

Film Review: X, Y (USA, 2004)

By Marcelle Perks

Director: Vladimir Vitkin

Producer: Helmut Gausterer

Length: 90 minutes

In his digi-feature debut, Vladimir Vitkin pushes together all the best aspects of indie filming: non-Hollywood plot, quirky characters, creaky hand-held camera moves, outrageous kinks, all lovingly mixed together with shots of downbeat NY. We lurch into the film straight into a strip-joint, where we make eye contact with Frankie (Melissa Murphy), a reluctant pole dancer. Although (as is revealed later) she is beautiful, the irony is that in her 'sex' accessories - gauche make-up, artificial pink wig - she looks undesirable. She drinks heavily, before performing wearily. The camera films her at odd angles, avoiding standard 'narcissistic' shots. There is no doubt in our minds that we are witnessing pure exploitation and that we are going to get an insight into an alternative view of female sexuality.

A siren sound interrupts her lazy dancing, she falls to the ground. Her boyfriend Terri (Jamie Harrold) arrives and brings her round. When her wig falls off to reveal classic blonde locks, suddenly, like a vampire victim, she becomes more interesting.

The next day we witness a complete change. In an imitation of one of those pod creatures from *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, she wears a fixed face and boxer shorts, in the bathroom she goes to pull out a penis, to her horror it is not there. Primarily with body language, a new reality is established. Not only does Frankie have amnesia, she's also convinced she is a man. Murphy's voice and ability to wear a towel convince us of her dilemma. The new Frankie hates being a woman. Convinced that her mind was swapped with one of the punters at the club, she hunts for tips about Frankie's past.

In her search to discover her new bodily self, she also realises that Terri is not the man he wanted to be either. He set out to become a doctor and ended up a hospital cleaner (perhaps an in-joke at the actor's previous doctor role in *Kingdom Hospital*). Terri, meanwhile, finds out the mysterious punter whose soul seems to have ended up in his girlfriend. Unfortunately, he's lying in hospital in a coma and dies before identities can be swapped. The new Frankie becomes threatened by hostile sexuality, a fate that becomes all the more interesting as we witness it from a man-in-a-woman's-body point of view. Being a woman is signalled as dangerous, the bouncer is sexually aggressive; Terri rapes Frankie when she refuses to have sex. She falls into depression and allows her dominating mother to take her home. But Terri is unable to cope without his girlfriend and he calls her constantly. Taking advantage of his new submissive state, Frankie returns on condition that he work more shifts to support her and do all the housework. This 'man' now takes advantage of his assets, and although she refuses to have sex, she takes to dressing in beautiful clothes like some chic dominatrix. We now have a complete role reversal, before he lived off Frankie, but now she makes him sleep on the sofa and even gets him to dance to strip tease music. Terri has become the new sex 'object'.

When Terri whines for "something real", a darker note to their new relationship is introduced. Perhaps in an ironic nod to the custom of fetishizing female breasts, Frankie has designs in this area too. She gets jewellery trinkets and sews them onto Terri's shaved chest, a ritual that reinforces his new found submissive state. In fact, as their sadomasochistic game gets into full swing, perfectly normal trinkets with messages like 'Someone Special' and 'Try God' assume

a different context. At the same time, Murphy's regained femininity gains a new vitality. Although the SFX are basic, the acting is impressive. At same point, the gender boundaries blur, has Terri become the 'woman' and Frankie the 'male'? Both leads have ambiguous names that can be used by both genders and the new Frankie seems now to relish in her new powerful personality.

Of course, intensity like this can never last. As Terri's increasing debilitation prevents him from going to work, we know that something bad will have to happen. The more they hurt each other, the greater their tenderness to each other, although the final scene sidesteps the gender role issue that all along has seemed to be the filmmaker's main concern. The ending, like the psychological drama *May*, goes for pure horror. The result is a dark love story with an ironic reading of female sexuality. Based on Michael Blumlein's cult novel of the same name, this is a film that defies genre expectations. Like *Crimes of Passion* its real sexual motif remains ambiguous and many details are left unexplained, but it tells a central truth: love remains unknowable.

This film does not currently have a distributor. Check for latest details at this website: www.xythemovie.com/ and upcoming film festivals. Next screening: San Francisco Indiefesti www.sfindie.com/