

The New York Times

Weekend MOVIES PERFORMING ARTS

FILM REVIEW

Throw Off The Yoke, But Keep The G-String

By A. O. SCOTT

Julia Query, who made "Live Nude Girls Unite!" in collaboration with Vicky Funari, was raised by her feminist mother to believe, she says, "in freedom, justice and equality for all." A graduate-school dropout, stand-up comedian and aspiring writer, Ms. Query — shown in an early home-movie clip reading "Free to Be . . . You and Me" with her mother — has also worked as a stripper at a San Francisco peep-show house called the Lusty Lady.

Her job, in addition to paying the bills and providing fodder for her stand-up routine, landed her in the middle of an issue that has divided feminists for years. Some women insist that exotic dancing and other sex work is inherently degrading. Others find it a liberating expression of free choice and sexual independence. Ms. Query, after a while, just found it boring.

In other words, it was a job. "Live Nude Girls Unite!," which opens today at the Quad, displays its share of exposed flesh, but at heart it's a movie about work, part of the rich tradition of labor documentaries that includes Barbara Kopple's "Harlan County, U.S.A.," and "American Dream." The idea of a strippers' union may seem farfetched, even laughable at first; the owners of the Lusty Lady and San Francisco's municipal authorities certainly thought so. But Ms. Query's film effectively makes the case that work, whatever you wear or don't wear when you're doing it, is still work.

The dancers at the Lusty Lady have tuition to pay and children to raise, and the claims they make hardly seem extravagant: job security, paid sick days, a safe working environment. Before the organizing drive began, the film asserts, dancers were routinely fired and non-white dancers were routinely dis-

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criminated against. (At upscale lap-dancing clubs, working conditions are shown to be worse: the dancers must pay extortionate "stage fees" and work as independent contractors, without the protections afforded regular employees or the possibility of union protection.)

Ms. Query is a cheerful, smart on-camera presence on and off the job. Without excessive political posturing, her film quietly dismantles stereotypes about women who work in the sex industry and makes its powerful feminist and pro-union argument with unpretentious good humor. The women who work at the Lusty Lady are diverse and, as their bosses (many of whom are women) soon discover, politically savvy. The sight of them at work may be titillating — though, as filmed from the dancers' own point of view, it's not terribly erotic — but the real thrill is in their fight to form a union and then to negotiate a contract.

Ms. Query captures the story's intrinsic suspense as the dancers, helped by a negotiator from Local 790 of the Service Employees International Union, agonize about whether to strike or to accept a less-than-ideal contract offer. At the end, their struggle inspires others in the industry, and Ms. Query and her friend Decadence fly to Pennsylvania and Alaska to spread the word.

The movie is enriched by another, less easily resolved drama involving Ms. Query and her mother, Dr. Joyce Wallace, a physician who is known for her extensive outreach work with prostitutes in New York. In one of her stand-up performances, Ms. Query notes that while it was relatively easy to tell her mother that she was a lesbian, she hasn't been able to "come out" as an exotic dancer.

When she does, at a conference on prostitution both have been invited to address, the scene is raw and painful, not least because the two women seem so alike in their tough-minded dedication to their convictions. Believe it or not, "Live Nude Girls Unite!" is a movie that would make any mother proud.

"WILDLY FUNNY AND PROVOCATIVE!" —Amy Taubin, VILLAGE VOICE

(WINNER! AUDIENCE AWARD)
San Francisco Int'l Film Festival

Live Nude Girls
UNITE!

written by
Julia Query & Vicky Funari

"A rare subversive documentary that manages to be comical, political, enlightening and entertaining all at the same time!" —ESQUIRE

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