

Winter 2001 — Short Reports



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CHECKING IN

J. T. Leroy talks with Lydia Lunch about *Johnny Behind the Deuce*

WHEN WE HEARD that splenetic social commentator, punk literary diva and seminal no-wave chanteuse Lydia Lunch had inked some kind of development deal for a new screenplay, we immediately phoned J.T. Leroy, long-time Lunch fan and author of the excellent best-selling novel *Sarah*, which Gus Van Sant just optioned. Leroy, by phone from San Francisco, tracked down the elusive writer/performer and got the scoop.

J.T. LEROY: So, I heard you are hooked up with the *Blair Witch* guys.

LYDIA LUNCH: No. My only connection to the *Blair Witch* guys is that I was on the soundtrack [to the first film]. I happen to know the producer, Greg Hale, because I play Orlando a lot and he's very good friends with the guy who brings me down there. I approached him after he came to my last show in June and just guilt-tripped him into giving me some money to develop a script.

LEROY: What do you mean by "guilt tripped him"?

LUNCH: Well, look... *Blair Witch* was fantastic in the sense that everything that surrounded it – the hype, the prequel, the backstory – was very conceptual. And, as a conceptualist [myself], I had a great amount of respect for what they did. With my history in the Cinema of Transgression and the New York underground cinema that preceded that, I just pleaded with [Hale] that I didn't want to go to anyone in Hollywood [to develop a film project]. I said that there's a void in cinema that I think I have the capacity to fill [with] something that is more psychologically in depth about *why* violence occurs. I'm so sick of Hollywood's glorification of senseless violence without ever depicting the

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psychological buildup or the repercussions of this kind of violence. [Hale] has no commitment to my film beyond the fact that he's [been a patron] in the development of the screenplay. He didn't buy the script.

LEROY: So what did you tell Hale you were going to do?

LUNCH: Exactly what I just said. I'm writing a screenplay based on real-life experiences – a sick-and-twisted love story about a night watchman in a sleazy hotel who's suffering from alcoholic delusions and schizophrenia while the people that are housed there are being murdered. The main character doesn't know whether he's doing it or if he's set to be the next victim. He starts an affair with a photographer who by day is photographing young boys as a tribute to her son, who was taken away from her and committed suicide, and by night she's developing photos for local blackmailers. They start an affair, hoping to heal each other's schisms, but only fall further into their own psychoses.

LEROY: It's real life, baby! Who's the guy you're working with?

LUNCH: Gene Gregorits. He came to me with the concept, wanting my title "Johnny Behind the Deuce," and I kind of weasled my way into writing the female character. But it's based on his real-life experiences as a night watchman in a sleazy hotel in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. That's what made me interested in it – that it was based on fact. Hollywood touches on interesting subject matter but doesn't go far enough with it. *Way of the Gun* is a perfect example. You have the director coming out with this bullshit philosophy that he's trying to separate himself from the culture of violence in cinema while he's making one of the most exploitive and violent shoot-'em-ups that has yet to come out. So where's the difference there? I have no interest in mainstream cinema. It bores the shit out of me. I've seen two good films in the last two years, *Requiem for a Dream* and *Fight Club*. [*Fight Club*] explains male violence quite comprehensively. It touches so many nerves. The same with *Requiem for a Dream*, a film based around drug addiction that is basically about heartbreak, loss, mourning and emptiness.

LEROY: Why haven't you done film for so long?

LUNCH: I had to concentrate on what was, for me at the time, more important, namely spoken word

and poetry. And, you know, with the Cinema of Transgression and Richard Kern's films, I had gone as far as I could go in that format. And until I had more experience to document, I didn't feel it was right that I made another film. Now I have something that needs to be told, something that's more darkly twisted and sickly romantic.

LEROY: Sounds good to me. The only other thing I have to ask is, Will you marry me?

LUNCH: Hell, yeah. Get in line.

LEROY: I am a bigamist at heart.

LUNCH: So you won't mind playing second fiddle.

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