
LV Review Journal, Pahrump series fascinating if you can make it through the misery,

C. Lawrence

Monday, 14 July 2008

by Christopher Lawrence

Las Vegas Review-Journal, February 04, 2008

About the only thing wrong with Sundance Channel's new prostitutes-in-Pahrump documentary series (debuting at 11 p.m. today) is its title: "Pleasure for Sale."

It's the bait-and-switch equivalent of paying the guy at the ballpark eight bucks for what he's been yelling is ice-cold beer, only to have him crack you upside the head with a fungo bat instead.

Oh, sure, the series is set at the world-famous Chicken Ranch. It even features nudity and carefully edited sex acts. But you'll find more pleasure watching a string of those "Save the Children" commercials, with a hangover and a mysterious rash, while standing in line at the DMV.

If years of listening to Howard Stern have taught me anything -- other than that some women will take off their clothes and let you hit them with a fish -- it's that prostitutes rarely had healthy, happy childhoods. Still, listening to these women's stories, several of which play out like the first act of a "Death Wish" movie, is heartbreaking.

During the six-episode series, viewers will meet:

• Chyna, the sweet-faced new girl, who was gang-raped at 19.

• Sinful, the most outwardly religious of the women, whose first sexual experience was being drugged and raped at gunpoint for two days.

• Dominique, the former ballet dancer, who can't remember a day growing up that she wasn't beaten by her "stage mother from hell."

• And Rose, the unofficial den mother, who turned her first trick, unprotected, as a 16-year-old runaway for the princely sum of \$20.

In the history of television, few series have ever been more in need of a pie fight or a wacky neighbor.

The clients don't even seem all that happy. A regular named Ernest calls Presley, another of the prostitutes, "the only thing I think about anymore," adding that he wakes up crying every morning because he's not with her. And Jeff, a "balloon fetishist," gets choked up talking about his session with Rose, which, so as to not blow an entire year's worth of good will with my editor, I won't even attempt to describe.

When "Pleasure for Sale" isn't wallowing in despair, it's busy chronicling enough back-stabbing and drama -- though, oddly, not enough sex -- for a season of "The Real World."

It also leaves time for locals to weigh in on brothels.

The Rev. Vernon Boots preaches against them, even counseling Sinful in his home. The other voices of dissent come from the Rev. Ron Trummell and his daughter, then-Nye County Commissioner Candice Trummell, who repeats the death threats she's received before uttering the line of the series: "My parents and I know that ultimately I'm in God's hands. ... He's stronger than any pimp."

Several seniors, meanwhile, extol the brothels' virtues. (Well, maybe not virtues, but you get the idea.) And Dr. Carl LeViseur, who examines and tests each girl weekly, advocates a brothel in every hotel in the country.

But mostly it's about the despair. "Pleasure for Sale" is as far removed as you can get from HBO's "Cathouse," the everyday's-a-party look at the Moonlite Bunny Ranch outside Carson City.

When checking in to the Chicken Ranch, the women must surrender all their cash and prescription drugs. They're always on call and are woken up around the clock, regardless of when a customer arrives. And they're only allowed off the property for three hours a week, and that's so they can visit Dr. LeViseur.

Granted, the women are earning as much or more than the average Southern Nevadan, but it doesn't keep you from wanting to give them a hug and, maybe, a nice home-cooked meal.

Especially when Rose, who's now 47 and trying to figure out what she'll do once she "retires," says things like, "I have been a piece of putty in the hands of unscrupulous men."

Or when Chyna says, "Sex doesn't feel right if it's not destroying me," shortly before being hung naked from a tree by 4-inch shark hooks piercing her back. (She later allows herself to be brutally spanked by a client, describing the pain as an eight on a scale where 10 is the pain of her unmedicated abortion.)

If you can make it through the misery, "Pleasure for Sale" offers a fascinating look at what goes on "over the hump." If nothing else, 30 minutes of it a week will make you feel better about your own life than any therapy, spa treatment or new purchase ever could.

Just don't expect any actual pleasure. It may be for sale, but the Chicken Ranch seems to be fresh out.

Copyright © Las Vegas Review-Journal

<http://www.lvrj.com/living/15271341.html>