



International Women's Day: 40th Anniversary Screening

Working Girls

+ intro by writer and film curator So Mayer

Working Girls

Director: Lizzie Borden

Production Companies: Working Girls Company, Alternate Current

Financial assistance:

New York State Council on the Arts, National Endowment for the Arts, Jerome Foundation

Producers: Lizzie Borden, Andi Gladstone

Associate Producer: Margaret Smilow

Production Manager: Christine Legoff

Office Production Manager: Steve Carter

Post-production Supervisor: Christine Legoff

Production Consultant: Ed Bowes

Production Assistants: John Bilotti, Andy Bose,

Michael Copeman, Margaret Cotts, Pohl Mahlow,

Jan Markles, Dennis McCarthy, Revis Meeks,

Lazar Mintz, Hugh Nanton, Janet Paporozzo,

Steve Poland, Markian Surmach, Marcus Stebich

Assistant Directors: Vicki Funari, Cathy Campbell

Casting: Vicki Funari

Screenplay: Lizzie Borden, Sandra Kay

Original story: Lizzie Borden

Director of Photography: Judy Irola

Additional Photography: Joey Forsythe, Larry Banks

Lighting Designer: Larry Banks

Molly's photographs: Nan Goldin

Editor: Lizzie Borden

Editorial Consultant: Susan Martin

Production Designer: Kurt Ossenfort

Art Director: Leigh Kyle

'Virgin Island Series' drawings: Susan Hall

Scenic Painter: Joel Ossenfort

Costumes: Elisabeth Ross

Make-up: Hidemi Yamamoto

Assistant Make-up: Sarah Goodyear

Titles: First Generation Motion Graphics

Music Composed and Performed by:

David Van Tieghem

Vocals: Adèle Bertei

Music Produced by: Roma Baran

Sound Recording: J.T. Takagi

Additional Sound Recording: Julie Peroni

Sound Re-recording: Dominic Tavella

Sound Editors: Toby Shimin, Cindy Friedman,

Christine Legoff, Sandy Gerling

Thanks to: Kathryn Bigelow, Terry Brennan,

Tony Cucciare, David Dawkins, Barbara Glover,

Bruce Lange, Sheila McLaughlin, Hal Miller, Phil

O'Reilly, Yvonne Rainer, Mark Rappaport,

Nancy Reilly, Trix Rosen, Isaiah Sheffer,

Martin Soloway, Eric Swane

Cast:

Louise Smith (*Molly*)

Deborah Banks (*Diane*)

Liz Caldwell (*Liz*)

Marusia Zach (*Gina*)

Amanda Goodwin (*Dawn*)

Boomer Tibbs (*Bob*)

Eli Hasson (*voice of Hasid*)

Tony Whiting (*voice of Gina's client*)

Richard Davidson (*Jerry*)

Ronald Willoughby (*John*)

Paul Slimak (*Jake*)

Fred Neumann (*'Fantasy Fred'*)

Patience Pierce (*Kathy*)

Ellen McElduff (*Lucy*)

Grant Wheaton (*Robert*)

Richard Leacock (*Joseph*)

Martin Haber (*Don*)

Carla-Maria Sorey (*Debbie*)

Michael Holland (*Miles*)

Dan Nutu (*George the cook*)

Ron Manning (*Charles*)

Director Lizzie Borden meant for *Working Girls*, her second fiction film, to both extend and depart from *Born in Flames*, the 1983 underground *succès de scandale* that received equal parts praise and censure. Where *Flames* depicted an alternative United States in which women from different subsections of society – white, Black, middle-class, working-class, overtly and latently feminist – band together to overthrow patriarchal oppression, *Working Girls* would represent women in the real-world sex industry as similar to other professional women who experience exploitation, alienation, and even moments of power and pride in performing their jobs. But where *Flames* was raw, nonlinear, and collagelike, *Working Girls* would employ a conventional style to encourage stronger viewer engagement while simultaneously avoiding the depiction of paid sex work as erotic or alluring. As Borden explained in an interview with Scott MacDonald for *Feminist Studies*, 'When I started *Working Girls*, I wanted to begin with a whole different aesthetic that had to do with telling a story very simply. I didn't want to make a voyeuristic film, but I wanted to create curiosity in the viewer, almost voyeurism, about what it's actually like to be in a house of prostitution.'

To realise this aesthetic, Borden operated in a less experimental vein than she had for *Flames*, in which mostly amateur actors collaborated on developing their own characters to express personal points of view. For *Working Girls*, Borden created a story and then a script (the latter cowritten with Sandra Kay) based on detailed research she had gathered by hanging around brothels and interviewing prostitutes, madams, and clients. Her observations about middle-class prostitution became the basis for the film's subversive take on a traditionally mystified and moralised subject. 'I wanted to place prostitution solidly in the context of work as opposed to sex, since for prostitutes it is not about sex at all,' she told *Cineaste*. 'Prostitution is a business transaction, pure and simple, between prostitute and john.'

Also crucial for de-eroticising the potentially salacious content of *Working Girls* was the casting. Since the role necessitated so much nudity, most actors wouldn't consider the part of Molly, the story's protagonist. Luckily, Louise Smith, who had worked with experimental theatre directors Meredith Monk and Ping Chong but had never appeared in a film – much less naked – approached the part as a challenge. Borden selected Smith and other actors to play 'working girls' without the 'enhanced bodies' of women in many films involving nudity, a choice that further strengthened the portrayal of brothel prostitution as a service operated and used by everyday people. Women, however, were easier to cast for the nude scenes than were men, whom Borden had to take greater pains to keep comfortable on set. The Screen Actors Guild (SAG) denied *Working Girls* a low-budget contract after deeming the film's script pornographic. Borden argued it wasn't, but to no avail. Wanting nothing to do with the film, SAG told Borden she could pay her actors whatever she wanted, a capitulation that Borden asked to be formalised in writing.

Along with \$120,000 in grants obtained from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the Jerome Foundation, Borden created a limited partnership with the production company Alternate

Fred Baker (*druggist*)
Janne Peters (*April*)
Norbert Brown (*Neil*)
Helen Nicholas (*Mary*)
Benjamin Egbona (*Bongo*)
Chan Lee (*Joe*)
Ray Moy (*Bill*)
Lu Yu (*Spareribs*)
Roger Babb (*Paul*)
Saunders Finard (*Elliot*)
USA 1986
93 mins
Digital

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Current to produce *Working Girls*. A set resembling an actual brothel was built in Borden's loft, and she and cinematographer Judy Irola worked closely to design shots that dollied 'johns' into the brothel set's living room. A staircase led nowhere, while a bedroom was also built and re-dressed for each of the three bedrooms in the script. Furthermore, Borden and Irola created shots with the intention of de-eroticising the action by using camera angles to represent the woman's point of view. 'There's no shot in the film where you see Molly's body the way a man would frame her body to look at it,' Borden has explained. The audience's gaze thus becomes aligned with Molly's and not those of her clients or anyone else who might objectify her. Says Borden: 'You don't necessarily see exactly what she would see, but you see what you see, the way she would feel it.'

Borden also made the conscious decision to emphasise the paraphernalia of the brothel in order to, as she has put it, 'focus on the economics of prostitution, as the economics work out visually in this ritualistic exchange of goods: the condom, the exchange of money, putting the sheets on the bed. These ritual elements also have implications for other activities that women and men engage in normally.' Borden has cited the separation of sex from romance or love, and the convergence of sex and fantasy, as being part of the dynamics of prostitution.

Once Borden completed *Working Girls*, at a cost of \$300,000 (the rest raised by Alternate Current), her next concern was obtaining distribution for such a controversial project. 'When I tried to get an R rating, I found out that so much would need to be cut to satisfy the [Motion Picture Association of America] that there'd hardly be a film left,' Borden has said. Instead, she chose to distribute *Working Girls* without an official MPAA rating at all. Prior to shooting, Borden had altered character names to avoid possible legal action on the part of a real madam and some working girls upon whom she had based her fictional characters, but after screening the film at various festivals (including Cannes and Sundance, the latter of which awarded it the 1987 Special Jury Prize), Borden made only one change to the original cut: the excision of a six-second shot in which Molly gives a 'happy ending' to a difficult client.

Grossing close to \$2 million, *Working Girls* was a box-office success despite – or perhaps due to – its honest portrayal of a normally sensationalised subject. But the film received criticism from certain quarters for being pornographic or having no compassion for the johns. However, many other viewers more clearly understood and applauded Borden for bringing to light the inner workings of a widespread yet taboo profession that serves as a microcosm for larger societal problems concerning sex and economics. Such responses ultimately fulfilled Borden's intention to make *Working Girls* a challenging rather than an appeasing work of art. 'Of course I don't want people to like the film necessarily,' she has said. 'I want them to walk out thinking about prostitution ... and about work.'

Janus Films