

The Graying of Naughty

By Sharon Waxman
December 31, 2006
From The New York Times

LOS ANGELES

DE'BELLA — or Debbie, as everybody calls her — decided late in life to become a porn star. This year she turned 50, time, she knew, to chase her dream.

"I love sex," she explained, biting into a Burger King special before embarking on her scene for the day at a rented house in the San Fernando Valley. She was wearing a bright pink satin and black chiffon nightie with a matching thong and heavy makeup.

"I decided I wanted to do something different," she said. "I'd been working behind the scenes, and my friends said: 'Why not do movies? Have some fun, and get paid for it?'"

So she has. Since May, De'Bella (she did not want her real name published) has used days off from her job as an administrative assistant at a sex-related entertainment company, Platinum X, to shoot about 30 scenes, with men mostly 19 and 20 years old.

And while she is sort of a novelty — appearing on "The Howard Stern Show" to talk about her new career — it is no longer unusual (hey, Hollywood, pay attention) to see women, and men, of a certain age performing in sex movies.

"There has been a greater openness to older performers than there once was," said Mark Kernes, a senior editor at Adult Video News, or AVN, the industry's main trade paper. "Typically, once you got to 35, your possibilities were pretty much shot."

Not anymore. The pornography industry, that multibillion-dollar-a-year symbol of airbrushed American carnality, is aging. The advent of Viagra, the maturing of sexually aware baby boomers and overall improved health and beauty are all contributing to the graying of naughty.

The biggest change is in the sexual desirability of women old enough to be the viewer's mother. It has been fueled in part by pop culture's embrace of the sexy 40-something women of "Desperate Housewives" and "Stacy's Mom," the 2003 hit song about a teenager's mother who "has got it going on."

The mature-woman genre represents one of the fastest growing areas of video pornography, say leading distributors and retailers, and next month it will be inaugurated as a category at the AVN Awards, the Oscars of the skin trade.

Most of the movies are like the one De'Bella is shooting on this particular day in the Valley, a gonzo shoot — meaning it is more or less plot-free sex for 40 minutes or so. De'Bella's dark hair is up in a chignon, pinned with a couple of rhinestone clips.

When her performing partner, Rod Fontana, 54, shows up — he's tall and gangly with a shaved head — she smiles sweetly and shakes his hand. They have never met before.

"What's the premise on this one?" he asks. "Pizza boy?"

Whatever. Within a few unscripted minutes they're mostly unclothed, panting and moaning for the camera, engaged in sexual contortions and obviously unbothered by visiting onlookers.

The director, Urbano Martin, points his camera strategically, scarcely disguising his boredom. "I shoot specialty films," he explains during a break in filming, adding that he has been in the business for 17 years. "Fat women, old women, hairy girls — all kinds. We feed the niche."

The market for beautiful, airbrushed young women "is oversaturated," he says. "This is more normal people, more meat on the bone, like what you have at home."

De'Bella is not one of those otherworldly California creatures untouched by time. She looks like what she is, an attractive 50-year-old, with eyelids and cheeks that have succumbed to gravity and concentric circles of rippled skin on her belly from childbirth, three decades ago, and from dropping 38 pounds this year.

Still married to the same man after 28 years, De'Bella comes from a small town in Colorado and never imagined that she might become involved in pornography. "I was married and had a baby at 19," she says. "I don't know if I could have done it then."

That baby grew up and moved to California to become a sex-film performer under the name Jewel De'Nyle, which started her mother down the same path. De'Bella's husband, Larry Schwarz, is fully supportive. "She's doing it for the right reasons," he said.

Other mature stars are retired pornography performers who have been lured back into the limelight, like a 40-something former star known as Lisa Ann, and 35-year-old Tiffany Mynx or the performer turned director Devinn Lane, who has started a Web site to recruit women for her hardcore short films.

Vicky Vette, 41, blond and buxom — who could pass for 10 years younger — jumped in a couple of years ago, explaining on her Web site that after a career as an accountant and housing contractor with her husband, she won an amateur photo contest in Hustler magazine and began making sex videos. (She declined an interview, perhaps because her husband committed suicide in June and in a letter discovered posthumously accused her of being a white supremacist. She has denied this.)

Who watches this stuff? By far the most avid consumers of older-woman pornography, producers say, are young men fulfilling boyhood fantasies of teacher lust or yearning for the attractive mothers of their friends. Some, it has been suggested, may be tired of what one producer, Oren Cohen, has called, in a recent AVN article, "the young, helpless teen thing."

David Joseph, 38, De'Bella's boss and the president of Platinum X, said: "It's totally an erotic thing people are attracted to. There's a huge market out there for older women. I'm trying to understand it myself."

But the older-woman fantasy is nothing new, even if the video pornography industry is scarcely more than three decades old. It may be that the revival of young men's teenage fantasies, along with the sexual confidence of older women, is fueling the supply side as well as the demand.

The genre has been credited as the idea of Bonnie Kail, 48, the national sales manager of Wicked Pictures. A few years ago Ms. Kail was working for a small company, Heatwave Entertainment, which specialized in fetish sex, including so-called granny porn, which feature old women. She thought there was room for less freakish fantasy.

"I had said from my personal experience that, being divorced, I'm lucky if I can meet someone my age," Ms. Kail recalled. "Most guys who want to date me are in their late 20s. So I thought, let's get some hot-looking, 40-ish women and make that the theme."

Her boss at the time, Gabor Szabo, was the first to package mature-women movies as a distinct genre, and nearly every other sex-movie company has followed with its own line. Popular titles include "Hot 50+" and "Housewives Unleashed."

Still, the trend has taken a lot of the pornography world by surprise, including Mr. Joseph of Platinum X. When De'Bella asked him for permission to pursue a sex-film career in her spare time, he was mystified.

"It was weird to me," he said. "She could be my mom. At first I thought it would blow over and that maybe no one would hire her. But then people started hiring her, and then they wanted her for magazines. It's crazy. This is supposed to be an industry with the youngest, newest, most beautiful girls in the world. Isn't youth what everyone wants?"

Apparently not. And if women performers traditionally last just a handful of years before losing their sizzle, there are male performers who have been stars for as long as there has been a thriving sex-film business in the Valley, ever since the shotgun marriage of video and sexual liberation in the 1970s.

Ron Jeremy, perhaps the industry's best-known male star, is 53 and still appears in sex movies. Randy Spears, 45, has been performing in them for 20 years and is still going strong.

At 66, Dave Cummings bills himself as the oldest pornographic-film star working, though he is a relative newcomer to the business. Married for 22 years until his wife left him, as he put it, "for someone with hair," Mr. Cummings has four grandchildren and a thriving film career.

"My daughter's feeling is: 'Dad, I love you. It doesn't make any difference,' " he said by phone from San Diego, where he began swinging with couples after his divorce in the 1990s, which led to his sex-films gig. "My son thinks of me as his hero," he

added. "When he's out chasing girls, he says, 'Ever hear of Dave Cummings?' My son is getting action because of me."

The dirty little not-so-secret weapons of aging male performers are erectile aids like Viagra and Cialis. Mr. Cummings said he prefers Viagra, but uses it rarely, for instance when he is scheduled for back-to-back sex scenes or "when I'm working for a producer who's very demanding." De'Bella's recent partner, Mr. Fontana, said he used only herbal stimulants.

Like a lot of experienced actors in the business, Mr. Cummings directs as well as acts in his movies (don't ask: mirrors are involved), and they frequently play on dirty old man fantasies, with titles like "It's a Daddy Thing," "Sugar Daddy" and one just three months ago featuring a 19-year-old woman and a group of older sex-film stars. Mr. Cummings is on the cover of the DVD, leaning on a walker.

He intends to stay in the game as long as he can. "I'm not looking to get married," he said. "I'm too old for that. I don't know that there's anyone out there I could easily find who could understand that the reason I'm not having sexual climax this morning isn't because I don't love her. It's because I have to go to work."