

Review: Working Girls

A powerful film despite glitches

by Ross Evan West

Working Girls takes place almost exclusively in the claustrophobic world of a windowless Manhattan brothel. Here, for high priced hours and half hours, clients seek to escape from the outside world, to act out secret fantasies, to satisfy their libidos, and to find love.

But *Working Girls* treats their stories only in passing. From the point of view of the working women—and this is squarely where the camera resides—these men are no more than customers to be processed. The film treats prostitution dispassionately, as a business, a job, a way of life for the women who've chosen to practice the "world's oldest profession." But while treating the profession with a cool, unblinking eye, the film portrays the women themselves sympathetically and without relying on clichéd renderings.

Working Girls follows Molly (Louise Smith), an independently-minded Yale graduate, from start to finish of a very long day. She

encounters an assortment of clients: a wimp, a near-violent musician, a sleeze, a pathetic case, a lovely and sensitive older man.

When *Working Girls* gets down to the sex in the sex business, the camera becomes a weapon. We see no romantic glamorization, no soft lighting or glowing skin, no tender dissolves from one loving embrace to the next in the manner of, say, *Sophie's Choice* or *Coming Home* where lovers roll for seeming eternities of blissful soft-focus union. Instead, the sex scenes in *Working Girls* are harsh, cold, and ugly, full of sharp edges and editorializing close-ups.

When not occupied with clients, Molly talks with her shift sisters Dawn (Amanda Goodwin) and Gina (Marushia "Could Use a Few Acting Lessons" Zach, co-writer of the screenplay). The three women joke, tell stories, and scheme to outsmart Lucy, their madam. At least as much as the men with their invasive desires, Lucy's every meddling appearance,

sharp word, and fake smile make the women's working environment less tolerable.

In addition to these central characters, the seraglio is staffed by three other prostitutes: a Fading Queen, a Black, and a First-Nighter. That these characters are so easily pigeonholed is a major fault in *Working Girls*; at times making the film like one of those made-for-TV movies about AIDS/cancer/the plight of Vietnam vets/child abuse (circle one) in which characters are less individuals than they are vehicles used to explore the topic. Co-writer/director Lizzy Borden allows the film to slip for brief moments from the tense and moving to the condescending when her characters deliver speeches clearly intended to enlighten the audience about prostitution.

The limited setting of *Working Girls* adds a tinny ring to some of the characters. The tremendous impact of the unremitting tight quarters is bought at the price of having the characters tell their



Working Girls takes a realistic look at the "world's oldest profession"—prostitution.

stories instead of letting us watch the stories unfold. Unfortunately, this gives the film the feel of having been adapted from a play.

Aside from this gaggle of forgivable glitches, the film has much to recommend it: *Working Girls* illuminates the nitty-gritty details of prostitution that more stylized films such as *Klute* or *Mona Lisa* only hint at. It's powerful and thought-provoking; the players (with the exception of Ms. Zach)

bring much to their parts, and the whole film bumps and rattles deliciously to the big drum sound of percussion wizard David Van Tiegan (*Home of the Brave*).

At one point in the film Lucy says, "The two things I love most in life are sex and money. I just never knew until much later that they were connected." Expanding our understanding of this connection is what makes *Working Girls* a success.

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