

# TRISTAN TAORMINO: CHANGING THE FACE OF PORN

BY ANNE WINTER

**T**ristan Taormino's not your average lesbian. First of all, that's not how she identifies herself; she's queer, but sleeps with men, and says she's the kind of person who would have been kicked out of lesbian support groups in the 1970s. But it's her ability to be label-free that makes Taormino so valuable to the adult and mainstream communities.

"The world has shifted so much," Taormino said. "There aren't those hard- and-fast rules or lines. My audience is totally pansexual — it's everyone, all ages, all backgrounds — and those are the kinds of strict boundaries that have really broken down. And that's a good thing."

Taormino has acted as a purveyor of positive sexual awareness for almost a decade and is now carving her own niche in adult with her realistic approach to gonzo — "no script, no schedule, no plans" — and her most recent venture into the world of Vivid-Ed.

It was at Wesleyan University, what she calls a sexually progressive and experimental place, where Taormino was first exposed to the idea of porn for women, made by women.

"I realized that for other women, their first image of porn might have been 'Gang Bang Girl No. 25,'" Taormino said. "They see that and they think: 'Is this what all porn is like? Is there even a way to make it different than this?' My first exposures were really sex-positive and really hot — I never thought, 'Oh my God, all porn is bad!'"

Taormino said all the "crazy lesbians" at Wesleyan were into the Fatale Media video line — she watched Deborah Sundahl teach how to



*Vivid-Ed director Tristan Taormino surrounded by cast members from her award winning gonzo series, "Chemistry." Clockwise from top: Mika Tan, Marie Luv, Taryn Thomas and Dana DeArmond.*

female ejaculation — and that female-friendly porn ended up becoming part of her college curriculum.

"Suburban Dykes" with Nina Hartley and Sharon Mitchell still leaves her at a loss for words.

In 1999 Taormino decided to follow the path paved by Hartley to making sex-positive, educational porn.

"When you think back to when she probably did her first movie," Taormino said, "it was like, 'Hmmm, will this do good? Is this an idea here? Will anyone even buy this?' She really opened up the whole market."

Taormino planned to turn her first book, "The Anal Sex Guide for Women," into a video that was smart and educational but also really hot. She not only wanted to teach people how to do it but also wanted to inspire them to want to run out and do it themselves.

**I**t took her a while to find a studio interested in funding her anal sex guide. A few months after John Stagliano at Evil Angel turned her down, he called her back and agreed. A year-and-a-half later, Taormino made a follow up.

She then took some time off from porn to focus on other projects — including running her own website, PuckerUp.com, hosting sex-ed workshops and writing a sex column for the New York-based Village Voice.

"For me, porn was always kind of like this thing I wanted to do but definitely wasn't my main focus by any means," Taormino said. "In 2005 I came back to porn with the idea of wanting to do a gonzo series."

And "Chemistry" was born.

Taormino wanted to make a gonzo series unlike any other, a set of films completely void of strict direction and stifling scripts that so often take the

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realism out of porn: The actors are told to do what they want to do to each other, to participate in their own representation of what they believe is truly "hot."

She chose specific actors whom she knew had a special chemistry together, who worked well and would honestly enjoy a day of fucking and sucking each other. She

**"SHE MAKES ETHICAL PORN THAT VIEWERS CAN FEEL GOOD ABOUT BUYING."**

— SETH GOODMAN,  
TAORMINO FAN

believes it empowers the actors to be a part of the production process and not being directed to switch positions every five minutes.

"It's all about creating an environment where they can forget about the cameras, forget about performing," Taormino said. "They can chill out and be themselves, and I can capture some of that."

Jack Lawrence, who appeared in "Chemistry"

and Taormino's anal sex guides, said she's a "breath of fresh air" in the industry, a director with a true vision of what she wants to see.

"She makes the sex hotter and better," Lawrence said. "She knows the difference between real and fake; many directors mess up real sex, interrupting before the woman comes," because they don't realize she's having a true orgasm.

Lawrence said Taormino told the actors on set to do what they want with each other for 36 hours, and to do it as if the camera wasn't there. Taormino made them feel comfortable and nurtured and kept quiet throughout the shoot.

"It allowed for a better performance," he said.

Rachel Kramer Bussel, a former sex columnist at the Village Voice who's become a good friend of Taormino's, said that Taormino has taken the mainstream reality-show format and put it in porn.

"She took the mainstream reality-show format and put it in porn," she said. "It's something the regular porn watcher can get off on, but it's also for people looking for something different," she said. "And it's feminist porn but not your typical kind —

it's all in her approach."

It's the realism and the candidness of the performers that got "Chemistry" so much attention, winning the 2007 AVN award for Best Gonzo Release.

Steven Hirsch at Vivid agreed to Taormino's "Chemistry" series under one condition: he also wanted her to produce a series of educational videos. And then the Vivid-Ed "Expert Guide"

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was born, reaching back to her "Guide to Anal Sex" roots, and is a series on which she's putting most of her filmmaking focus.

"Now the focus is on Vivid-Ed, building that brand," Taormino said. "It's not just the videos; we launched a website and are developing a new line of sex toys. It's a major imprint at Vivid."

Bussel said Taormino brings a special outsider's perspective to the adult industry, bringing an educational feel to her films by demystifying the act, without sacrificing its hotness or explicitness.

Alicia Relles, who worked with Taormino to form the video section of female-friendly sex shop Babeland, agrees, adding that this demystification makes the sex-positive message shine through, making it permissible to watch.

"It appeals to the mainstream crowd," she says. "It's relatable and more accessible — perfect for our customers."

Seth Goodman, whom Taormino calls her No. 1 fan, has been following her work since 1999 after reading her first book, and said she has changed his opinions about pornography for the better. He said she showed him it's possible to make a "better form of porn."

"Many segments of the porn industry seem to be in the midst of a fad in which cruelty is considered desirable, and directors strive to outdo each other by presenting it in increasingly extreme forms,"

Goodman said. "Tristan's videos represent a refreshing alternative to that style."

He believes that Taormino's work is a "successful instantiation" of the idea that the adult industry can be reformed, to scale down its negative aspects and support and promote the positive.

**'S**he makes ethical porn that viewers can feel good about buying," Goodman said.

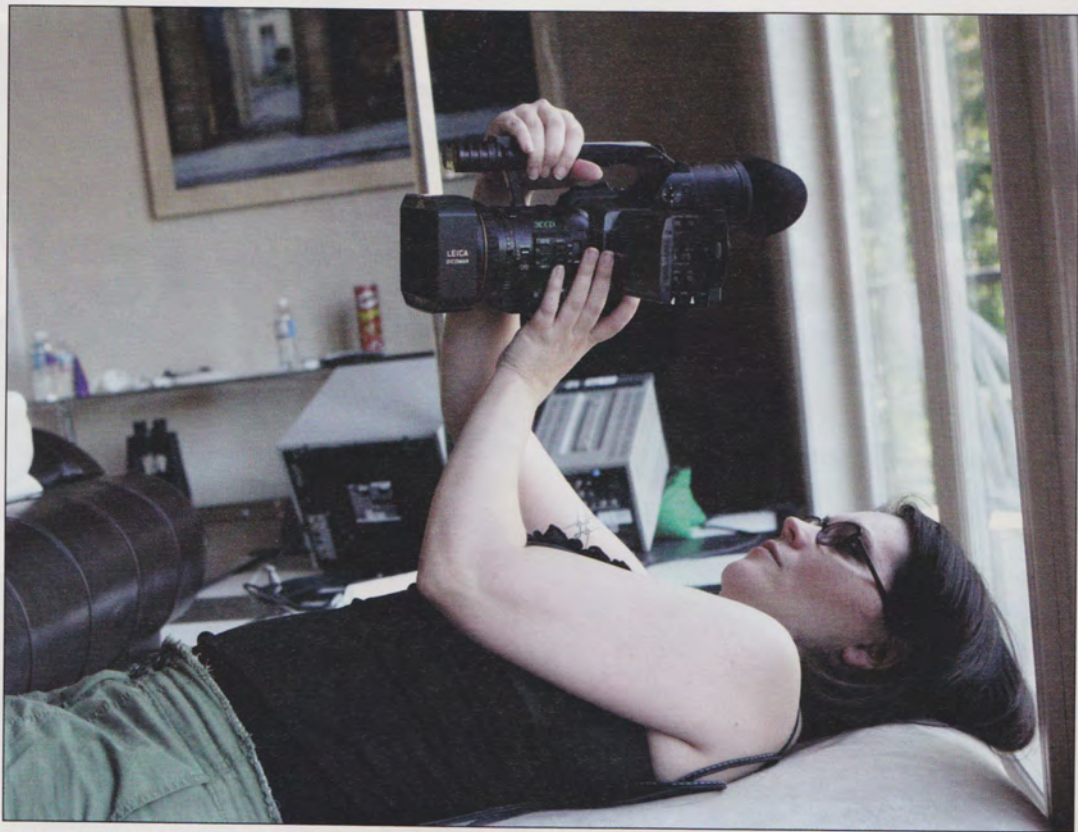
Robin Broder, a junior at Barnard College who recently invited Taormino to speak at her school's Take Back the Night rally, said someone in the industry has to make female-friendly porn and that Taormino is at the helm of a sexual revolution.

Taormino has developed a series of six "Expert Guides," encompassing such topics as the G-spot, cunnilingus and bondage, and she said has a flood of other ideas for future additions to the series.

"We're not running out of these anytime soon," she said.

It seems Taormino's experience in sex education has come full circle, bringing all of the information she's compiled in eight years of writing and workshops on film, making a permanent record of it.

"I feel like I know so much more now than I did when I started," Taormino said. "I've learned so much over the years just by people asking questions and posing problems — I love the idea of doing it now rather than [when I first started]." ■



*Vivid-Ed director Tristan Taormino's experience in sex education has come full circle, bringing all of the information she's compiled in eight years of writing and workshops onto film.*