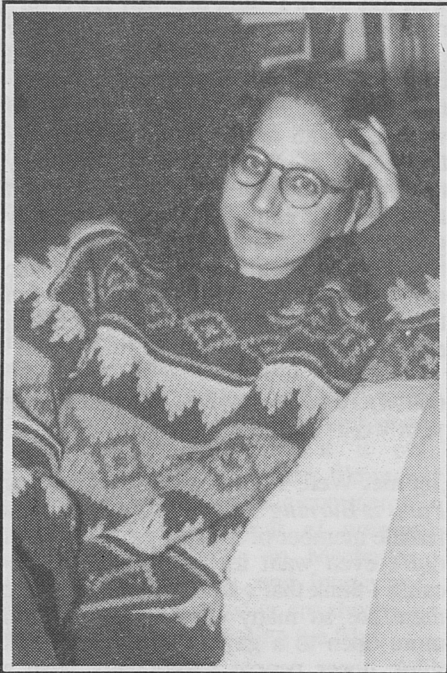


A Conversation with Jennie Livingston

Continued from previous page



lesbian, and that part of my personality contributes very heavily, as do the others. I think it's a trap to call oneself a woman film-maker or a gay film-maker, or a Jewish film-maker, or a black film-maker.

OITM: Did you have an idea when you first started going to balls that you might want to make a film? Or did that just happen as you learned more about the world?

Jennie: It happened within the first few months of going. When I first went, I had filmed these guys vogueing with a little wind-up camera. And I thought it looked good. I just thought, "Well, this will be an adventure." One of the things I got accustomed to doing with a still camera was having little adventures, going places I might not have gone. In a way I think that's how I overcame a lot of my difficulty or shyness about entering the gay

community. I would go to these really wild gay parties at Yale and take pictures. And it was a way of being part of it, but not having to compromise myself (laughs). I had a lot of gay friends at that point, but I just wasn't very sure. And so that was a way to go (to the balls) because there are great sexual and race and class barriers. Middle class white girls don't just go up to Harlem on their own. But middle class girls with cameras, maybe they do. Maybe they start to meet people and change their mind about what it is that middle class white girls can do. So I started to go and take a lot of pictures. And within a few months I felt like this would make a good movie.

OITM: Do you essentially think of yourself as a film-maker now, more than a photographer?

Jennie: Yes. I'm not really taking pictures so much. I'm writing a script, sort of a satirical John Waters-like film, which is a satire of violence against women in the movies. It's a film with a lot of violence against men. Not meant to encourage such a thing, but meant to make a satire of all the ubiquitous images we're always seeing. Every single movie you walk into there's a woman being murdered or raped or terrorized. I think people don't think about it enough — about what it means to always be seeing those images. It's a satire of that, it's also a satire of a thousand points of light, and it's a little bit about witchcraft. So it's a wacky old movie! I'm writing that and I'm also writing a book on gender for Random House. That'll be my non-fiction project. I do want to keep working in non-fiction, but non-fiction film is just...it's simply so hard to raise the money. I'm not a rich person. I can't not work, and hope after five years I'll be able to finish something. There's a way I was willing to live when I was 22, that I'm not willing to live at 29. Call that being bourgeois, but I just don't know how people

do it, who keep doing it. I think the people who do it a second and third time have some kind of back-up that I don't have.
OITM: Do you get mostly gay audiences? Do you get mixed audiences?

Jennie: The audiences have been really mixed. I think it's definitely had, much to my surprise and excitement, a mainstream appeal. Because I made it to appeal to everyone. I don't think that gay movies should just appeal to gay people. The point is that our stories are just stories, and a good story's a good story. I get really offended when...I remember this one journalist last summer, when we were doing the publicity, asked me, "Why should anyone go to see this when they can't relate to it?" He was playing the devil's advocate. And I felt like, *The Terminator* is really like daily life. I mean, what is this? *Capo Fear*, that's really a dilemma that I had just last week. Movies are stories. You don't have to relate to them, except that they are stories.

OITM: How has your life changed since *Paris is Burning* became such a success?

Jennie: Well, I think it's changed in that it's created an immense amount of pressure. Before it was completed, the pressure was, finish the film, finish the film, somehow try to finish the film. Now the pressure is to come up with something else. There's also an immense business pressure because the film becomes this thing unto itself, and there are battles with lawyers, battles with companies, people sort of stealing money from you, and then other people saying, "You made all this money and you haven't given us any." There was someone from the ball world who tried to sue us and claimed he hadn't signed a release, which he had. Meanwhile, we've been trying to get our money from the company that's distributing the film, because it is our intention to give a chunk of

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