

INTERVIEW

WITH LIZZIE BORDEN

'Born in Flames' is a fantasy, a piece of science fiction. A wouldn't-it-be-nice-if film that ends with feminists exploding a bomb on top of the World Trade Centre. Lizzie Borden, director and producer, did not intend to make a realistic film, yet she demands that we identify with the women throughout. While you're watching it, the images and the pace constantly remind you that the future on the screen is in fact the present. Women wash up, have sex, gossip, look after kids, are hassled by men and raped. In places it is ironic, contradictory and funny.

We approached the meeting with Lizzie Borden with a more pessimistic life-isn't-like-that outlook which the film perhaps doesn't deserve. Yet for all its humour, it was clear that its political message was meant to be taken seriously. The film deals with the power of women to unite across lines of race, class and sexuality and to make fundamental changes in their lives. Borden set out to inspire a sense of unity among women that she found so lacking in real life in New York. Yet, by presenting a series of images in which different women team up to fight the system, the film effectively evades the reasons why we are so divided now.

MR: It would be interesting to talk about the history of the film, where the money came from, how you arrived at the plot?

LB: Well, I financed the film myself, over a period of five years. I had the idea for the film as a general, overall structure; I mean the premises of the film were very clear to me before I started. A lot of it comes from having lived in New York, and being very politicised by feminism, and also being very frustrated at the divisions within the women's movement. I wanted to posit a structure for a film whereby women were to work together across race and class lines. Having done a lot of reading on women and anarchy I'd found that women were always the anarchists in relation to left wing bureaucracies. I had the idea of it occurring after a social democratic cultural revolution because the classical left wing male position is that things will definitely get better for women after economic stability is reached. I wanted to point out that very deep structural revolution was absolutely necessary if leftist changes were not to go immediately back to the right.

MR: How did you involve the people who acted in the film?

LB: I worked differently with different people. I was very aware of Flo Kennedy as a civil rights activist and media personality, and involved her from the beginning. My way of working with her was that I knew her stories, so in certain scenes I would ask her to tell us a story. Honey I found more or less by accident, through talking to someone on the street. Adele Bertei, who plays the lead at Radio Regazza, I also knew I wanted to work with at a point where the structure of the film began to manifest itself in the two radio stations. But at the very beginning, the people I started to work with were the three white newspaper editors, Pat Murphy, Kathy Bigelow and Becky Johnston. They originally were going to have much bigger roles, but as I got involved with other people it stopped being so interesting to focus on them.

The other person who has a big part is a completely different story — Jeanne Satterfield, who plays Adelaide Norris. Originally Norris was going to be a photograph in a newspaper that would serve as a catalyst, but eventually she had to become a real character. So here's this woman, a basketball player who works



in a YMCA, who's not a political person at all, somewhat unwillingly pulled into the movie. Strangely enough the process of working on the film did politicise her, particularly over her dealings with Flo Kennedy.

My big concern in finding women for the film was getting out of my community. When I started I looked through my address book, I knew I didn't know any Black women, other than very super-educated women who wouldn't provide the kind of alternative background that I wanted to exist in the film. For me, the process of making the film was, on some level, to serve as a microcosm for what I felt could happen if women were to work together across race and class lines — which I just didn't see happening anywhere in New York.

VW: As a white woman, did you feel justified in making a scenario where Black and white women work together quite happily?

LB: I didn't make the scenario that they would work happily until I was in the process of making the film. It was open-ended enough that if it hadn't turned out positively, that would have been reflected on some level. I wanted the initiative to be made by Black women. Flo Kennedy, who's the mentor to Adelaide Norris, first suggested arming a group, which some of the women objected to within the film itself, and which would be questionable at any time. But then Adelaide dies and there's a need to take action. Honey, from Radio Phoenix, was the first to recognise this and approached Radio Regazza—so the Black women were the ones to initiate joint action, it wasn't the traditional way of white women saying 'Why won't these Black women work with us?'

VW: The whole issue of racism was very much in the background. It was obvious from the news on the TV that it still existed, and yet there was hardly any reference to it by the women themselves.

LB: I very much wanted it not to be a problem. You see it's not a realistic film, and there was the science fiction aspect, that I would bring the unity of women to the surface.

There were three things I didn't want to bring out as an explicit dialogue. One was the discussion of race, second of class and the third of gay/straight politics. I think anyone who would approach the film with a desire for a rational political structure would tear it to pieces. I was very nervous that people would call it irresponsible.

It wasn't so much a question of it being *women* who were the embattled group on the front lines, it could be any group. In this fiction I wanted to illuminate what women have in common. Women have always wanted equal status, things that are seen as secondary, like day-care as an automatic right, free health care, for example.

What I wanted to do in the news stories was to show that the media was pushing group against group, creating that sense of strife in order to break up the unity that had brought about the so-called transformation in the first place.

VW: What made you decide to have the women resort to 'armed struggle'? Were you aware of making any connection with groups like the Red Brigades or Bader Meinhof?

MR: And now that there are huge numbers of women active in the peace movement, why is it that the film poses a violent response from women?

LB: Well, I have very mixed feelings about this nuclear stuff anyway. To me it's a smokescreen, another excuse for white people not to have to care about 75 per cent in this country existing in sub-poverty. No, I hoped it wouldn't reflect so much on the Bader Meinhof or Weather Underground, and I certainly didn't intend any of the armed resistance to be prescriptive. You know, see the film, go home and make a bomb.



What I was trying to do was play with the idea of what would happen if a group of women were to make a series of armed moves against the media. Though, in fact I was taking various forms of resistance from various countries. One of the basic ones was those underground radio stations, which was pure Italy. In New York there are no underground radio stations. Taking over the airwaves came from the Yippy days when they did manage, for a second, to broadcast over a broadcast. To me that was one of the hottest things ever, and although people can say, that was the sixties, it doesn't work, to me there was something very valuable about the sixties, that it was against cynicism. People did have a feeling that things could be done, so when there was armed resistance it was based on the belief that things could change, that there was a necessity to wake people up in some way. I wanted to create this feeling that the necessity to transform everything could grow and grow among women.

MR: But I think I'd question the fantasy which the film provides of unity among women, because we have to deal with difference among women, for me that's how we have to struggle, to build a politics around difference, class difference, race difference, sex difference.

LB: I think it's very clear in the film that these women are different. I don't think it attempts to homogenise anybody. There's one meeting where Adelaide Norris meets the two newspaper editors and she's basically saying 'You don't understand what I'm talking about' and they don't understand her either . . . here are these apologists for the state who are saying things can't change that much, if you work against this then you destroy the possibility for change. Adelaide Norris is saying my mother lived a certain life, young women today are still living that life. In other words, change in the ghetto is not coming. What I hoped to show by this is that the concerns of different groups were very different. I purposefully chose women to show their differences rather than their similarities.

VW: But take the example of male violence, that's one of the most divisive issues, because racist ideology here in Britain in the eighties makes black youth, particularly male youth, a symbol for the nation's decline—the collapse of law and order. They are said to be largely responsible for street robbery, for harassing and robbing old people and women, and by and large, that's bought by white feminists and people on the left. It's rarely challenged anyway.

LB: That's the same in the US. But my feeling is that if I'd started trying to integrate the problem of youth of any sort, Black or white, it would have made it completely impossible to make this movie dealing with women. You see, to me it's an outrage that every fourth woman in her lifetime will be sexually assaulted, how anyone can live with that is beyond me. A lot of leftists, male and female, try to explain rape as a function of an oppressive society. Where does one then put one's outrage? It's not the kind of thing that can be explained away at any point. My aim in the film was to try and create ways women could show power, from the most fantastical ones like the women's bicycle brigade—which I think would be a wonderful idea but is a little bit impractical, and I critique it within the film with Honey saying 'The women's army's not mature enough to hang out with me'.

I came from a much more classic liberal position until I started working with the women in the film. I didn't experience much violence in my life until I met Black women and saw the violence in their lives. I'd never been assaulted by men, I've been much more careful and protected. Because of the outrage of women I was working with, that's where I began to understand that sense of resisting on every level.

MR: Can you talk about the music in the film?

LB: I always wanted different people from different places to watch the film and find something in it. I tried to make the film work on a subliminal level, making the music and editing parallel each other; so that there'd be this fast movement throughout the film almost like agit-prop. The cutting would be so fast you wouldn't fall into the film. I didn't want to make a film that you could fall into as a fictive space—that you could forget about yourself for two hours and come back up.

For a start I couldn't do this anyway because of continuity problems—a lot of my reasons for making it look like a documentary and not being concerned with the aestheticising of the shots had to do with knowing I couldn't work with one camera person, had to shoot a lot of it myself, over a long period of time, so I had to dispense with the idea of continuity early on. But secondly I felt that it would depoliticise the film in a way that I wanted it to work. I wanted the viewer to be very active, largely because I wasn't constructing a seamless reality. As you're watching the film, you're supposed to be aware that this isn't really the future.

I was trying to re-instil an *image* of a possibility. What to me was important in walking away from the film was to have seen people working together, to see that possibility, because we've all been so discouraged. I mean, try again, talk again.

Vron Ware and Mandy Rose