



CAGED HEAT

This women-in-prison film pushes the boundaries of the genre.
By Rachel Shatto



hower scenes, sadistic guards, a cellblock riot and forbidden dyke love—*Stuck!*, a '60s women-in-prison tribute, has it all. Shot in black and white and set to a jazzy beatnik soundtrack, it's an atmospheric, tragic homage to a bygone era.

In the grand tradition of women-in-prison films, *Stuck!* centers on an innocent woman framed for her mother's murder and sentenced to die by hanging. Daisy, played by the deliciously curvaceous Starina Johnson, is thrust into a pack of hard-boiled female cons, played by a mixture of indie powerhouses—Mink Stole, Pleasant Gehman, Susan Traylor, Jane Wiedlin—and co-starring genre icon Karen Black as the nosy neighbor and sole witness to the "crime."

The opportunity to work with such talented and established actors was a career vault for Johnson, a relatively unknown actor. "It's really nice to work with actresses who you can feed off of. Sometimes you work with people, and they are just waiting for their close-up, which is so awful. To work with

other people who also love the art of it is really nice," says Johnson.

The role of doomed "new fish" Daisy was immediately appealing to Johnson. "There is something just fascinating about having to live your life as fast as humanly possible because you know you're going to be killed," muses the young actor.

Johnson received a little extra help getting into character, when she and her and her fellow "inmates" were literally locked into their cells in the humid heat of Macon, Georgia for the shoots. "There was an oppressive feeling in [the cell], plus with the movie lights on, it was really claustrophobic...it wasn't like there was just two people there at a time. We all were in there during all of the shots. So you constantly had to be in your character," says Gehman, who plays Dutch, Daisy's lusty love interest.

Although the film relies heavily on typecast sexploitation characters, it cannot simply be categorized as just

Scenes from *Stuck!* (above from left): Jane Wiedlin, Susan Traylor, Mink Stole, Pleasant Gehman, Starina Johnson; (inset) Gehman, Johnson, Gehman



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another kitschy chicks-in-chains flick. *Stuck!* is part genre classic, part powerful drama and part black comedy—all rolled into one sexy film.

Gehman was shocked at the powerful emotional undertones of the script. "During the actual shooting of it, it became apparent to us that there was a lot of really heavy emotions in the room. Like when...Daisy got dragged off to the gallows the first time. Seriously, I wound up crying off four sets of false eyelashes. It was almost like *The Crucible*... it was, like, spreading hysteria—if one person was doing something really emotional, everyone would start crying in the cells," says Gehman.

At the center of the emotions is a romance. Dutch is a cop-killing prostitute who takes a liking to the innocent Daisy from the moment she meets her. A lifetime fan of the sexploitation genre, Gehman jumped at the chance to join the cast, "[I was] fulfilling one of my life's dreams to be in a women's prison movie and acting with one of my earliest screen idols... Mink Stole, especially when I found out she was going to be my cell mate," says Gehman, excitedly. "And playing a white trash hooker lesbian cop killer, how could I say no?"

However, when it came to her character, Gehman wanted a few tweaks. "At first, in the script, it actually says that she's a manish woman. But, I decided since Dutch had been a hooker—whether or not she liked men—I figured she would be using her sexual allure to get what she wanted. I wrote to [the director] and I sent him pictures of Rosie the Riveter and also the Ronettes. I said, 'I would kind of like her to...be almost a Puerto Rican tranny, and like a really tough, post-World War II kind of woman instead.'"

The director agreed and Gehman found herself really getting into her character. "I was going overboard. I made a shank out of a toothbrush and I showed it to all the girls in the cast, and they were like, I want a shank," laughs Gehman. "Mink and I even were on the phone, flipping a coin over who got the top or bottom bunks."

Both Johnson and Gehman were wary of the love scene in the script, afraid they wouldn't do the moment justice. "That was actually the scene in the entire movie that I was most worried about, because I wanted it to be just genuine. This is one of the last times they're going to see each other," explains Johnson. Gehman adds that her inspiration for the scene is Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet*, "where they just touch hands... just a little finger touch between the bars."

While *Stuck!* is firmly rooted in the grand tradition of women-in-prison films—in both theme and style—it transcends the genre to explore what it really means to be "stuck," and why it has very little to do with which side of the prison bars you're on. ■



Hell on Wheels stars Meredith Miller and Lana Seiler

LADIES, START YOUR ENGINES

Gay girl biker gangs reign in *Hell on Wheels*.

What would a world without men really look like? According to New York City-based filmmaker Katrina del Mar, it wouldn't have any women in pastel twinsets with folded hands and meek smiles. Instead, she says, "It's going to be a hot-and-fast action film."

Hell on Wheels: Gang Girls Forever, the third film in her *Gang Girls* trilogy, offers a lesbian utopia with a notable lack of the Earth Mother vibe. The culmination of a decade-long series that began with *Gang Girls 2000* and *Surf Gang*, del Mar's latest film translates the iconography of 1960s juvenile delinquency, biker culture and lesbian intrigue to modern-day New York City.

A feminist fable swathed in diesel exhaust and danger, *Hell on Wheels* pits five gangs of rude 'n' tattooed cycle chicks against one another in a fight to own the streets—and the coolest rides. Starring a ladies-only crew of dyslexic bikers, queer senior citizen skateboarders and killer vegans, the film uses tongue-in-cheek humor and plenty of steamy girl-on-girl action to recast male rebellion into a feminist manifesto.

"I'm interested in what women can achieve when they work together in groups, rather than divisively compete for male attention. Ultimately, it's a feminist message," del Mar says. "It's incredibly sexy to see women ride horses, fight, go fast, or lick lollipops in extreme close-up. Watching a girl headbanging to loud music isn't typically considered erotic, but in my films it becomes an erotic meditation."

Del Mar's stylistic cues can be traced back to mid-century sexploitation flicks—think Russ Meyer or Doris Wishman—as well as the take-no-prisoners ethic of the Cinema of Transgression, which reached its high point in the 1980s. The manifesto of that avant-garde movement declared that any film that doesn't shock isn't worth looking at, a principle del Mar adheres to in her movies.

"Women should be protagonists in their own action films. Dress up, look great, be smart, kick ass, kiss with passion," she laughs. "I'm a *heroine* addict." [Kat Long]



Katrina del Mar