

# JANUS FILMS

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## WORKING GIRLS

Sex work is portrayed with radical nonjudgment in Lizzie Borden's immersive, richly detailed look at the rhythms and rituals of society's most stigmatized profession. Inspired by the experiences of the sex workers Borden met while making her underground feminist landmark *Born in Flames*, *Working Girls* reveals the textures of a day in the life of Molly (Louise Smith), a photographer working part-time in a Manhattan brothel, as she juggles a steady stream of clients, balances

relationships with her coworkers with the demands of an ambitious madam, and above all fights to maintain her sense of self in a business in which the line between the personal and the professional is all too easily blurred. In viewing prostitution through the lens of labor, Borden boldly desensationalizes the subject, offering an empathetic, humanizing, often humorous depiction of women for whom this work is just another day at the office.

United States | 1986 | 93 minutes | Color | 1.66:1 aspect ratio

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## PRODUCTION HISTORY

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 realize 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 moralized 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-eroticizing 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 theater 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 formalized 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 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



### CAST

|             |                |
|-------------|----------------|
| Molly ..... | Louise Smith   |
| Lucy .....  | Ellen McElduff |
| Dawn .....  | Amanda Goodwin |
| Gina .....  | Marusia Zach   |
| April ..... | Janne Peters   |
| Mary .....  | Helen Nicholas |

### CREDITS

|                               |                   |
|-------------------------------|-------------------|
| Directed by .....             | Lizzie Borden     |
| Produced by .....             | Lizzie Borden     |
|                               | Andi Gladstone    |
| Story by .....                | Lizzie Borden     |
| Screenplay by .....           | Lizzie Borden     |
|                               | Sandra Kay        |
| Director of photography ..... | Judy Irola        |
| Lighting designer .....       | Larry Banks       |
| Production designer .....     | Kurt Ossenfort    |
| Sound by .....                | J. T. Takagi      |
| Music producer .....          | Roma Baran        |
| Music score by .....          | David Van Tieghem |
| Vocals by .....               | Adele Bertei      |

de-eroticizing 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 emphasize 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 sensationalized 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*." ●

## TRIVIA

In his only career acting role, renowned British documentary filmmaker Richard Leacock plays a brothel client named Joseph. Lizzie Borden has described Leacock and Mabou Mines actor Fred Neumann (in the role of Fantasy Fred) as having been the two easiest male actors to work with on set.

Actresses initially attended rehearsals for *Working Girls* wearing the kind of brazenly sexy attire they imagined was typical of middle-class prostitutes. Borden made the actresses apply for jobs at brothels so they would see that real-life prostitutes dress "like their college roommates."

*Working Girls* was filmed on Super 16 mm (later blown up to 35 mm for exhibition) with the same camera, rented from DuArt, that Spike Lee used to shoot *She's Gotta Have It*.

When Borden and the producers showed *Working Girls* to potential financiers for finishing funds, a wealthy madam said that if the character of Dawn (Amanda Goodwin) worked for her, she would fire her immediately: "She's messing up the place."

The stairs on set led nowhere. The "upstairs" was a separate location. When the actors ascended the stairs, they had to wait at the top, often shaking the set underneath.

Additionally, the set had no running water—any water had to be brought in from the kitchen with a hose.

Borden kept the brothel set up in her loft after all the editing was finished and pickup shots had been completed: "It was very bourgeois—the kitchen, the bathroom. It was fancier than anything in my bare-bones loft, but nothing worked—the sinks in the kitchen, the bathroom. Sometimes I'd forget."

Louise Smith was nominated for a 1987 Independent Spirit Award for Best Female Lead for her portrayal of Molly in *Working Girls*. Paralleling her character's academic background, Smith had previously graduated from Antioch College in Ohio with a Bachelor of Arts in theater and later went on to chair Antioch's theater department from 1994 to 2008.

## LINKS

[Jordan Flaherty, "Sex Work, Feminism, and Revolution," CounterPunch \(January 28, 2015\)](#)

[Christoph Huber, "Whatever Happened to Lizzie Borden? \[Interview\]," Cinema Scope 74](#)

[Annelise Ogaard, "Working Girls & Empathy," Screen Slate \(March 31, 2020\)](#)

["Working Girls \(1986\)," episode 186 of the podcast The Projection Booth, hosted by Mike White; guests: Lizzie Borden and Amanda Goodwin \(September 30, 2014\)](#)

["Working Girls \[Official Homepage\]"](#)