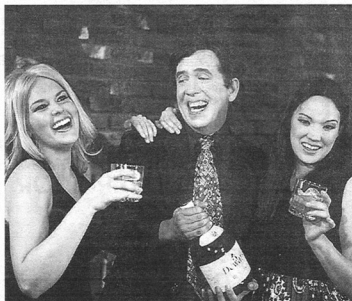


REP WATCH » VIVA



Bridget Brno, left, Jared Sanford and Anna Biller. Actor-director Biller takes a woman's look at a distinctly male genre. VAGRANT FILMS

Seventies high camp on the shag carpet

BY GUY DIXON

A topless beauty in the bathtub flips through 1970s nudie mags with an inquisitive gleam in her eye. Later, she changes in front of her friend's husband. Uh-oh, she's all exposed as she cops a shrinking violet pose straight out of Playboy.

This is what Los Angeles artist/filmmaker's Anna Biller ironic take on the sexual revolution looks like. Her new feature *Viva* seems destined for instant cult status, particularly in the gay film community, where it has been establishing a following. Camp is layered upon camp as Biller, in the lead role of the oh-so innocent housewife *Viva*, discovers lust and straight/gay sauciness around every corner of the shag-carpeted seventies.

In developing the project, Biller immersed herself in old Playboy magazines and exploitation films, but she wanted to embed a lesson in the lechery — reversing the power relationship. The male characters in *Viva* emulate the ugly stereotype of lascivious guys out to get some flesh between cocktails and golf tee-off times. But the female characters are into exploring their sexuality on their own terms and comparing themselves with each other.

"My underlying agenda with all of this — even

though it's told through film style, film fantasies and film references — is really to talk about female sexuality and desire," Biller says, "to see if you can make a sexploitation film that's actually for women."

And for all the peek-a-boo knit tops and flashes of nudity, the film isn't about titillation at all. The dialogue is intentionally as stilted as seventies ad copy and as dated as the Brady Bunch-on-Valium decor. (Biller made most of the sets and costumes herself.) The pacing is also undramatically slow and measured. The result: a film entirely about sex that feels astonishingly sexless. Then again, Biller emphasizes that this is not a film catering to straight men, but a performance piece for women.

Hence the reason for starring in it herself. "I wouldn't ask another actress to take off her clothes in the movie and do all these things with the power trip being I'm the director, you're the actress," she says. "That would be the same thing as if I was a male director. If I'm doing it to myself, then I can see what it feels like and be on both sides [of the camera].

"It's like looking in the mirror, and I think that's why a lot of women identify with it."

» *Viva* plays the Royal Theatre (608 College St.) until Wednesday (416-534-5252) and at the Carlton from next Friday.