

money to the people in the ball world. The truth is that, once we are able to get the money that we're owed, give some away to the ball world, and pay our debts with some, we're still not going to be able to give well, and the money for the next projects will have to come from other sources. I can't deny that the film has been great for me, because it will enable me, I think, to go on and make other films. It's certainly not about being rich.

OITM: If you were making the film again, would you do anything differently?

Jennie: Well, that's an impossible question to answer because I think the film worked. Within its own demands, it works. There was a time when the dailies had just come back that I wished there were more drama in the film. Most of the drama of the film comes either from the performances in the balls themselves, or from storytelling, from someone talking to me or telling me something. You are either captivated by it or you aren't, but basically the people in the film are very good storytellers. But there's not that kind of (cinema) verité. Rather, it's somebody telling you people get kicked out of their houses because they're gay. You don't see anyone being yelled at by his mom and told to get out. I think at one point I felt there's not enough direct engagement with events outside of the ball world. I think that is a criticism of the film I would make. But I worked with very limited resources. And although I planned to get more verité, when it came down to shooting the film, my response to those limitations was "Well, you're working with people who you know are really articulate. You know you can get them to tell a story." If I sit down with Dorian for four hours, I know I'm going to get hours and hours of brilliant stories. Whereas if I hang out with Dorian or Venus or anybody for our days, waiting for something to happen, well, it might happen and it might

not. And I will have used a lot more of my valuable film.

OITM: What kinds of reactions has the film had from the gay world, from African-Americans, African-American gay people? How have the different communities reflected in the movie reacted to it?

Jennie: Well, early on before I finished the movie, I showed some footage to gay men of African descent in New York, who were really positive about it. The reviewers from that community who have reviewed it have been really really positive. I know that from talking to Willi (Ninja — one of the men in the film) that there is a segment of the black gay community who feel like it makes people look bad, that it's airing dirty linen, essentially, that shouldn't be aired. So I know that there's that reaction. I guess I've been lucky in that the reviewers who have written don't at all agree with that. I actually was kind of astounded that this person who keeps badmouthing the film is this African-American straight scholar, a feminist scholar named bell hooks, who wrote a really angry, sort of yucky review in *Z* magazine. I think she feels like it pretends to be radical and isn't. But I also think there's real homophobia there, almost like, "How dare does this white woman do something on the black gay community?" And I feel like that kind of division is really destructive. It's like Marlon Riggs doing his film saying, "Am I black or am I gay? Because in the gay community they're racist and in the black community they're homophobic." I think it's time for all of us on the left and on the fringe not to make those barriers. Anyone can say, "I don't like *Paris is Burning*. It's not a good film," or "It's not as radical as I'd like it to be." But certainly in terms of putting out a pro-gay, pro-black message in the mainstream, no other film in 1991 did that. And someone may not

like it, but can acknowledge that this is on the side of good, rather than the side of evil. Because I think the right wing is just scary and it gets scarier. In the year after Anita Hill and the Gulf War and the William Kennedy Smith trial, and all of these things, I feel like we on the left have just got to stop saying, "You're not good enough, and you're not good enough." Because it's so divisive, and we're never going to form a winning coalition. I'm sorry. That was a diatribe.

OITM: In your work in general, what are the kinds of issues that you try to confront and how do you get at them?

Jennie: Well, in a way it all comes down to something that a lot of women writers, like Virginia Woolf and Jeannette Winter-son, write about. What is it like to have one body, as opposed to another? You look at your body and you say, "That's my body." And you have this little mortal thing that's your body. And so, in a way, what the work is about is what it's like to have a certain kind of body. For example, there's this guy, and he wants to be famous and he wants to be a fashion designer, but he's got this black skin, his body doesn't own a lot of money, and he's got this penis, but maybe he really feels uncomfortable about it. He would rather be a woman. It's really the question of identity and how identity can clash with the social reality that's outside of that identity, that self-perceived identity. And more specifically, that boils down to, how do we deal with sexism and racism and classism as they affect us? And how does the media, how does living in a media society affect that sense of identity and affect that reality? Because we're just bombarded with these images of what we should be or who's better. And that's sort of what the photographs were about and certainly what *Paris is Burning* is about, and pretty much what this next film I'm writing is about. ▼

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