10 years of SHORTBUS

Since its release in 2006, John Cameron Mitchell’s Shortbus has become an essential addition to the canon of alternative LGBT+ films. To celebrate a decade of this important piece of cinema, and with interviews with the director and two cast members, we tell the unusual story of its production and explore why its themes are still so relevant ten years later.

It’s rare in cinema that, within the first ten minutes of a film, you witness a man autofellate and ejaculate in his own mouth, a woman struggle to orgasm, a man cum so hard that he spurts all over his own apartment, and a dominatrix takes autofellate and ejaculate in her mouth while looking into the camera. This is a Jackson Pollock. But then we choose, “he says. “Where do smaller films need to be terrified of explicit sex? There’s a need for thinking that Shortbus is rife with dramatics and comedy, sadness, depth, isolation and connectedness. I wanted to use sex in a way that another film would use music. Music is a language and sex is a language. I wanted to use it to draw out emotion and comedy, like another paint in the cinematic paint box.” With this in mind, he opened up a nationwide casting for ‘The Sex Film Project’.

John wanted to achieve something different. “There’s something wrong with porn,” he explains, “but there’s more sex than arousal. There’s comedy, sadness, depth, isolation and connectedness. I wanted to use sex in a way that another film would use music. Music is a language and sex is a language. I wanted to use it to draw out emotion and comedy, like another paint in the cinematic paint box.” With this in mind, he opened up a nationwide casting for ‘The Sex Film Project’.

After narrowing down the applicants, a nearly three-month workshop process began, and the plotting of the film was underway.

Among the actors involved in the process were Paul Dawson and Sook-Yin Lee, who play the two main characters of James and Sofia. “I looked at it as these weird art camps that I’d infrequently go to,” Sook-Yin recalls of the workshops. “It was nice to leave my work for a couple of weeks to a month, have an adventure in New York and foster relationships with the people in the cast.” Having previously worked with John on Hedwig and the Angry Inch, which is currently enjoying a successful revival on stage in the US — Shortbus has all the magical realistic hallmarks of a film musical, but rather than letting music help the story, Mitchell uses sex. That’s, of course, what Shortbus is infamous for; its unparalleled, unflinching and desperately realistic approach to sex. From the beginning of the film’s development, John wanted to make a project that contained unsimulated, explicit sex scenes.

“The question was, “ he says, “why do smaller films need to be terrified of explicit sex? There’s a need for thinking that Shortbus is rife with dramatics and comedy, sadness, depth, isolation and connectedness.”

Likewise, this is something that Paul Dawson felt drew him to the project. “It was the most pure, artistic experience I’ll probably ever have in my life,” he says. “To work with John is to collaborate; he insists upon it.”

In the film, both Sook-Yin’s character of Sofia and Paul’s character James go through immense transformations. Sofia is married but is “pre-orgasmic”, meaning she’s never had an orgasm. Meanwhile James, an artist and filmmaker who’s in a long-term relationship with Jamie (played by Paul’s real life partner PJ), is suffering with suicidal thoughts and what could be described as internalised homophobia.

“We began with [John] trying to get us to share some of the most difficult aspects of our lives because he knew these areas were risky,” Paul says of the creative process. “‘James was born from a seed of an idea that was from my own experiences.’ It’s that’s not to say that the characters were completely autobiographical; John, Sook-Yin and Paul point...
out they were fictionalised creations, with Paul adding, "At least 25% of each character is John, because, ultimately, he wrote it." Utilising the techniques of visionary directors like Mike Leigh and John Cassavetes, the cast and crew held fake press conferences and improvisation sessions to mine into the characters’ backstories. This wasn’t, as Paul remembers, an easy task. "The hardest part is to use these very tender parts of yourself to keep the character separated from the real you. A few of the younger cast members had problems with that.”

Documenting the experience in a behind the scenes film, Gitled and Challenged: The Making of Shortbus, you can see the cast and crew begin to form a tight-knit creative family, something that was essential when it came to principal photography and the sex scenes. Trust became an imperative part of filming; in order for the actors to truly feel comfortable performing real sex on camera, they had to feel safe and supported. John recalls how, during one of the raw sexual rehearsals, one of the actors suggested that the entire crew were also naked. In fact, as director, he felt it imperative that he took part, and in the final orgy sequence he even performed oral sex on a woman for the first time. ‘Shortbus’s enduring charm and importance as a snapshot of the human experience is also grounded in the personal journeys of the characters, of which sex is just one (integral) part. They’re all part of which sex is just one journey of the characters, also grounded in the personal of the human experience is an imperative part of filming; in order for the actors to truly feel comfortable performing real sex on camera, they had to feel safe and supported. John argues that this is something that, unsettling, still lives on. “It’s sad and troubling that it still resonates today because, in a way, ten years later, we’ve even more isolated,” Paul says. This is mirrored in the film with the scary foreboding of mobile apps like Grindr. One scene sees Ceth, a young man who becomes embroiled in a relationship with James and Jamie, utilising a smartphone-like device called a Venta 650, which goes to locate potential husbands. “It’s funny because we invented Grindr,” John laughs. “Yet what we did is very, very sweet. Grindr by its very nature insinuates grinding it up and spitting out. Whereas ‘venta’ is the Yiddish for matchmaker.”

John argues that this is one way that sex and sexuality has been mutated by technology in the passing decade. “It’s the delivery system of sex that has changed,” he says. “The internet and Grindr have, certainly in the industrialised Western world, warped the way that people discover and experience it.” Sexual discovery is critical to the journey that Sook-Yin’s character undergoes as without it we wouldn’t see Sofia’s unravel from being upheld to her ultimate breakdown and orgasmic revelation. “I feel that there’s the walking embodiment of someone who needs to give a trigger warning for everything, which is what’s impeding her from creating connections with herself and others,” she says. For Sook-Yin, it’s important that this impeding stem comes from the growing crisis surrounding language and what can and cannot be said. “It dresses itself up to be progressive, but then it seems a lot of its concerns are very conformist.” As she says, today the persona of Sofia appears to be everywhere. In the resulting ten years, conversations around sex seem to have shifted, too. “In 2016 we still can’t talk about sex and we’re screwed;” Sook-Yin says. It’s what perhaps, makes the concept of the “Shortbus party” so utopian; there’s a permissible freedom that a safe space like that creates, allowing for discussions and experimentation around female and male sexuality, gender and non-conformity. Like the characters themselves, the Shortbus salon was based on real-life club nights and events of the 90s and late 00s that were seen out of a craving for an antidote to homogenisation and the isolation of the city. “There really was this punky, hippie, queer vibe; I experienced it,” John recalls. "Freedom of sexuality and the spirit of Shortbus and its alternative movements may be, in some way, partly to blame. Likewise, an increased xenophobic and conservative rhetoric becomes a mainstay of society and a Trump presidency a real possibility, the spirit of Shortbus and its inherent and freeing urge for connectedness feels more essential than ever.

“Everything I do is to remind people that there are people in our world,” John says, “and that life isn’t just about shouting, but singing, dancing and, of course, having sex.”

In this difficult time, then, perhaps it’s our duty to bring the spirit of Shortbus back...