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movies

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THE NOTORIOUS BETTIE PAGE:

Directed by Mary Harron. Written by Harron and Guinevere Turner. Cinematography, Mott Hupfel. Music, Mark Suozzo. Starring Gretchen Mol, Lili Taylor, Chris Bauer, David Strathairn, Sarah Paulson and Jonathan Woodward. Picturehouse/HBO Films, 2006. R. 91 minutes.

Who is Bettie Page? Much of *The Notorious Bettie Page*'s audience probably knows little about the film's subject beyond her most famous images (and perhaps that her look still inspires plenty of young women to curl the bangs of their dyed-black hair). Page is a recognizable icon, but it's the person behind the pinup that Mary Harron (*American Psycho*) explores in her engaging new film.

Harron and co-writer Guinevere Turner bookend their story with the mid-1950s hearings of the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, in which Page's bondage photos were shown as an example of the pornography corrupting the nation's youth. Bettie Page (Gretchen Mol) sits quietly outside the courtroom, gently turning away the interest of an awestruck guard and reading mail as she waits to be called before the Senate subcommittee. The dichotomy is clear: This polite young woman in white gloves is the same woman wearing a corset and brandishing a whip in the images being condemned by the committee. How could she be both?

Harron's film flits swiftly and effectively through Page's early years, showing but never lingering on events that a lesser storyteller might have tried to use to define Page — a strict mother, an abusive father, a terrifying incident on a dark street, a brief early marriage. Eventually, Page boards a bus for New York, where she has one of those encounters that now seem storybook-like. Walking on the beach at Coney Island, she encounters a cop and part-time photographer, Jerry Tibbs (Kevin Carroll), who asks if he might take her picture. The impromptu shoot marks the beginning of Page's almost accidental career, which Harron presents chiefly from Page's perspective. As she does more and more photo shoots and films, her fame is present, but

it's mostly indicated by the trial: If the Senate knew about her, Bettie Page was clearly not just an underground sensation.

The Notorious Bettie Page is a delight to watch. Most of the film is in rich black and white, with the Miami scenes shot in saturated color, bright as one of Page's postcard photos. It's very stylized, but never so flashy as to overwhelm the people at its heart. And though the writing is stellar and the entire cast winning, the film belongs to Gretchen Mol, whose performance is a joyful, fantastic surprise. With an easy smile, expressive eyes and playful snarl, she captures the essence of Page's appeal. As photographer Bunny Yeager (Sarah Paulson) observes, when Page was nude, she didn't seem naked. Mol carries herself (and cinematographer Mott Hupfel shoots her) in a way that emphasizes Page's earthy wholesomeness. Whether she's spontaneously disrobing in the woods or discussing her belief in God with a photographer, she's clearly at ease in front of the camera.

Page isn't quite naïve, but she's too openminded to realize that the images in which she appears might offend people. When a beau is horrified by her bondage work, she's devastated. Her following scene in a Miami church is extraordinary, a moving moment of personal revelation made clear on Mol's luminous face.

Within Harron's portrait of a striking woman is a pointed observation on history's tendency to repeat itself. We can laugh at the pictures held up in court and labeled shocking and corrupting, but when a father gets on the stand and claims that these images led to his son's death, the scene turns chilling. What makes it striking is not just how familiar the accusation sounds even today; it's the way Page's joy in her body, her talent for posing and her beauty are implicated. *The Notorious Bettie Page* gives its heroine the last words, which she delivers with pert chin held high. But along with the sparkle of Mol's performance, the film's darker themes linger.

EW

The Notorious Bettie Page opens Friday, June 2 at the Bijou.

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