

FROM THE PEOPLE WHO BROUGHT YOU "CODEPENDENT LESBIAN SPACE ALIEN SEEKS SAME"

THE FOXY MERKINS

The Autumn Whisper



Area 51



The Montana Mist



SEE WHAT'S LURKIN'

**"Ridiculous, absurd and outrageous without ever being vulgar.
Every scene is genuinely funny" - CraveOnline**



"Delightful" - Screen International

"Brilliant" - FourTwoNine



THE FOXY MERKINS

Written by Madeleine Olnek, Jackie Monahan & Lisa Haas
Produced by Laura Terruso & Madeleine Olnek
Directed by Madeleine Olnek

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/TheFoxyMerkins>
Digital press kits, Press Clips, and press materials available
here: <http://bit.ly/FoxyMerkinsPressOnly>

Trailer: www.vimeo.com/125648089



U.S. Feature Film -- 2014

81 Minutes -- HD Shooting Format -- DCP Exhibition Format -- Dolby 5.1 Mix -- Aspect Ratio 16:9

critical response to THE FOXY MERKINS

Fred Topel of CRAVEONLINE says, “The Foxy Merkins is reminder of how much fun Sundance movies can be. This is the festival that brought us *The Beasts of The Southern Wild*, but it’s also the one that brought us *Clerks*...It’s ridiculous, absurd and outrageous without ever being vulgar. Every scene is genuinely funny...remember the name *The Foxy Merkins*.”

Helen Eisenbach of THE HUFFINGTON POST calls “The Foxy Merkins” “Odd, poignant, both profane and strangely innocent, and above all, shockingly funny...a comic bonanza of mind games, sexual stereotypes and unexpected love.”

Mark Adams, Chief Film Critic of SCREEN INTERNATIONAL, says “The Foxy Merkins” is “Delightful...made with a real sense of warmth and indie humor..a gentle charmer.”

Peter Knegt of INDIEWIRE calls *The Foxy Merkins* “Downright hilarious” and names it one of “10 great LGBT Films From This Year’s Sundance Film Festival.”

Aaron Hillis of THE VILLAGE VOICE names “The Foxy Merkins” at BAMcinemaFest part of “Ten Reasons to Spend your Summer in a Movie Theater.”

Melissa Anderson of ARTFORUM writes “Of the comedies on view [at *BAMCinemaFEST 2014*], none offered as much consistently inspired silliness as Madeleine Olnek’s *The Foxy Merkins*. Olnek’s second feature, much like its predecessor, *Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same* (2011), is a lo-fi divertissement that proves to be more than just a jokey title.”

Nicholas Bell of IONCINEMA says, “this is an unfailingly funny film, proving Olnek to be a refreshing voice to behold in an era of repetitive storytelling and mediocre beats.”

Dean Treadwell of FILMICABILITY says “The Foxy Merkins” is “One of the best movies I’ve seen so far this year...[a] fantastically entertaining comedy.”



THE STORY

Logline

Two lesbian hookers wind their way through a world of bargain-hunting housewives and double-dealing conservative women in this subversive buddy comedy, an homage to and riff on iconic male hustler films.



Short Summary

Margaret is a down-on-her-luck lesbian hooker in training. She meets Jo, a beautiful, self-assured — and straight — grifter from a wealthy family who's an expert on picking up women. The duo hit the streets where they encounter bargain-hunting housewives and double-dealing conservative women, all the while trying to reconcile their differing feelings towards each other. The makers of "Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same" bring you this lesbian hooker buddy comedy, an homage to and parody of iconic male hustler films.

Long Summary

Margaret, (LISA HAAS) is a down-on-her-luck, asthmatic lesbian hooker who comes to New York City to ply her trade. She meets Jo (JACKIE MONAHAN) another hooker working the streets. A beautiful and self-assured grifter from a wealthy family, Jo is an expert on picking-up women, even as she considers herself a card-carrying heterosexual. Street-wise in the ways of lesbian prostitution, Jo takes Margaret under her wing, provides her with a low-rent living situation and gives her tips on how to build her clientele.

Navigating the bizarre fetishes and sexual needs of their dates, we follow their adventures together through encounters with an MFA Drama student (DEB MARGOLIN), hotel convention attendees (BABS DAVY, BETSY FARRELL), and a shopaholic swinger (SALLY SOCKWELL). Margaret quickly finds out that the demographic of customers is primarily frustrated housewives, or closeted, married, Republican women.

As Jo and Margaret's friendship deepens, Jo volunteers to help Margaret find her mom. Searching local cemeteries, they encounter a Mumbling Erotic Accessory Salesman (ALEX KARPOVSKY) who is selling merkins, "a toupee for your vagina." Margaret is ignorant of this erotic accessory, but Jo knows the entire in-depth history of the merkin, which she later explains were used by 15th century prostitutes to conceal their syphilis.

Soon after they meet a husky-voiced kinky Republican woman (SUSAN ZIEGLER), and her "maid," (FRANCES BODOMO). The seductress is a bombshell with a fetish for cops (CHARLES ROGERS, LEE EATON) and sexual caprice, who puts Margaret through some unspeakable experiences that test the strength of her trust for Jo.

When Shopaholic Swinger Winifred (SALLY SOCKWELL) makes a grab-ass play for Jo in front of Margaret, we see Jo beginning to bristle at the reality of the street hustler role she has been playing at. Endlessly resourceful, Jo attempts to sell a sex tape she has secretly made of Margaret and a "date," but it is rejected by a cable-tv Executive (Once again, ALEX KARPOVSKY) who doesn't like the casting. In an emotional scene around the campfire, as their luck is beginning to run out, the two women attempt to sort out the confusing nature of their intimate relationship. Meanwhile, Margaret hasn't given up on finding her mother, and to try to find her, they must go and face Margaret's sadistic brother (DENNIS DAVIS), who taunts Margaret with a potential cause of her debilitating asthma, calling into question why Margaret longs so much for someone who has left her with so little.

As the film reaches its climax, Jo's mother (DIANE CIELSA) gives Jo an ultimatum; Jo quickly hooks up with a man (GIAN MARIA ANNOVI) who she and Margaret meet in Little Italy. Ultimately, Jo's self-involvement trumps their chances of a lasting friendship. Jo abandons Margaret and heads off for a WASPY married life in the suburbs; Margaret realizes the loss of her "friendship" with Jo and aspires to leave "the life." In the end, Margaret re-meets one of her "Janes" (JENNIFER PREDIGER) and they make a genuine romantic connection.

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR



WRITER/DIRECTOR/PRODUCER MADELEINE OLNEK is a Guggenheim-award-winner who has been dedicated to writing comedy and stories about love between women. She did her graduate studies at Brown and Columbia University, and had four films at Sundance. She has written, directed and produced 24 plays in downtown New York city. Her three feature films are *WILD NIGHTS WITH EMILY* (starring Molly Shannon as Emily Dickinson; distributed by UNIVERSAL & MGM), the Sundance Independent Spirit nominated lesbian hooker comedy *THE FOXY MERKINS* (which played at Sundance and the Moscow International Film Festival), and the Sundance cult comedy *CODEPENDENT LESBIAN SPACE ALIEN SEEKS SAME*.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

A friend of mine once told me how upset she got when she came out as a lesbian and realized there were no prostitutes for women. She was angry about it as if it were a civil rights issue, and I found the ridiculous and circuitous politics of her feelings of entitlement very, very funny. At the same time, I had to admit to myself that I loved the classic male hustler films such as "Midnight Cowboy" and "My Own Private Idaho,"-- and wasn't that my own idealizing and romanticizing those roles and that possibility for women? When Dustin Lance Black accepted his Academy Award, he said the campfire scene in "My Own Private Idaho" gave him the courage to be gay. I loved that scene too-- the incredible vulnerability of River Phoenix's performance-- but that is a scene about rejection, it's about unrequited love, it's heartbreaking, and who would want to look forward to experiencing that? I lodged in the back of my mind that someday I should make a movie about lesbian hookers who were picked up by housewives and Republican women, as if such a world really existed. Then we could see how funny it was.

A few years later, I had just made my first feature, "Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same," and was on the festival circuit. It can be very uncreative spending all your time promoting something, and the actors were begging me to start another movie. Two of the actors -- Lisa Haas and Jackie Monahan-- made a really funny promo video when we were at Sundance. They were in only once scene together in "Codependent..," and didn't really know each other, but in this video I was struck by their chemistry; they made a really great odd couple. Shooting on the streets of New York was an important element in this picture, and working with two very seasoned performers-- Jackie and Lisa had both toured internationally with their work and were used to acting under difficult conditions in clubs and performance spaces -- meant that I knew they would be able to find the joy in their adventures together under nerve-rattling circumstances. This was important since this film is also a buddy comedy, about a straight woman and a gay woman who bond while working the streets, and the way that love and friendship can be intertwined. We also spent a long time writing the movie together and that process served to deepen their intimacy on screen.



During the editing we had many, many screenings. In one of the work-in-progress screenings, a former AIDS activist told me how she and a bunch of other lesbians tried to form a prostitution ring that provided lesbian services for women in the 90's-- how it didn't work, even though they "got beepers and everything." "Women just won't pay for sex," she said. A provocative statement, but for all of us making the film, we were more interested in the assumptions and questions behind it: what might women's emotional freedom from their sexual impulses look like?

Women excel in friendship, it is extremely important to them, and yet, buddy movies with female leads are extremely rare-- "Thelma and Louise" blew people away in how cutting edge it was to put the close relationship of these two women front and center in the movie. But at the same time, it ended with them driving off the cliff, to uplifting music, as if the double-suicide of the main characters were a happy event (and for the backwards real world of the 80's, perhaps it was). "Bridesmaids" was also groundbreaking and hilarious, and a box-office take of that kind would usually send Hollywood to make a million more female-friendship movies. But there have been few.

"The Foxy Merkins" started as an homage to male hustler films that I loved-- it began as a movie about other movies, the same way the films of the French New Wave are. We wanted people to watch the movie and think of those other films and consider the comedic juxtaposition of women in that context--but we soon found in writing the story that we were more compelled by the those films as a jumping off point into our own comical and complicated journey.



What the critics have said about Madeleine Olnek's work

"Why She's On Our Radar: Her debut feature, the hilarious black-and-white sci-fi romantic comedy "Codependent..." charmed the pants off critics and audiences at the Sundance Film Festival where it world premiered. The film's since gone on to slay at a slew of festivals"-- indieWIRE

"Sweet, funny, clever comedy...Olnek's sensibility is singular." -- Variety

"Clever...witty...this enormously likable movie keeps sexual politics on the back burner and the universal search for connection front and center...Ed Wood would be proud." -New York Times

"A hilarious date movie for couples of all orientations" -- Hollywood Reporter

"Codependent...' is silly, cheesy and surprisingly enjoyable. As goofy and singular as its look-twice title...["Codependent..." is] a memorable curio."—Los Angeles Times

"Inspired silliness... satisfyingly incongruous—and slyly subversive" - The Village Voice

"Her deadpan style and sympathy with life's losers and outsiders brings to mind Jim Jarmusch's landmark indie film "Stranger in Paradise." "Space Aliens" is not only a worthy successor to that film, but it plants Olnek in the very best tradition of Downtown Manhattan indie filmmaking." - Edge

"Really, really sweet and funny...hysterical...I watched it twice." – KPCC Film Week, an affiliate of NPR

"unforgettable...a comedic goldmine." --Filmmaker Magazine

"Uproariously Neurotic Comedy" --New York Newsday

"Hilarious... Olnek directs at a breathless pace." --The Village Voice

"Funny, darkly obsessive, often fascinating... The work is disturbing, sexy and pithy, all at once." --Greenwich Village Press

"Madeleine Olnek is producing incredible contemporary masterpieces" --Paula Vogel in American Theater Magazine



CAST BIOS

Lisa Haas (Margaret) is an actor currently best known for playing the character of Jay Duplass's assistant on HBO Max's "Search Party." Her starring role in the Sundance cult comedy "Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same" was followed by the Sundance film "The Foxy Merkins" (also directed by Madeleine Olnek) which was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award. She has a featured role in Madeleine Olnek's third film, the SXSW and Independent Spirit nominated film "Wild Nights With Emily" currently streaming on Hulu.

Jackie Monahan (Jo) toured the country featuring for Amy Schumer which included opening for her monthly in Vegas. You may have seen Jackie on Adult Swim's "The Eric Andre Show", Last Comic Standing, or Comedy Jam on Showtime. In addition, Jackie starred in and co-wrote Madeleine Olnek's beloved Sundance feature film "The Foxy Merkins" which was also nominated for an Independent Spirit award. Jackie starred in Olnek's Sundance hit "Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same" which received rave reviews from both Variety and The Hollywood Reporter. Roger Ebert called Monahan "A delight, and the Queen of Deadpan. Her stand-up comedy album "These Lips" is available on Amazon.

Alex Karpovsky (Merkin Salesman/CNN Executive) can be seen in a recurring role on HBO's acclaimed show "Girls," and will make his major motion picture debut in the Coen Brothers' upcoming flick "Inside Llewyn Davis." He completed his first feature-length film, "The Hole Story," in 2006; the existential black comedy earned Alex a slot in Filmmaker Magazine's annual "25 New Faces of Independent Film." Alex's award-winning follow-up, "Woodpecker," premiered at the 2008 South by Southwest Film Festival. Alex's most recent film, "Trust Us, This Is All Made Up," premiered at the 2009 South by Southwest Film Festival. As an actor, Karpovsky was featured in "Beeswax," "Grand Theft Auto IV," "Harmony and Me," "Lovers of Hate," "Bass Ackwards," "Tiny Furniture," (2010 South by Southwest Film Festival - Narrative Jury Prize for Best Feature Film); and "The Grownups."

Susan Ziegler (The Kinky Republican Woman) is an actor with extensive film, TV, and Off Broadway credits. She co-stars opposite Molly Shannon in the SXSW film, "Wild Nights With Emily" currently streaming on Hulu. She also stars in several other films directed by Madeleine Olnek, the Sundance film and Independent-Spirit-Award-nominated comedy "The Foxy Merkins," and the Sundance short film "Countertransference."

The **Foxy Merkins**

Dir: Madeleine Olnek. US. 2013. 90mins

This engagingly left-field lesbian comedy is a self-aware low-budget blend of more posturing male hustler films such as *Midnight Cowboy* and *My Own Private Idaho*, but made with a real sense of warmth and indie humour by director Madeleine Olnek, whose Sundance success *Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same* went on to be something of a cult success.

The pair of leads work well together, with Lisa Haas playing the genial foil for the more extrovert Jackie Monahan.

Shot digitally and intermittently as Olnek travelled the festival circuit with her last film, *The **Foxy Merkins*** may well lack polish and precision (the sound is downright clunky at times) but it more than makes up with a warm-hearted sense of fun and genial and game performances, especially from the two leads Lisa Haas and Jackie Monahan.

The film had its world premiere at the Sundance Institute presented Next Weekend in Los Angeles. By its nature it is a film aimed at niche screenings, though should also have a healthy festival life.

Rather amateurish and down-on-her-luck asthmatic lesbian hooker Margaret (Haas) has the good fortune to meet the beautiful, confident and wilful Jo (Monahan), who comes from a moneyed background and is far more knowledgeable about picking up women, despite claiming to be resolutely heterosexual.

The pair, who favour sleeping under sinks at a toilet of an evening, set about walking the not-so mean New York streets, and encounter a series of women - from a shopaholic swinger (Sally Sockwell) through to a husky-voiced Republican woman (Susan Ziegler) and her 'maid' (Frances Bodomo), who make Margaret go through some odd police-linked experiences to test her - and gradually come to grow into their unlikely friendship.

But Jo is being pressed into giving up the life by her wealthy mother (Diane Cielsa) and eventually marries and heads to the suburbs, leaving Margaret back on the streets but actually a stronger and more confident woman and even able to now spot a romantic option with a woman (Jennifer Prediger) she had actually met on her first bumbling day on the streets.

The film, though clearly micro-budget and at times acted with enthusiasm rather than precision, is a gentle charmer and punctuated with some delightful dialogue and set-piece sequences. When they go and see a digitally re-mastered screening of *Lassie* a woman approaches Margaret...but is only after her popcorn, while another woman insists on paying her in coupons for the Talbots store.

Delightfully - while they are wandering a graveyard - there is a discussion about what music Sade might listen to. Jo pithily adds: " There's that line... 'coast to coast, LA to Chicago'...thank God she doesn't work as an air traffic controller."

The pair of leads work well together, with Lisa Haas playing the genial foil for the more extrovert Jackie Monahan. Both appeared in *Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same*, though Monahan's stand-up background shows through as she delivers many of the witty one-liners. Oh, and for the record, a **'Merkin'** is a pubic wig.

Producers: Laura Terruso, Madeleine Olnek

Screenplay: Lisa Haas, Jackie Monahan, Madeleine Olnek

Cinematography: Anna Stypko

Editor: Curtis Grout

Music: Dan Bartfield

Main cast: Lisa Haas, Jackie Monahan, Susan Ziegler, Alex Karpovsky, Sally Sockwell, Deb Margolin

BACK AND FORTH 06.18.14

BASED SOLELY on its intro and outro, the sixth edition of BAMcinemaFest, New York City's signature summertime film event, could easily be declared the best yet. Though vastly different, Richard Linklater's *Boyhood*, which opens the festival, and Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, which closes it, are the perfect bookends, each movie, whether deliberately or not, a profound reflection on the meaning of time. Linklater's remarkable fiction project (eloquently assessed by Amy Taubin in the current issue of *Artforum*) was made over the course of twelve years, following the development of Mason, played by Ellar Coltrane, who was six years old when shooting began in 2002, from first grader to incoming college first-year at UT Austin. Witnessing Coltrane and his character transform from tyke to budding man in less than three hours is a singularly moving experience; I can only hope that Linklater and his lead actor return to this compressed longitudinal-study format for a second installment, in which we trace Mason's growth from voting age to thirty.

Twenty-five years have passed since Lee's film, shot almost entirely on location on one block in Bed-Stuy and spanning roughly twenty-four hours, opened in the US. Celebrating the silver jubilee of this effulgent, electrifying movie, one of the most essential ever made about New York, inevitably invites reflecting on how much the city, especially Brooklyn, has changed from the final year of Ed Koch's mayoralty to the first of Bill de Blasio's. (Not to mention the arc of the writer/director/star/producer's career: The commemorative screening of *Do the Right Thing* on June 29 both concludes the festival and kicks off BAMcinématek's Lee retrospective, which runs until July 10.)

In between these superlative films are twenty-some feature-length works, two featurettes—including another excellent rep offering, Manfred Kirchheimer's little-seen *Stations of the Elevated* (1981), a hypnotic chronicle of graffiti-festooned subway exteriors and other signs and symbols specific to late-1970s Gotham—and a handful of shorts, most made by emerging directors in American independent cinema. It would be scandalously unfair to expect the efforts of neophyte filmmakers to even begin to approach the monumentality of Linklater's or Lee's (or even Kirchheimer's) projects, though I don't think it's too outlandish to ask that a movie endure in the memory longer than the fifteen minutes it takes to walk from BAM to my apartment.

Many titles in BAMcinemaFest did not withstand this low-bar test of time, but several others did. Of the comedies on view, none offered as much consistently inspired silliness as Madeleine Olnek's *The Foxy Merkins*. Olnek's second feature, much like its predecessor, *Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same* (2011), is a lo-fi divertissement that proves to be more than just a jokey title. Both also feature Lisa Haas, whose bulk and sartorial choices suggest Andrea Dworkin—making it all the more pleasingly incongruous that her *Merkins* character, Margaret, should be a dyke hooker, advised to solicit clients outside Talbots by her friend in the sapphic skin trade, Jo (Jackie Monahan, another *Space Alien* vet who shares *Merkins* co-writing credit with Olnek and Haas). *Merkins* sends up both male-hustler movies (*Midnight Cowboy* and *My Own Private Idaho* in particular) and the upscale, conservative daughters of Gomorrah with unerring goofiness.

Shot on Super 16, Bingham Bryant and Kyle Molzan's *For the Plasma* has the distinction of being the festival's lone world premiere and its most beguiling, unclassifiable entry. Quarter-lifer

Helen (Rosalie Lowe) summons her friend—if that's the right word—Charlie (Annabelle Lemieux) to assist her with some mysterious research involving data provided by CCTV cameras in the woods of an arcadian small fishing village in Maine. “How long have you been doing this?” the newcomer asks the pro, who responds, “A week or a year—makes no difference.” The reply typifies the seductive strangeness and arbitrariness of the plot: Most of Helen and Charlie's conversations are delivered with zero affect until a raging blowup between the two occurs late one night, never to be acknowledged afterward. *For the Plasma* is a modest project of big ideas: about solitude, collaboration, conspiracy, magical thinking.

Another filmmaking duo, Lev Kalman and Whitney Horn, also tracks big-brained twenty-somethings in idyllic spots—this time, around the globe—in their delightful *L for Leisure*. Set during 1992 and '93 and beautifully shot on 16 mm, this achronological account of a group of graduate students during school-year downtime was clearly made under the sign of Whit Stillman and Éric Rohmer, but the film wears its influences lightly. Similarly, the period details—the Capri Sun pouches, the absurd height of all waistbands for both male and female attire, the flyers for the campus “AIDS dance”—are exact without ever becoming fussy, all the more impressive when considering that this ludic time capsule was made by directors who were only ten and eleven during the years depicted. Like *Boyhood* and *Do the Right Thing*, *L for Leisure* invites us to look back while pointing the way ahead.

— Melissa Anderson

The sixth annual BAMcinemaFest runs June 18 through 29 at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York.

Sundance Next Weekend Review: The Foxy Merkins

“A reminder of how much fun Sundance movies can be.”



The Sundance Film Festival launched a Los Angeles event called Next Weekend, where they are showing films from the festival's "Next" program and a few premieres. I was excited to have a little piece of Sundance in August, and I was able to catch the premiere of a new film by some Sundance veterans I met my first year in 2011. Director Madeleine Olnek and stars Lisa Haas and Jackie Monahan made *Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same* which was adorable, so when I saw their picture in the program guide for *The Foxy Merkins* I was sold, although the title *Foxy Merkins* kind of sells itself.

This time, Haas and Monahan play lesbian hookers. Again, enough said, right? Margaret (Haas) is new on the street so Jo (Monahan) becomes her Ratso Rizzo, complete with a street crossing/taxi cab encounter. Scenes of Margaret learning the ropes involve grabbing random mall ass and stealing coffee. You can tell Monahan and Haas have a natural chemistry and comic rhythm.

On the job, the clients aren't so much about the sex. Each one has a fetish that's not even really sexual, just comical. One john (joan?) only involves movie theater concessions. A pair of accountants with a silly voyeur fetish are particularly funny, but the major set piece is an extended single take with a fully frontally naked Haas. I've got to applaud the performer for going all out.

These are harmless, ridiculous fetishes and there is a mockumentary interview segment where hookers are able to recount even more crazy requests they've fulfilled. It is ridiculous, absurd and outrageous without ever being vulgar. Every scene is genuinely funny, some involving nonsexual banter between Jo and Margaret about sharing clothes. There is a recurring gag about Women's Studies majors and MFA drama students ending up homeless, so we're definitely feeling someone's pain here. There is even a merkin salesman and the merkin becomes an emotional hook by the end of the film.

I'm trying not to spoil any of the specific jokes because I want you to see this one day, but the absurd sense of humor is hard to explain unless you see it. So I'm going to issue a spoiler warning. In the next paragraph, I will mention a few specific jokes that illustrate the kind of bizarre humor that cracked me up in *The Foxy Merkins*. I don't think it ruins the joke. It will still be funny when you see it play out, but if I've already sold you on the style of humor, just skip to the last paragraph.

As I hinted at above, one of Margaret's clients just wants to crawl on a movie theater floor and eat Margaret's popcorn and drink her soda. That's weird. The two lesbian accountants just want to watch Jo motorboat Margaret fully clothed. Even the naked one is more about the client's desire to stage a crazy humiliation of Margaret while she's naked. These are only three of the set pieces in *The Foxy Merkins* so I hope they give you an example of the welcome irreverence skirting around the issue of actual sex in a sex comedy.

The Foxy Merkins is also a reminder of how much fun Sundance movies can be. This is the festival that brought us *Beasts of the Southern Wild* but it's also the one that brought us *Clerks*. Hopefully *Next Weekend* will give it the first push and I'm here to tell you to remember the name *Foxy Merkins*.



10 Great LGBT Films From This Year's Sundance Film Festival

BY PETER KNEGT
JANUARY 28, 2014 4:37 PM

The Foxy Merkins (directed by Madeleine Olnek)

Madeleine Olnek continues the absurdist tone of 2011 Sundance highlight "Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same" with the "The Foxy Merkins" -- a wacky tale of two lesbian prostitutes (Jackie Monahan and Lisa Haas, the latter of which co-wrote the film with Olnek) who work the streets of New York City. One is a down-on-her-luck newcomer to the scene; the other is a beautiful (and straight) grifter who's got things down. Their adventures are bizarre and offbeat and probably not for everyone, but they sure did work for me: I found "Merkins" to be downright hilarious.

THE HUFFINGTON POST

The Huffington Post - January 16, 2014

By Helen Eisenbach

Midnight Cowgirls

Posted: 01/16/2014 12:41 pm EST Updated: 01/25/2014 4:01 pm EST

"We understand any movie about lesbian hookers to be universal, whether or not you've actually seen one," says director Madeleine Olnek. She's temporarily fled her NYC home for L.A., one of three artists culled from hundreds to be nominated for the Independent Spirit Awards' Someone to Watch honor. Next she's on to Sundance to show her second feature, *The Foxy Merkins*, a uniquely Olnek-ian creation: odd, poignant, both profane and strangely innocent, and above all, shockingly funny. Olnek, long a cult figure in downtown Manhattan for her brilliant, idiosyncratic comic plays, shifted to film some years ago and promptly netted a William Goldman Screenwriting Fellowship and the Adrienne Shelly Award for Best Female Director at Columbia University. Her absurdist gem *Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same* premiered at Sundance in 2011; *Merkins*, a comic bonanza of mind games, sexual stereotypes and unexpected love, was chosen for both Sundance's NEXT WEEKEND festival in L.A. and the big show in Utah January 2014. Olnek shared some of her philosophies and experiences by phone.

Are you a different person in Los Angeles?

Oh my God. I finally understand the film business: it's so nice here, the trees are so nice and the weather's so nice and people's *houses* are so nice... I read this book called *Screenwriting for Fun and Profit* -- except *FOR FUN AND* was crossed out -- by those guys who did *Reno 911!*, and they talk about how you think in Hollywood executives are trying to actually find a great movie to make. And they're like, "Wrong! All executives are trying to do is not get fired." In the context of how pretty it is here --if you live in a nice house, of course you would want to not lose it -- filmmaking be damned. If you're an executive working on a movie, it might not be to your advantage to make that movie better. It might be to your advantage, if you made a mistake, to cover it up rather than to address it. You might be fired.

How do you propose we rectify this situation?

I think the best filmmakers live in ugly New York. There's not going to be the same loss.

Because we have so little. When you were a girl did you imagine you would grow up to be a filmmaker championing the sexual liberation of the female?

[*deadpan*] Yes, of course I did. ... We had a Super 8 camera I played around with, but I didn't have a sense of myself -- I actually did make my little brother and his friends act in movies. They didn't know what was happening to them; at a certain point they would just run off from wherever I was. But I always loved loved loved film comedy; it's always been comedy that's drawn me toward pursuing what's now become filmmaking. First I wanted to be an actor so badly. Then I was trained as an actor and I learned about writing and directing, so I became a writer and director making plays ... sort of evolving trying to figure out what was the medium through which I was supposed to tell a story.

Are you surprised to find yourself doing film?

The idea of film was always intimidating to me, because it seemed so expensive... As much as I loved going to movies it wasn't something I would even let myself consider, because I didn't know how I could have access to that. It wasn't until technology changed that I thought, "Oh, you can just make movies the way people make downtown theater."

Did you anticipate doing your very specific improvisational kind of filmmaking, where you collaborate with actors on your story and they improvise the script?

Actually, the only time I worked that way was when I was in college, when I did comedy shows. We did some improv scenes -- I came up with this idea for an audition skit: I was a director and I was just supposed to sit there while other people came in and did their audition. ... I actually worked with Molly Shannon, who in the course of doing the skit over and over came up with that character she did on *Saturday Night Live*; that's where she first developed it. That was the only time I really worked that way. When I went into doing traditional playwriting I had all the actors say [the script] word for word. It didn't make sense to improvise on stage, because you couldn't edit it. And an actor isn't necessarily thinking about through-line as they're free-associating. It wasn't until -- it's going to sound silly, but I spent a year writing this script for a short film and there was this line in it, it was my favorite line, it was the actor's favorite line, and when it came time to shoot the scene that line was in -- I wasn't directing this movie -- there was no time... And I felt like, *Oh my God, scripts don't matter!* [*laughs*] It's only a part of it. In playwriting, the playwright is king and the writing is the center of all of it. In screenwriting it all has to do with how it works and where's the physical space you're in and continuity -- all these other elements where what becomes more important is that you have it believable from moment to moment. That's what incredible about improv: a camera literally captures what's happening. So if you do a scene where you tell someone to say something and the other person doesn't know what it's going to be, you really capture their surprise.

Film really is a director's and editor's medium.

My identity was as a playwright for many years, so it's weird, as a writer, to go into film and just give all that up. You have to be focused on what's the best thing for the project. I assemble so many actresses and actors who are so smart and they're so funny, that for me not to use their contributions because of some kind of ego thing would be strange. And I think people are speaking more frankly about how films are made -- recently Scorsese and his editor were talking about how much improvisation there were in all of his famous movies. And no one would think about that; they wouldn't put the words *Scorsese* and *improvisation* together. But when you think about it, those scripts are so good -- I'm sorry, that's not one person sitting alone writing that.

Improv has a vital energy, like live theater, because it's so spontaneous. Do you find improv adds a charge?

Oh, totally. But I think where a lot of directors go wrong is you can't really shape improv in the editing room. What gives improv its shape is how you direct the actors to pursue their objectives during a scene.

Do you consciously pursue any particular themes? I see your work as consistently searching for connection and love while finding the comedy in heartache.

Because it's such a long process to make a film, you have to make a film that contains things you care about. [Otherwise] you can't get to the end; it's just too hard to do it. I think all writers and directors have their obsessions -- I don't think they're consciously focused on them, but something is expressed from their worldview, their obsessions or concerns, things that are important to them, the things they value -- all of those things come out from story to story. Often in film you can see it even when they're not the writer of the script; you can still see their opinion or worldview emerging from the different stories they tell. For me I know that I'm often put in "a box shaped like a coffin," to quote our First Lady of the mayor. Because I tell stories about women, I'm seen as having this agenda -- where I'm just talking about what I know. These are the experiences I have, and it wouldn't occur to me that I couldn't tell these stories. Whereas other people sort of preemptively stop themselves from telling these stories. I was talking to my friend [playwright/actor] Deb [Margolin] about how few female buddy movies there are. Women are very invested in friendship, and women have experiences and we're as adventurous as the next person. But we rarely see these stories on screen. When we were on the festival circuit for *Codependent*, it felt like a road movie. And when I was in Seattle with [Merkins star] Jackie [Monahan], we went to this lesbian bar, and there were only two other women there -- and they ended up stealing my jacket, and it had my iPhone and my wallet. And we actually ran through the streets of Seattle, and we actually caught up with them at this other bar! They were so stupid -- they told us where they were going to! First I was like, "Wow, out of New York City the lesbians are so friendly!" but Jackie was like, "They're on drugs."

A perfect setup for a caper film... Was there one particular inspiration for *Foxy Merkins*?

I had this idea years ago, which was making a movie that was sort of a parody of an homage to classic male hustler films, told with a female cast. Because when you see those movies, if you're a woman, you identify with the main character. Why wouldn't you? You're an individual, you're adventurous, you have the same fantasies -- I'm not saying sexual fantasies, but the fantasy of being a loner, being an outlier, on the edge; that's how you feel. Then when a bunch of things happened right after Sundance [with *Codependent*] I thought, *I should make that movie now, because that's a movie we could all work on.*

If you were running a studio, we'd have a whole department for female road movies and buddy comedies.

Look at how *Bridesmaids* did financially -- if that was any other kind of film, there would have been a million knockoff female buddy films by the next year. I mean, *Thelma and Louise* was considered this totally vanguard movie, it blew people away -- but it ends with the double suicide of the main characters! [laughs]

We've been asked, and [Merkins star] Lisa [Haas] been asked, "What obligation did you have, playing a female prostitute?" Our first obligation is to comedy.

There are so few comedy geniuses around. Melissa McCarthy can say these foul things and it doesn't remotely affect how much we love her.

Melissa McCarthy has this guilelessness. She is not a malevolent person. So even when she's saying angry things there's a kind of a comic and cartoonish spirit that is, at its heart, warm.

Lisa Haas has the same guileless innocence. Or Tina Fey, who's somehow both warm and tart. It's remarkable the impact she's had on popular culture.

I love in Tina Fey's book where she talks about how it's not your job to address sexism -- the only instance in which you should address sexism is if someone is literally standing in your way between you and a job. If someone is going to stop you from getting a job, then, yes, you have to address their attitude. But otherwise you have to save everything you have for your work. Because your work is going to take everything and more. And you can't take on the idea of trying to -- I mean, sexism has existed forever and will exist long after we're gone. Our job as comedians is to just serve comedy and make the comedy as funny as you can. I feel like, what better example of someone who figured out how to negotiate the world than Tina Fey, you know? In comedy.

That she was able to be intelligent and political and funny and she wasn't clobbered for it but in fact embraced created a whole sea change: it allowed people to acknowledge that women could be all those things. It was obvious women were, but she somehow made it acceptable and somehow safe. Maybe because she just spent all her time concentrating on the work. Have you been surprised at any of the reactions to your movie?

With the Next Weekend festival, we were unprepared for how well it went. People came back for the second screening that were at the first one. We were amazed.

It's a testament to the hunger there is out there for those stories. It must be both gratifying and hard to be pioneering -- I would guess you get people's visceral responses, with their psychological issues sort of laid on the table, because they don't have other forums for experiencing these kinds of things. They're not used to seeing these stories on film.

It's pretty easy to spot when someone has an agenda in reacting. But, honestly, an agenda can't carry you through making a film -- unless you're a documentary filmmaker. Narrative is just too humanistic of a craft. The process is just about people and moments and the truth and stuff like that... [If] there's a hunger for my work -- if that's true, I would say that we just don't get to see very smart quirky women on screen a lot. And women who may be unconventional-looking, perhaps. One of the things that bothers me the most in criticism is when people describe the people I work with as not being actors. They're all trained actors ... they're on stage every week downtown. I almost feel like if I worked with Kathy Bates and Linda Hunt, if they weren't famous, people would assume they were my friends. They wouldn't even see them. There's just this idea that an actress has to look a certain way and be, you know, three pounds -- and I have real-looking people in my films who are brilliant comedians, improvisers -- and the intelligence level is just so high, it's very

refreshing. People get to see the kind of people who they themselves would choose to spend time with. When you go out for coffee, do you want to go out with someone who's really smart and compelling, or do you want to go out with someone who's two pounds? *[laughs]* Where people really want to come see these movies really has to do with: *this is what life is like for us, we're surrounded by intelligent people -- how come we so rarely get to see that on screen?*

Thus the success of *Girls*. Back in the '70s, Hollywood went from casting Robert Redford types to Dustin Hoffman types, but we continue to glamorize and misrepresent what women are supposed to look like. Would Hollywood and television do well to recognize there are vast audiences who would respond to more female-centered films like yours?

There's a hunger for comedy that is shared. It transcends gender, for sure. And people who are working in comedy, who love it, who see it as a practice, they all feel the same way about the very very funny shows. Obviously I'm not Larry David, but when I see that show or I see other stuff that's very funny, I'm drawn to them, and I do think that it's something that goes beyond -- I mean, I know guys love our movies who love comedy. If you're sort of humorless or you take yourself very seriously, no, you're not going to like my movies. Because part of what I'm presenting is sort of -- that way Aristotle talks about how the comedian presents the world as ridiculous.

I knew you'd end up quoting Aristotle. Do you have any overriding emotion as you anticipate your movie's debut at Sundance in Utah?

I feel like you're talking as if I'm giving away the daughter I never had at her bat mitzvah.

Hopefully she'll get lots of checks from relatives and strangers. How much money do you need to raise to actually make a movie and how do you raise it?

The costs sort of snowball... We're running a Kickstarter campaign right now, and we came up with the weirdest prizes we could think of -- some of them, actually, it's not clear how we're going to deliver them or create them, like the Merkins coaster... But all these people I know have come out of the woodwork with donations, and other filmmakers have made donations, even filmmakers going to Sundance with their own films, which is really so moving to me.

It's the artist believing in the process and the talent. In this strange way we can all make happen the films that we want to see rather than being forced to just endure the things Hollywood churns out.

The idea of making the movies you want to see -- that's exactly this new wave of accessible technology plus accessible fundraising.

The artist's life is not filled with encouragement, so we have to appreciate those moments.

The whole idea is that comedy is about trying to create joy for people. We're trying to get the joy, that's the big picture for us. There's a lot that goes on at Sundance; it's so stressful for a director... *[but]* we're so lucky that we got to make a movie and be recognized

basically by the greatest film festival in the world. It's unbelievable -- when in my first year of film school I couldn't even shoot a scene that would cut together, where someone would say something and then you'd have the other shot of the person saying something back -- it didn't even look like they were in the same room. That I'm now in Sundance is just unbelievable to me.

American Gigola: Olněk's Hilarious Sophomore Film Reinvents the Masculine Realm of Hustler Bonding

Few filmmakers are able to successfully create a distinctly unique universe of off-kilter comedy both consistent in tone and unwavering quality, especially if it also happens to be cobbled together from a mixture of limited resources. But you can add director Madeleine Olněk to a shortlist of such names with her sophomore film, ***The Foxy Merkins***, an inspired ode to male-hustler buddy films from the vintage 1970s, transposed to modern day and removed from the arena of the heteronormative. Perhaps scrappy and episodic, which only adds to its infectious charm, this is an unfailingly funny film, proving Olněk to be a refreshing voice to behold in an era of repetitive storytelling and mediocre beats within the realm of independent film.

In what appears to be a bid to reconnect with her mother, Margaret (Lisa Haas) takes off to New York City, though she seemingly didn't plan on how she would support herself through the venture, leading her to take to the streets as a prostitute. Once there, she finds a rather mixed (and, invariably sordid) female client base, though she's not very adept at navigating this arena of exchange. Luckily, she runs into Jo (Jackie Monahan) at a 24 hour café. Jo's a seasoned pro, and though she specializes in heterosexual clientele, she's no stranger to navigating the lesbian hooker scene, and navigates Margaret toward the ground zero of lesbian cruising, the outside of Talbot's department store. She also shares her sleeping space with Margaret, the Port Authority public restroom. While Jo comes from a family of means (her mother keeps attempting to get her to come home), Margaret seems determined to find where her long lost mother is, leading them through a series of strange and bizarre scenarios.

To describe the feel of *The Foxy Merkins*, imagine if Quentin Dupieux had the proper amount of familiarity to make a female buddy comedy concerned with the finer details of lesbian street-hookers and their clients. It's a film that transcends an actual need for a bonafide, clearly defined narrative, for its magic is in some superb comedic timing, a handful of inspired recurring gags,

and a pair of leads that feature the kind of chemistry in the dynamic vein of Laurel & Hardy or that of Art Carney and Jackie Gleason in “The Honeymooners.”

Olněk’s scenario, co-written with the stars of the film, Lisa Haas and Jackie Monahan, may be simple in structure, yet it’s entertaining in that unpredictable sort of way in a universe where the strange and unexpected just sort of happen, not unlike (though not as crass as) early John Waters films, where peripheral family members and vaguely defined motivations descend surreptitiously for eventual closure.

The wickedly weird humor begins with its title (and grants the film one of its most hilarious bits, featuring a trench coated Alex Karpovsky in a graveyard that seems inspired by a similar sequence with David Lochary in *Pink Flamingos*, 1972). For the uninitiated, the definition of a merkin is ‘false hair for the female pudenda,’ if that gives you any indication of the subversive humor at work. But, Olněk’s film would be lost at sea if it weren’t for Jackie Monahan and Lisa Haas, with whom she worked on her 2011 debut, *Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same*.

Haas in particular is an invigorating screen presence as a lesbian hooker, working through her questionable decision in an occupation difficult for those with low self-esteem and undermining shyness. She braves multiple naked sequences when a rich client’s (a delicious Susan Ziegler) unique fetish involves police raids, sublimely staged and sidesplittingly ludicrous. A host of other notables filter throughout the milieu, and recognizable faces like Jennifer Prediger (Swanberg’s *Uncle Kent*; Hannah Fidell’s *A Teacher*), Desiree Akhavan (soon to be instantly recognizable when her own lovely directorial debut, *Appropriate Behavior* sees release), and Frances Bodomo (director of the short film, soon to be feature “Afronauts”), congeal into an excitingly rich amusement, a textured film that’s one of those surprising, rare discoveries of original comedic talents.

Reviewed on July 19 at the 2014 Outfest LGBT Los Angeles Film Festival – U.S. Dramatic Features



NewFest 2014: Rubber, Leather, Hookers, and Cupcakes

July 25, 2014 - 20:41 — Brandon Judell

Perfect though, from beginning to end, and unabashedly outrageous, is Madeleine Olnek's *The Foxy Merkins*, a comic tribute to East Coast women's-studies majors who have to earn their daily bread by becoming lesbian hookers. Anyone familiar with Ms. Olnek's previous cult favorite, *Codependent Lesbian Space Alien Seeks Same*, which was one of the top comic offerings of 2011, should not be surprised that her latest is one of the top five thigh-slapping, zany flicks of 2014.



The film stars Lisa Haas as Margaret, a blatantly incompetent, amply proportioned, would-be prostitute with asthma and an allergy to Pledge. Consequently, she has trouble performing cunnilingus in extremely clean homes and those where incense is burned. Right away her customer base is severely circumscribed. Luckily, she runs into Jo (the delicious Jackie Monahan), an experienced working girl from a rich home who becomes her mentor.

Soon the passive/aggressive pair are sleeping in a public bathroom, "motorboating" for closeted conventioners, scissoring with Republicans, and buying merkins in a cemetery from *Girls'* Alex Karpovsky. (Merkins, by the way, are artificial coverings of hair or fur for the pubic area that courtesans apparently used in centuries past to cover up their syphilitic sores.)

Part John Waters, with a dash of Paul Morrissey and a whole lot of Sappho, this delirious comedy is the must see girl-on-girl comedy of the new millennium. (Please send a copy to Melissa McCarthy pronto for some badly needed inspiration.