

A Conversation with Jennie Livingston

Sage Russell

ing, provided the title for this film and it is perfect. Paris is our image of ultra sophistication, European culture, and this film burns it, mocks it, by showing sincere emulation. As fellow filmmaker, Todd Haynes, in a joint interview with Jennie Livingston last April in *Outweek* said, "[Those viewers, i.e. the British Broadcasting 'cultured' channel as well as the *New York Times*] who want to see the disenfranchised as victims . . . becomes a genuine, liberal, kind of sick instinct that tries to have sympathy . . . for people. . . . The attempt to be "real" is a mirror image of everyone who is white trying desperately to be a 'real white person.' It still takes play-acting . . . We play those games just as passionately."

Yes, I acknowledge, there is a tragic hue to the lives we see. We come to know and appreciate a bright, petite drag queen, Venus Xtravaganza, her dreams and her realism: her measure of success in drag is being able to get on the subway and to get home without blood and with all her clothes intact. Venus was murdered shortly after this film was made.

Yet Venus is alive for me, testimony to life without the particular social fortifications we are all so prone to claim and construct, fortifications of education, money, the "safety" of Vermont - all the social constructions separating "us" from "them." As Jennie Livingston said in *Outweek*, "when AIDS is cured and gone, there will still be anti-gay violence, drag queens will still be despised." This film, by making "real" the zestful spirits of drag queens in New York even for us behind Vermont's barriers to urban danger, throws shade on our false images of security, on our Paris of sophistication. This will be out on video soon, so if you have not had a chance to see it, it is zesty fun for a future evening - an outing for VGSA this spring? ▼

Jennie Livingston grew up in Los Angeles, and moved East when she was 17 to attend Yale University. She graduated from Yale in 1983 with a degree in painting and photography. At that time she considered herself primarily a photographer. Soon after moving to New York City in 1985, she learned about voguing and the ball world, and headed up to Harlem with her camera. Five years later, her depiction of this world, in the movie *Paris is Burning*, became a sensation. The film received rave reviews, was shown at festivals all over the world, and was released in theatres. Very few documentary film-makers ever achieve this kind of success. This is remarkable for a film whose subject is the world of poor, black, gay male drag queens in New York City. And even more remarkable for a first-time film-maker who had taken one course in film-making, but had never been to film school.

The success of *Paris is Burning* has enabled Jennie Livingston to quit all her word processing jobs to devote herself full-time to film-making and her other creative projects. She recently spent four months in Vermont, where her partner, Vanessa Haney, spent a semester as a visiting artist at Middlebury College. At the end of December they headed back to New York. Before leaving, Jennie Livingston took some time off from packing to talk to *OITM*'s Sage Russell.

OITM: Are you completely out? Do you mind being identified as a lesbian?

Jennie: No, it's fine. I made the decision when I made the film. I made the film because I wanted to, and I think in the process of making the film, either because I was getting older or because the actual process of film-making politicized me, I became more comfortable about just being a gay person personally. And then when it came time to publicize the film, I realized there was going to be a lot of publicity. All of a sudden I was talking to *Time* and *Newsweek*. I made a conscious decision that here I was, I was political, I was reading *Outweek*, I believed that people should be out, that there was nothing

to be ashamed of, etcetera. So I might as well just do it. I think in a way it's a very risky thing, in terms of the film industry being a rather homophobic and a sexist business. But on the other hand, the rationale I made is that the kinds of things I want to make are so weird anyway — they're not all gay, but they're definitely not the mainstream view — that I don't think that one extra fact about me is really going to affect people's willingness to fund my weird films. They'll either like my weird films or they won't. The fact that I'm a lesbian isn't going to weight it either way.

OITM: How does being a lesbian inform your work?

Jennie: Well, I think in terms of making *Paris is Burning* it simply means that as a female member of a larger gay world — I don't even want to say community because I think that's such a confusing term; there are so many communities — I'm more open to a gay male culture. But I think queer people traditionally have a heightened sense of humor and a heightened sense of performance and a heightened sense of otherness. I think how much you feel like an other is really determined by who you are. Some people are gay or lesbian, and they feel like, "Well, I'm just folks, I'm normal." I happen to think one of the things I like about being queer is that I'm not normal. I don't want to be normal. I think I've always had a sense of how women are treated differently, and that also contributes to my feelings of otherness. I'm also Jewish, of German descent, so although I'm sixth generation American, I think I have a consciousness of otherness and of oppression, of what happened to the descendants of my ancestors, that also contributes to that. But I don't really think of myself as a lesbian film-maker. I think of myself as a film director and a writer who is a

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