



SHOWGIRLS COMES OF AGE

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Showgirls, Paul Verhoeven's much-maligned erotic film celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary later this year. This essay seeks to re-assess the film – which was almost universally derided upon its release in 1995 – now that it is a quarter of a century old. Telling the story of a drifter who hitches a ride to Las Vegas, Nomi Malone (Elizabeth Berkley) works hard to climb the ladder from stripper to casino showgirl, making a series of acquaintances along the way, many of whom are only looking to exploit her. On the surface, the film seems to be simple, made to satiate the desires of the audience – primarily heterosexual males – however there are arguments to be made that *Showgirls* is so much more than that. This essay is in two sections: firstly, this part will contextualise the film, acknowledge some of the film's criticisms, and will then go on to consider the film as a postmodern self-critique. The second instalment will go on to analyse *Showgirls* as an indictment of America in terms of its hegemonic structures, artificiality, its exploitative nature, and stardom.

There is just so much interesting context to *Showgirls*, including the choices of director and writer, casting, budget, marketing, Hollywood studios, and the certification of the film. *Showgirls* is directed by Paul Verhoeven, whose reputation had grown with multiple successes in his native Netherlands before making the successful Hollywood films *Robocop* (1987) and *Total Recall* (1990). It was with his 1992 erotic thriller, *Basic Instinct*, that Verhoeven really became a household name director. *Showgirls* saw Verhoeven team up again with screenwriter Joe Eszterhas, the pair having worked together so successfully on *Basic Instinct* just a few years before. Eszterhas had developed a certain reputation for eroticism in his films – particularly *Jagged Edge* (1985) and *Sliver* (1993). The infamous moment in *Basic Instinct* – and no doubt one of the draws for some audiences – was its “crotch shot”, revealing that femme fatale murder suspect Catherine Tramell (played by Sharon Stone) was not wearing any underwear. Not only did this explicit image appear in the final cut of *Basic Instinct* but much of Verhoeven's reputation for sleaze came from Tramell/Stone's displaying of genitalia



not being in Eszterhas's script, as it was a directorial choice entirely (Williams 2005). Prior to *Showgirls*, Verhoeven was known for his satirical interpretations of what he considered to be specifically American vices, such as violence and corrupt law enforcement. This would prove to be relevant in the budgeting and control Verhoeven and Eszterhas were allowed with *Showgirls*, as well as the ways the film can be read. After the huge commercial success of *Basic Instinct*—the film grossing \$352 million from a modest budget of just \$49 million—it was assumed the pair could do no wrong.

Eszterhas's script was purchased for \$2 million by Carolco Pictures and the huge United Artists studio, who also distributed the film along with MGM. Having such powerful and famous backing boosted the filmmakers' creative egos even further and their ideas for the film were huge, bordering on excessive. The casting of actors, as always, would be crucial, and the perfect actor for the role of Nomi would need to be someone who could dance, would be fine with full nudity and someone who the core target audience—heterosexual males in their teens and above—would want to sexually objectify. Drew Barrymore was famously amongst the list of stars who refused the role, but in Elizabeth Berkley *Showgirls* had found an actress whose career standing mirrored that of Nomi somewhat. Just like the character, Berkley too was looking to reinvent herself, having been known for starring in the teen television series *Saved By The Bell*. She brought her pretty, girl-next-door innocence and insatiable Hollywood dreams, which is exactly what the filmmakers (and their audience) wanted. Kyle MacLachlan was cast as the powerful entertainment director Zack, who had experienced a certain eroticism previously in David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), albeit a film which is much overtly darker in its use of sex.

Berkley's naked body and Verhoeven's reputation were key marketing tools the studio used when selling the film to audiences. However, the ways *Showgirls* was marketed can be considered to have played an important role in the negative publicity the film received, leading to its lack of commercial success. One such example of this was through the suggestion that the film was more explicit than it actually was. This, coupled with the film being given the NC-17 certificate in the U.S., caused audiences to expect something more extreme than what Verhoeven and Eszterhas had actually made. Once the film was released, suffice to say it was a commercial flop, and a critical one too, the latter informing the former in some cases perhaps. With a budget of around \$45 million, the film accumulated just \$20 million at the U.S. box office which was a big loss for the studio. However, one of the many overlooked aspects of *Showgirls* is that it later became commercially very successful in the home video market, making more than \$100 million in sales. Berkley's performance and Verhoeven's direction bore much of the criticism of the film. Of Berkley, Anthony Lane in *The New Yorker* wrote "her breasts are more expressive than her face" and also that "there is not a whisper of satire in this movie" (Lane 1995). Leonard Maltin in the *Movie and Video Guide* (2008) branded the film "part softcore porn, part hokey backstage drama, full of



howlingly hilarious dialogue" (2008, 1245), with the *New York Times*'s Janet Maslin (1995) claiming that the screenplay prevents "any character from entertaining two consecutive thoughts in a given scene".

Whilst containing many scenes of nudity and sexually suggestive dancing, is *Showgirls* sexy enough? Perhaps in the act of showing the nudity, there is a removal of mysticism and sex appeal; maybe the women of *Showgirls* are "desexualised at the very moment they are stripped naked" (1957, 165), to borrow Roland Barthes's famous phrase. The desexualisation can be considered to be the filmmakers' way of drawing attention to Las Vegas's lack of sexiness, and Verhoeven referred to this in a 2015 interview with *Rolling Stone*, stating that "I would say *Showgirls* is more anti-erotic than erotic" (Wood 2015). Owing to the scenes of sex, lap dances and nudity being presented in an aggressive manner, perhaps Verhoeven and Eszterhas are commenting that in both Las Vegas and *Showgirls*, people *have sex*, they do not *make love*.

There has been some re-evaluation of *Showgirls* in recent years, almost as if audiences and critics needed an extended period of time to digest exactly what it was they had witnessed. One such proponent has been Eric Henderson, who in his review of the film for *Slant Magazine*, dubbed the film "undoubtedly the think-piece object d'art of its time" (2004). Furthermore, respected academic film journal *Film Quarterly* devoted seven different critics to a re-assessment of the film in 2003, with one of whom, Noël Burch, claiming that *Showgirls* "takes mass culture seriously, as a site of both fascination and struggle" and is "an excellent vehicle for social criticism" (Burch et al. 2003, 36).

This essay seeks to respond to some of *Showgirls*' criticism and to offer alternative readings of the film. To respond directly to *The Washington Post*'s Desson Howe (1995), who said that "to take *Showgirls* that seriously (as either trash-art or appalling pornography) wouldn't be worth the exertion"; this essay serves as a direct contradiction to Howe's opinion.

A POSTMODERN SELF-CRITIQUE

One approach which can be taken when analysing *Showgirls* is viewing the film as a "knowing" self-critique. Such a reading assumes that *Showgirls*, a film in-part about exploitation, is itself an exploitation film. The film features a series of dance scenes—Cristal (Gina Gershon) in the *Goddess* show, Nomi performing at Cheetah's, then later auditioning and rehearsing for *Goddess*—with each becoming progressively more sexually-suggestive and containing more nudity. In addition to these dance sequences, Verhoeven and Eszterhas show the behind-the-scenes workings through numerous scenes set in dressing rooms, which provide ample opportunity for the (female) characters to nakedly strut around, with each scene seeming to provide more screen time to the dancers' naked breasts. These characters are sexually objectified and exploited



by the audience at Cheetah's and Stardust, and then are sexually objectified by the audience of *Showgirls* too.

Not only do the dance routines and dressing room scenes get more explicit and exploitative, but the sex scenes do too. Whilst there is only one consensual sex scene in the film (between Nomi and Zack in the swimming pool), Zack's lap dance, Nomi's practice with dance teacher James, and Molly's rape are all sexually graphic, and again, become increasingly more extreme with each example. *Showgirls'* audience has bought a ticket or a DVD, and are implicated in the perpetual cycle of exploitation, voyeurism and sexual objectification of women as a result. Voyeurism is a theme which permeates the film, in terms of both the ways the audience looks at the bodies on the screen, and also within the narrative itself. In one scene, when Zack receives a lap dance from Nomi (whilst Cristal watches on), James is shown to be watching the event through the curtains. Upon the next cut, we are watching James, who in turn is watching Cristal watch Zack receive a sexually explicit lap dance from a completely naked Nomi. Through these moments of voyeurism, *Showgirls'* characters display ultimate scopophilia. Later in the film, however, the audience is implicated again, as our voyeuristic habits ensure we must watch as Molly is gang-raped by a wealthy and powerful male celebrity. The audience must live with this horrific image, unable to testify in order to get justice for Molly.

Whilst it is conceivable to consider *Showgirls* as an "exploitation film about exploitation", the question remains whether Paul Verhoeven and Joe Eszterhas consciously made the film in a knowing and reflexive way. A reading of *Showgirls* should recognise that the technique of deliberate overstatement is used in order to draw attention to that which it is criticising. In a defence of the film, Verhoeven referred to this in his interview with *Rolling Stone*, by saying, "Yes, it was over the top. And that was on purpose" (2015). *Showgirls* features numerous examples of excess, whether through mise-en-scène (neon, sequins, nudity) or sound (the "howlingly hilarious dialogue" according to Leonard Maltin, 2008), yet these can be considered as the filmmakers' ways of highlighting a comment they are making. For example, throughout the first act of the film, Nomi is shown to be child-like, throwing temper tantrums and sucking on a candy dummy. She also acts immaturely after having sex with Zack, excitedly telling Molly about it whilst clutching a child's teddy bear. These examples constitute some of the criticisms levelled at Berkley's performance (and Eszterhas's writing), yet they could be read as the filmmakers' aims to draw attention to Nomi's innocence prior to being corrupted. Indeed, the second half of *Showgirls* contains a noticeable reduction in Berkley's flamboyance, giving further weight to the assertions that her performance (and Verhoeven's direction of her) was completely conscious. Verhoeven has regularly defended Berkley's performance, claiming in the interview with *Rolling Stone* that "I pushed it in that direction... because that was the element of style that I thought would



work for the movie" (2015). One fan of Berkley's performance, and of *Showgirls* altogether, is legendary French director Jacques Rivette, who in an interview with *Les Inrockuptibles* described the film as "one of the great American films of the last few years" and of Berkley said, "that actress is amazing!" (2001).

The next part of this essay will analyse *Showgirls* in further ways, including the suggestion that the film is an indictment of various elements of America. It will be argued that the film is a critique of America's exploitative nature, its artificiality, its obsession with stardom, and its hegemonic structures.

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