

## 'Viva' Q&A

### Director/star Anna Biller bares all

**By Mark Gross**  
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With "Viva," Anna Biller does it all: Writing, directing, set and costume design and acting. (Yes, she does nude scenes. It'd be difficult to make a film exploring the sexual revolution of the 1970s without them, don't you think?) Speaking with Biller over the phone, she shared her thoughts about checking out Playboy, being a sex goddess and taking it all off.

**You're very meticulous in your work, coordinating practically everything for your films. What were the major drawbacks of this approach and how long did it actually take to create 'Viva'?**

About four years. The drawback is that it took so long. The good thing is that I had total control of my film, which I think is everybody's ultimate fantasy.

It's kind of a painful process, but it's also pleasurable. It seemed natural to me to spend most of my time alone, come together a weekend here and there to actually shoot and then edit in the studio. It isn't normally how people make films, but it was nice because it was a bit like creating a real piece of artwork.

**Any frustrations about things you couldn't control?**

I wanted so badly to just have it be a film I could live with, and to not lose control over everything. In the beginning I was very frustrated, because I had people on the set that weren't helping me. They were actually sabotaging the work I was trying to do, because they didn't understand it's a different mode of production. I eventually just got rid of all those people. Then everything started to run smoothly. And when new people would come in and be like that, I'd get rid of them, too.

Subsequently, I read about a lot of directors that had been successful in creating a unique type of film vision, have been exactly that way on the set. Like [Japanese director] Kon Ichikawa just got rid of every single person on the set that wasn't completely sympathetic.

**Aside from thumbing through stacks of Playboy magazines and watching what you've called 'classy' porn, what was the most fun about creating 'Viva'?**

I really enjoyed working with the actors, because the actors would really get into it. They got transported to this other world the way I did. The sets were so authentic that people really thought they were living in another time. It was like how children play act and they really believe they're someone else.

**Do you have any favorite Playboy cover girls?**

No. You know what's funny -- maybe this is me being a woman, or something -- I wasn't looking at the girls. I was looking at the layouts. I really do focus on girls when I'm casting, but since those girls are not available to me, I just don't.

**So not much of a chance you'll be gracing the pages [of Playboy] any time soon? Oh, me. [Laughs]**

Not very likely.

**You've characterized your writing process as sort of indulging daydreams. Do you care to share any of your favorite inspirations, reveries or fantasies you experienced while drafting 'Viva'?**

It came from so many places. I was very disturbed by the aftermath of the sexual revolution as a child, and by the way that men were. I felt like I reached puberty and suddenly there were all these predators. I was very naive, and there were some comical situations and some disturbing situations. You feel a loss of power and a gain of power when you reach that age as a female.

**You definitely capture that with your character [Barbi/Viva] in the film.**

She's trying to figure out how to make it into power for herself, but she hasn't quite figured it out. The times when [Viva]'s a goddess is when I start having to go back to references in older films. The orgy is almost like a '30s movie. It's like [the song] 'Hot Voodoo' [sung by Marlene Deitrich] in 'Blonde Venus,' and then in the ending number it's like 'Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.'

**'Viva' is akin to the mood of what seems like a burlesque revival -- being sexual in nature without being obscene. What do you think has contributed to the momentum this movement has experienced?**

There's an absence of Aphrodite in culture -- the female sex goddess as a figure. The genders have become too similar, and that screwed a lot of people up. The playfulness and the games of gender play are evaporating, and with that civilization is evaporating.

The way that genders relate with each other used to be very codified and specific. It's part of what creates pleasure, civilization, thought, and having that go away makes people barbaric.

**A popular line of questioning in these interviews tries to relate an actress to the character she plays. Since that would be a highly personal question, we'll avoid it. But we are interested in how you've been approached at film festivals and by your fans. Do people tend to identify you more as Viva, Barbi or Anna?**

I think they like to see me as Viva, which is good because I'd like to be Viva. It's better than Anna. It's better than Barbi. Barbi's this loser housewife. Anna is a very serious person who thinks a lot and works really hard.

**Do you find yourself playing the role when you're at festivals?**

I have to. It's part of the fantasy. I'm not just a director, I'm an actress. An actress' job is to perpetuate the fantasy of the character she plays.

When I went to the Rotterdam Festival they were fantasizing about my character to the extreme. It was very fun, and it was very weird. There were lots of photo shoots, and they wanted to do them arty and retro. I spent all my time putting on make-up and posing.

It was a joke about me being a model in the movie. It's an absurdism, and I was shocked when people weren't laughing. I don't think of myself as being pretty or glamorous.

I've been making movies where I couldn't show myself without layers and disguise, because I didn't want to show me. In this one, I was thinking the ultimate drag act would be to play just a plain, ordinary girl. That would be so hard. Like a pretty girl on the beach, because that's the most exposed thing you could do, and that was my worst fear and horror -- to strip off the clothing. I made myself do it, and then I found out people aren't laughing and looking at it like it's a big joke. I think of myself as a man when I'm playing a woman. It's such a drag act. You're constructing the female.

Mae West did that. She had all the layers of stuff: The corsets, the wigs. That's what I used to do. Like how a transsexual does it. They've constructed it completely. They've constructed their bodies over and everything. I felt more like that.

**Considering some of Baltimore's most-loved residents like Blaze Starr, Trixie Little -- she's a local burlesque star -- and, most recognizably, John Waters, it seems like 'Viva' should be pretty warmly received here. Are you going to be in town for the festival?**

I will. I'm excited to meet some of those people. Is John Waters going to be in town for the festival? I would really hope to get to meet him and hope that he gets to see the film, because I'm a big fan of his. That would be a real dream for me.