The body in question

Working Girls
Directed by Lizzie Borden

By Pat Aufderheide

People resent that it's not sexy," sighs Lizzie Borden, the independent New York filmmaker whose latest film, Working Girls, has broken box office records in New York for independent films. In it, Borden presents sex-for-sale in a Manhattan yuppy-style brothel, from the perspective of the employee.

But Borden's not heartbroken; that response is one symptom of the film's success. Working Girls is anything but pornographic; it is titillating. Like Borden's first feature, Born in Flames, a saucy feminist fantasy of women's revolution, it teases a viewer's expectations and shocks with a view from the underside of male dominance. And that, among other things, is entertainment.

Borden's filmmaker who likes to get a viewer by the balls, and then tweak them. (And when it comes to expectations for women's roles in film, both men and women in this society have balls.) In this film, that has prompted the kind of controversy that publicists would die for. Working Girls not only divides audiences on sex lines—men tend to get flabby sensitive about the film's portrayal of the clients—but also has raised contentions about its feminist implications.

The film takes you through a day in the life of Molly (Louise Smith), a nice girl from Yale who works as a prostitute to support her habit as an artist (she's a photographer). The people in Molly's workplace are eccentrics, sick, working women, who have chosen prostitution. They make good money, have flexible schedules, the supply cabinet is well stocked, they're proud of their skills.

So it Borden saying, then, that women like prostitution? Is she saying that prostitution is powerful? Is she dissociating the agency of women's oppression from men to capitalism? Is she feeling a rush to "houses" on the Upper East Side? Working Girls does cheerfully flaunt its pride in this particular branch of women's work. But it does so within the confines of a world whose limits the film both exposes and exploits.

Borden got interested in the subject, she says, when she realized that many of the artists and professional women she knew in New York were "working girls" on the side. What she heard and saw in a group of women who did choose prostitution over more time-consuming or lower-paying lines of work flatly contradicted the images that the movie had created. "I looked at so many other films about prostitution, and they all involve punishment of the woman," she says.

So Borden set out to make a movie told from the perspective of workers in these upscale "houses." (Although the story is based on real life, she wanted to make a fiction feature because, she says, on a subject so stigmatized fiction can tell more truth than a documentary.) And that's both its strength and its limitation.

It is not a movie about women's oppression or liberation, but about the control that some women exercise within an oppressive set of social and economic expectations. It shows you workplace tensions, and also the workers' pride in being able to deliver what the men want without believing it themselves. (That's what the men who are complaining about the film are really ranting about—it tells them what prostitutes really think about their clients.)

The film spins neatly on its tiny axis, it's set up as a kind of sitcom, with action alternating between the hotel-suite-like living room, bedroom and bathroom. The group of women, including busty Dawn (Aminda Goodwin), who carries a large working-class chip on her shoulder; sweetly patient Gina (Marisa Zach); and embittered, aging April (June Peters) briskly evoke the way in which going to work is a kind of voluntary internment in a day-prison.

The job of sex: True to its focus on the job of sex, the film hinges not on antagonism between men and women, but between boss and employee. The villain of the piece is Lucy (Ellen McElduff), owner of the business. She cons them into working long hours, gives them lectures on what a decent employer she is ("I don't make you girls do the laundry") and carps about job performance before cutting the birthday cake for the "girl" who doesn't want to be reminded of her age. (McElduff, a key figure in the Mabou Mines company, plays her character for caricature, breaking out of the cool sitcom look and feel of the apartment where all the action takes place.) Molly tells Lucy at the end of a hard day, "Have you ever heard of surplus labor?" Lucy responds, "Don't patronize me, I went to a good school, too.

Men aren't the enemy here, but they do look silly, because once they enter the "women's space," as Borden puts it, "they're nothing more than the field on which the workers play to make their money. The men are vultures of male preoccupation and anxiety: the shy guy, the powerful lawyer who likes 'mild' s&m ("What time is it? I'm late—until me!"). the Texas construction magnate who wants two girls, the Japanese businessman. They become the butt of the women's contempt, the way that car owners are fools to service station attendants and restaurant patrons are one or another form of walking irritation to a waitress.

The work routine provides the film's rhythm. The lighting (Larry Banks) and photography (Judy Irola) shifts from sunny daylight to ever-blacker tones as the day wears on. As the women repeatedly apply air deodorants and use Listerine, you can almost smell the fetid air. The camera focuses on habitual gestures: the automatic offering of a drink, the reaching for a towel, the expert depositing of used condoms in a Kleeneex. Dialogue also focuses on routine: Lucy's chirpily "What's new and different?", stock phrases referring to payment, cliches of entry and exit.

The work is mostly mental: the manufacturing and retailing of the sales of images of womanhood and the irritation of intimacy—"sale sex" in a social sense. Molly's such a good prostitute (and the money she makes is impressive) because she can psych out her clients. She'd make a great public relations woman in a large corporation.

Making a Yale literature graduate the lead character allows Borden (and her co-scriptwriter Andi Gladstone) to indulge this theme. It also, however, reminds you of what a slim slice of prostitution this movie deals with.

Although the movie tells you that prostitution is just wage slavery on sex time, it also shows you that, while prostitution is indeed a job, it's not just another job. It's one that occurs on the underside of social relations, like organized crime or drug dealing or insider trading. Otherwise the film wouldn't be titillating. It'd be a film like Car Wash or D.C. Cab.

That tension not only fuels our curiosity as each man grows up to the bedroom. It emerges in the chat among the men in "their space"—theirs in the sense that a prisoner's space is his own. Molly can't tell her lesbian lover what she does for a living, and Gina's lost a boyfriend who can't understand. "The workmen call themselves 'working girls,'" and hate the word "whore." Molly has to endure several clients' questions about what a nice girl like her is doing in a sex-for-sale life. Working Girls is a superb insider's view of a job that capitalizes on social oppression, one that raises many more questions than it answers. By the movie's end, you're convinced that sex-for-sale is hard work, and also that it isn't just wage slavery on sex time. Working Girls, savvy and witty, is an embodiment of the contradictions at the heart of its subject.