

CULTURE


# IS SHOWGIRLS THE BEST WORST FILM EVER?

Shlocky, absurd, shamelessly camp – how did the 1995 box-office flop become such a cult classic? With a documentary about the film on its way, Lotte Jeffs considers its peculiar appeal in 2019

Lotte Jeffs | Sunday November 17 2019, 12.01am, The Sunday Times



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If only there were an easy way, a century from now, to explain everything that was wrong with millennial society, a single cultural artefact that would stand for the myriad issues we face today: consent, sexual harassment, the male gaze, zero-hour contracts, minority oppression ... Wait, what's that rustling behind the sequined curtain? It's *Showgirls*! The film that, if it were found in a time capsule in the year 2100, would demonstrate, with a dramatic high kick, all of these low points and more, offering up the cultural nadir of our time.

We might want to put Jeffrey McHale's documentary *You Don't Nomi*, exploring the so-bad-it's-good significance of *Showgirls*, in the capsule with it. McHale's doc, which premiered in the UK at the London Film Festival last month, revisits *Showgirls* and reminds us why, as the critic Haley Mlotek puts it in the opening voiceover, "We're not done with it." When *Showgirls*, written by Joe Eszterhas and directed by Paul Verhoeven (then riding high after the success of their creative partnership on *Basic Instinct*), was released in 1995, it was critically panned. *Empire* magazine called it "dramatically limp ... and about as genuinely arousing as intricately choreographed nude livestock". It starred the former teen actress Elizabeth Berkley (the geeky "feminist" in *Saved by the Bell*) as Nomi Malone, a young woman who just wants to dance, on a problematic journey to becoming a Las Vegas showgirl.

The fashion world has often turned to *Showgirls* for mood-board fodder. It is rich in truly fabulous 1990s outfits: cut-off denim shorts, shirts tied at the waist, diamanté leotards, sequined thongs, and the make-up — hello, lip liner! Nomi's mispronunciation of Versace as "Versayce" is infamous. Online, too, it is famed for gif-able moments, mainly lifted from the various OTT dance moves.

The film destroyed Berkley's career, but has since become a cult classic, due, in large part, to the hysterical energy she brought to the role, the absurd script ("I don't care whether you live or die. I want to see you dance and I want to see you smile") and the over-the-top scenarios, from exploding on-stage volcanoes to writhing swimming-pool sex. It's spectacularly bad, but if you get it, as one drag queen who pastiches the film in their act says, "It becomes your religion."

McHale, an editor of shorts and music videos before making *You Don't Nomi*, was first shown *Showgirls* at college about a decade after its release. "In the first few minutes my heart started racing. I just couldn't explain why it was jumping off the screen at me," he says.

"It's a viewing experience like no other film, where you are asking yourself, 'What were they thinking, what was this intended to be? Did I just hear that? Did I just see that?'" He refers to it as a "masterpiece of shit", and points to the exquisitely bizarre performances as pure camp, in the vein of *Valley of the Dolls* and *Mommie Dearest*.



Scenes from *Showgirls*  
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Kyle MacLachlan, who played Zack Carey, the sleazy "entertainment director" of the Stardust Casino, and filmed, with Berkley — who seduces him in an act of revenge — some of the least sexy sex scenes ever seen on screen, told *Metro* in 2012: "We all went into it with absolute conviction. Had we gone into it thinking we were making a camp classic, we'd have ruined the camp element."

In the years that have passed, *Showgirls* has been embraced by the gay community in particular. McHale tells me: "As a gay man, it's part of the fabric of my cultural DNA. It is hard to analyse why we are drawn to these kind of characters and camp in general, but I think, with *Showgirls* specifically, the gay community sees a lot of itself in Nomi. She sets out to follow her dreams, she moves to the big city, as plenty of us do. We also find strength and power through our sexuality, so I think that resonated."

Susan Sontag's *Notes on Camp*, published in 1964, inspired this year's Met Gala. In it, Sontag says: "Camp is art that proposes itself seriously, but cannot be taken altogether seriously because it is 'too much'." Everything about *Showgirls* is too much, from the direction to the plot, and even the costumes. And yet Verhoeven posited it at the time as a complex exploration of sex and power. He genuinely thought it was sophisticated. In an interview in 2015, he said: "When I think of the movie, I see all these brilliant colours and these beautiful movements — of the body and of the camera — and what stands out for me is the elegance."

MacLachlan's acting is on a par with that of the rest of the cast and yet *Showgirls* didn't destroy his career in the same way it did that of its female star. "It had to be taken seriously as we were filming it," he told *Metro*. "Only when it was assembled and I saw it for the first time, I thought, 'Oh boy, this isn't going to be pretty.'"

It wasn't, but it didn't hurt MacLachlan's career as much: the star of *Blue Velvet* and the classic 1990 TV drama *Twin Peaks* subsequently got roles in *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives*, proving that Hollywood can be more forgiving if you're a man.

The film has taken on a life of its own and a meaning no one making it ever intended. Verhoeven eventually leaned into the critical mauling. He attended the Golden Raspberry awards — the Razzies — in 1996 and accepted seven prizes, including worst director and worst picture. "People got more and more enthusiastic about it. They were all applauding. It was ultimately a really interesting atmosphere," Verhoeven said of the ceremony, which bore little resemblance to the Golden Globes in 2017, when his film *Elle* won best foreign-language picture.

It is interesting to watch *Showgirls* today, after the #MeToo movement ripped Hollywood apart and exposed what it was like for some young actresses to work for powerful men. Now there are intimacy coaches on set for sex scenes, and "inclusion riders" on fair casting. Berkley has never said she was exploited, but the very nature of the film is unsettling. And that's not to mention the portrayal of the women of colour and the gratuitous rape scene that, for me, stops *Showgirls* from being a funny, camp classic and turns it into something truly disturbing.

I ask McHale why, in 2019, he decided to make a documentary about such a problematic narrative. "I don't know if it is a film that we should celebrate," he says. "I think it is a film we should examine and, as we dive deeper into it, we have to see it for what it is, warts and all. I don't think it is something we should discard. If we allow ourselves to have honest opinions about our media and what we consume, and the depictions of women, and queer characters, and people of colour, that's only going to make us more aware of each other, and better understand each other."

McHale's documentary ends with Berkley — who never bounced back as an actress after *Showgirls*, and is now best known for presenting a reality-TV show — introducing a screening of the film for thousands of fans at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery in LA. It's a heart-warming moment. She is given a standing ovation — finally, the recognition she deserved for trying really hard in her starring role in one of the best worst films ever made.

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