



Bottom Line: The salacious side of the movie business through the prism of one woman's tragic story

JANUARY 25, 2007 by Sura Wood

Girl 27: An exploration of a 1937 Hollywood rape. PARK CITY -- David Stenn, author of books on Clara Bow and Jean Harlow, exposes the sordid side of 1930s Hollywood in "Girl 27," a disturbing documentary about the 1937 rape of Patricia Douglas, who waited 65 years to tell her horrifying story. The interviews with her are the reason to see the film, padded with old movie clips about violence against women and too much of Stenn, who talks extensively to the camera, does the voice-over and reads from his 2003 article for Vanity Fair.

As an exploration of scandalous Hollywood history, the docu is a good candidate for broadcast on cable television.

In a larger sense, "Girl 27" is about the moral hypocrisy of Hollywood as well as a testament to the lingering damage inflicted by rape: the attack and what followed ruined Douglas' life.

Douglas was a young dancer in MGM extravaganzas, one of 120 girls, mostly under-age, who were deceived into attending a stag party for a salesman. David Ross, a conventioner, forced liquor down her throat, beat and raped her. Douglas was crucified in the press, which pounced on the scandal, and shafted by the courts, which bowed to the power of the behemoth studio. The judge humiliated her -- he said she wasn't attractive enough for anyone to want her -- and dismissed the case.

Ross never went to jail. A witness paid off by the studio recanted and her own mother, sold her out for hush money. Betrayed by everyone including her lawyer and a failure as a wife and mother, Douglas retreated to an apartment she rarely left and spent most of her life virtually alone. By any measure, she was dealt a bad hand.

While not exactly an investigative journalist, Stenn researched the case diligently for more than a decade and persisted in pursuing Douglas for an interview. It says something for him that after 65 years of silence, Douglas, who trusted no one, agreed to talk on camera about her ordeal. Grossly overweight and with the affect of a wounded animal, Douglas was bitter, profoundly depressed and in overwhelming pain. She died shortly after the interviews. Her halting account of the rape and its aftermath is riveting. Greta van Susteren, attorney Michael Taitelman and Douglas' daughter, among others, provide context.

Stenn, an accomplished TV writer-producer with an ebullient personality that doesn't wear well, undercuts his material by putting himself front and center -- he has more screen time than Douglas. Stenn films himself pacing in his hotel room, thinking out loud in the car and, in a lapse of taste, dancing on Ross' grave. Declarations of his good intentions, however genuine, come across as self-serving. There's certainly a whiff of exploitation here.

To be fair, because of Stenn's invaluable help, Douglas, who was deprived of the justice she deserved in court, will finally have her story heard.

GIRL 27 A David Stenn Film produced by TLR Prods. Llc. Credits: Screenwriter-director: David Stenn Director of photography: Peter B. Good Music: Hal Lindes Co-producer: Lindsay Webster Editor: Tessa Davis Running time -- 84 minutes No MPAA rating