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Porn's taboo transsexual stars

"T-girls" are fighting for respect in the adult biz. What does it mean for the general acceptance of trans women?

BY TRACY CLARK-FLORY



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Brittany St. Jordan, a 28-year-old leggy redhead in a plunging gold number, was all dressed up with somewhere to go: the Adult Video News Awards, the so-called "Oscars for the porn industry." But she ended up standing in line for three hours waiting to walk the red carpet, as other female performers were sent ahead. When she finally got her turn, event organizers directed her away from interviews with the press.

St. Jordan had an idea of why: Unlike the ladies who were sent right in, she's a transsexual woman.

After the night was over, having lost in the Best Transsexual Performer category, St. Jordan took to the Web to protest her treatment. Her story inspired Kelly Pierce, a female trans performer who didn't attend the ceremony, to write a lengthy blog post titled "AVN's Inequality & Segregation Needs to Stop!" Soon, industry blogs and message

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boards picked up on the controversy.

It was an explosion of long-building resentment over their treatment within the industry. Beyond the red carpet delay this year, which AVN says was not limited to transsexual performers, the company has never allowed the Transsexual Performer of the Year award to be presented on stage. Instead, it has been announced on a JumboTron as the audience starts to filter out of the auditorium. As one star told me, “We’re the black sheep.”

That is despite the genre’s tremendous popularity: “T-girl sites are the fourth most popular category of adult Web site,” according to “A Billion Wicked Thoughts,” a book that crunches the numbers behind Internet porn. (Although female-to-male transsexual stars are on the rise in queer porn, what we’re talking about here are trans women — more specifically, people assigned as male at birth who have transitioned to being female but still have a penis.) There are more frequent Web searches for this genre — often through terms like “shemale” and “chicks with dicks” — than for basic X-rated categories like “butts” or “blowjobs.” Authors Sai Gaddam and Ogi Ogas found that the genre’s average viewer is a straight-identified male (and, based on their analysis, passing curiosity **doesn’t explain** its popularity).

After St. Jordan’s outcry gathered virtual steam, AVN called a meeting last week with a handful of concerned trans women. On Tuesday, the company published **a press release announcing** that the transsexual winner would be announced on stage in the future. AVN also promised to allow more trans performers to walk the red carpet and talk to the press, and to present awards during the ceremony.

St. Jordan, who says she put her career on the line by speaking out, is thrilled. “Whether or not I ever get nominated again or get invited to anything with AVN again, the fact that the Transsexual Performer of the Year will be on stage and seen by everybody? That’s huge.” Tomcat, director of Kink.com’s TS Seduction site, agrees: “Not sharing the stage with Ts performers has allowed the majority of non-trans performers to dismiss them as outsiders and perpetuated discrimination against a group who should be equally praised for the work they do and the revenue they generate for the industry.”

While AVN’s decision marks serious progress, St. Jordan says that recent commentary on industry message boards reveals just how far there is to go. “Some of the hate and ignorance that came spewing from people was unbelievable, and this was people in, or associated with, the industry. You saw where a lot of people stood.”

Not that it wasn’t already apparent. There’s a huge stigma against mainstream straight stars working with transsexual female performers — they’re stereotyped as gay and therefore at higher risk for transmitting HIV. Tomcat, a trans man, told me in an email, “I still encounter many non-trans performers who will not work with [female] Ts performers because they consider [them] to be more of a STI risk to do a scene with — this is bullshit. In a industry where everyone is tested and everyone makes choices, the same risks are present regardless of gender identity.”

It perhaps goes without saying that the marketing of transsexual porn is often problematic. “People still search for Ts porn using ‘shemale,’” Tomcat says. “To me, this is like searching online for a cab company by typing in ‘stagecoach.’ It’s an antiquated term that is ignorant, incorrect and no longer OK to use.”

Some performers, like Wendy Williams, aren’t so concerned about the lingo. “I don’t live in a utopia, it’s what it is,” she says with her Southern lilt (she’s from Eastern Kentucky). “I’m not trying to be a transsexual activist.” Plus, “It’s a porn term that describes a genre. That way, some country, straight-ass guy in the corner is going to understand,” says Williams. “You say ‘transsexual’ and they’re confused, you say ‘shemale’ and they know what that is.”

A major struggle for the transsexual female niche is to get recognition within the straight side of the business as opposed to the gay side. “This is one of my biggest pet peeves, when I go into a store to do research to see if they’re carrying my DVDs or product lines

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and you have the transsexual stuff mixed in with the gay stuff,” says Williams. “Putting it next to ‘Harry Men Volume 1,’ it’s just not a good idea,” she says, since the vast majority of their fans identify as hetero. “My gay friends squeal at the idea of having sex with anything but a masculine male — the breasts and all that is just a huge turnoff.”

For most fans of transsexual porn, the genre is just one of many categories that they’re interested in. “A Billion Wicked Thoughts” argues that T-girl porn has such a significant straight male following because it combines the key sexual cue of female anatomy with that other fixture of heterosexual porn: a big, hard cock. Madison Montag, a nominee for Transsexual Performer of the Year, says, “They get tired of just the same old thing. Transsexuals are more feminine, they’re like hyper-feminine. To me, it’s kind of get the best of both worlds.”

The mis-categorization of Ts female porn has been painfully evident at the AVN awards in the past, Williams says: Buck Angel, the first recognized FTM trans performer, won the Best Transsexual Performer award in 2007. “It was a huge scandal in our community,” she says. “How do you judge his porn against our porn? His fan base is totally different. That’s just one example of how ignorant the porn community is.” (In an aside, she mentions the scene she filmed with him in 2005: “Actually, Buck was the very first, quote, vagina I had ever been in.”)

Many female transsexuals feel like they’re rejected from both the straight and gay world. “Even if you go into the [gay] clubs, transsexuals and drag queens are primarily there for entertainment,” says Williams. “It’s not really inclusive. We’re kind of in limbo, we’re in between both worlds.” In the straight world, men are often timid about revealing their interest in the genre. Most sales happen online, says Williams, who has a line of signature toys, including a \$240 cyberskin mold of her ass. She says, “We’re the taboo, and where does taboo usually happen? Behind closed doors.”

Then again, Pierce, a blond with pixy features, says that when she signed autographs in a booth at the AVN Expo in 2008, she was allowed in the “female section” and had a line longer than some non-trans girls. “They were kind of upset with me,” she laughs.

In terms of fans’ willingness to announce their interest in public, it all has to do with a performer’s “passability,” according to Pierce: “Some men feel like they’re more straight if they’re attracted to more feminine looking transsexuals who bottom” — because topping is seen as masculine. Passability is also a factor in how girls are treated within the industry, she says: “If you look like a woman, they’re more accepting of you. And if you don’t look like a woman, they’re less accepting.”

Montag, a 19-year-old, doe-eyed brunette who calls me “sweetie,” says she got stellar treatment at this year’s AVN awards — she rubbed elbows with Ron Jeremy on the red carpet and scored a seat in the second row — and attributes it in part to her passability. “I’m very young. I’m only 5’1” and 81 pounds. I’m very petite.” She adds, “I started hormone therapy earlier than other girls.”

St. Jordan agrees: “When it comes down to it,” she says matter-of-factly, “this is business, and it’s a beauty contest *every day*.”

Williams, who is 6-feet-tall with red, va-va-voom hair, says the pressure to pass as a porn star is even greater than in everyday life. Normally, she says, “I pull my hair up into ponytail and throw on some lip gloss and people just think I’m a tall girl with big boobs.” On camera, everything is different: “You need to seem extremely feminine, but if you want to seem feminine, then you need to be on hormones — but if you’re on hormones, you can’t stay hard and come, and if you can’t stay hard and come, you’re a bad performer.” On top of that, she says, the same viewers who expect this expensive nipped and tucked aesthetic “want to pirate my videos and not sign up for my website and have it for free.”

The irony is that many female trans performers get into the sex industry to pay for their transitions. Well, that and because it can be difficult to get a job anywhere else: “I

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interviewed for a job that I should have got,” says Williams about her pre-porn days, “and the guy told me, ‘I just don’t know how the cohesion in the office would be if people knew that you were a transsexual woman.’” Things have improved in the decade since then, but the same issues persist: “I couldn’t get a job, not even at Burger King,” says Montag, who lives in a small town in Texas where “people get beat up just for being punk and emo.”

She may be sexually outgoing on the Internet, but it’s not so in real life. Montag says she gets far more action on-screen and doesn’t pursue men in real life, for fear of them having a bad reaction to the discovery that she’s trans. Instead, she sticks to the Web: “[You get] a better reaction and it’s safer, too,” she explains. “It’s not like they’re gonna beat you and leave you in a cornfield to die.”

Courtney Trouble, a queer porn star and director who has worked with many trans performers, hopes that porn might actually help reduce transphobia in society at large. “Porn, while seemingly a private, frivolous luxury, has the immense power to gently create an awareness for trans issues in the audience,” she says. “If porn can create a change in the minds of people outside the industry, that’s where the real rewards are.”

Tobi Hill-Meyer, director of “Doing It Ourselves: The Trans Women Porn Project,” left the mainstream business “to create an alternative that allowed trans women to be represented the way each performer wanted to see herself represented,” she says. “I had to leave the mainstream industry in order to accomplish that, but I’ve seen a similar thing happening within it. More and more performers are speaking out about changes they’d like to see and setting up their own websites or productions.” Trouble believes that independently produced porn will do away with terms like “shemale,” “tranny” and “chick with a dick.”

Others predict transsexual porn will explode within mainstream straight porn. That’s in part because “so many transsexual stars are transitioning younger and getting more beautiful,” says Pierce. But she adds, “Sexuality in general is becoming more open-minded and the new generation is really pushing the limits on sexuality, and I think it’s going to push the transsexual market.”

St. Jordan agrees: “I think there’s gonna be some great crossover stuff real soon, within the next year or so,” she says. That means transsexuals performing not only with non-trans girls but also with straight male performers. This is partly because of growing acceptance and interest on the part of porn viewers, and partly because the up and coming generation of young performers have increasingly liberal attitudes. She says, “As new minds and ideas are coming into the industry, there are more people willing and open to work with us.”



Tracy Clark-Flory is a staff writer at Salon. Follow @tracyclarkflory on Twitter and Facebook.

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