspire me, of course. I am getting more of an interest in technology and inventing technology or inventing other things.

Your favourite movies?

I love the films by Lars Von Trier (**Melancholia**, **Breaking The Waves**, **Dogville**, **Dancer In The Dark**, etc) and I am looking forward to his new one, **Nymphomaniac**. I have so many favorites, I don't think I can name them all. The same films that I mentioned above that inspired **Showgirls 2:**



Penny's from Heaven, **Eyes Wide Shut**, Fellini's **Juliet of the Spirits**, **Staircase** (Richard Burton and Rex Harrison), **The Swimming Pool** (Charlotte Rampling), and... to be continued.

... and of course, films you really deplore?

Marley & Me and **War Horse**. I was crying the whole time in **War Horse** because of the images of animal cruelty and the same with **Marley & Me**, watching the dog get put to sleep during flashbacks of when it was a puppy was not enjoyable on any level for me, I was traumatized. I had the same reaction after seeing **King Kong** (with Jessica Lang), I couldn't stand that they killed poor King Kong at the end. Very disturbing.

Your/your movie's website, Facebook, whatever else?

www.showgirls2movie.com or follow me on Twitter: @RenaRiffel.
Wild Eye Releasing's **Showgirls 2** Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/showgirls2>

Anything else you are dying to mention and I have merely forgotten to ask?

The last few months have been wonderfully drenched in **Showgirls**. I did a month of "Showgirls! The Musical! Off-Broadway in NYC! And two weeks ago we did Peaches Christ's *Sweet 16 Showgirls Spectacular* in San Francisco, her annual **Showgirls** pre-show and screening extravaganza. I performed with Peaches, I sang "Deep Kiss" live on stage (with 20 back up dancers) which was my song in **Showgirls** during the lap dance scene, and Dewey Weber (Jeff from **Showgirls** and from **Showgirls 2**) made a surprise appearance on stage and returned Nomi's suitcase which his character stole from her in **Showgirls**. Also, I will be launching my own line of Apps for iPhone and Android which will be interactive movies/games, so I will post updates on the website when those are available or other news or updates will be posted on the www.showgirls2movie.com website of upcoming films or projects. So, please stay tuned! And thank you all for your love and support on all these things, it means so much to me and I appreciate you all very much for going on this **Showgirls** ride with me. And thank you Mike at www.SearchMyTrash.com for your great review and for your support and your Q&A!! Thank you thank you thank you!!! :-)

Thanks for the interview!

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