

the village VOICE

As Nasty as They Want to Be

PEEP SHOWS AND PRISON SHOWMANSHIP

LIVE NUDE GIRLS UNITE!

Directed by Julia Query and Vicky Funari

A First Run release

FILM

Quad Opens October 20

"Two, four, six, eight. Don't go in to masturbate, chant the strippers who are picketing the entrance to San Francisco's Lusty Lady Theater. In 1997, after a lengthy, combative labor negotiation, the Lusty Lady became the first unionized strip club; its workers were organized as the Exotic Dancers Union, a chapter of the Service Employees International 790.

Writer and stand-up comedian Julia Query worked at the Lusty Lady to pay the rent. Although she had never made a film before, she decided to document the strippers' struggle to unionize. After working on the project for about a year, she brought in experienced documentarian Vicky Funari as codirector. Their film, *Live Nude Girls Unite!*, should put to rest the canard that feminists have no sense of humor. From the opening shot of Query strolling past that legendary temple of male beatitude, the City Lights Bookstore, to the closing Emma Goldman quote, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution," *Live Nude Girls Unite!* is wickedly funny. Its subversive comic style is an antidote to the absence of humor in two films that must have been on Query's mind: Barbara Kopple's classic labor doc, *Harlan County, U.S.A.*, and, at the opposite end of the political spectrum, Paul Verhoeven's glossy sexploitation fiasco, *Showgirls*.

Query incorporates her stand-up routines as a way of commenting on the events at the Lusty Lady. "I never before worked with so many women with college degrees, most of them in feminist studies. They realized what to do about patriarchy: Make them pay." Nearly a decade before the Lusty Lady strippers fought to become unionized, sex workers led by Scarlett Harlot tried to get the labor relations board to recognize them as full-time, union-eligible workers rather than as independent contractors. The board ruled against them, explaining that if they had been farm laborers they might have had a case. Which isn't so different from the lawyer for the Lusty Lady's owners objecting to the use of the word "pussy" in the contract the strippers propose, claiming that "they were sexually harassing themselves."

The film zeros in on the doublethink and institutionalized misogyny behind such state-

BY AMY TAUBIN



MAKE THEM PAY: QUERY (AT RIGHT) ORGANIZES LIVE NUDE GIRLS.

ments, but it's even more provocative when it goes after the divisions within feminism around the issues of sexuality, sex work, and the ways women deploy and depict their bodies. "I like dancing in a room with other women. It's like a weird pajama party," says one of the strippers, making us aware of the camaraderie, pleasure, and power the women experience as they perform, not only for the Lusty Lady's patrons but also for Query's camera.

Query's mother is Dr. Joyce Wallace, celebrated for her efforts to promote safe sex among New York prostitutes. Having learned her feminism at her mother's knee, Query didn't hesitate to come out to her as a lesbian, but she kept her sex work a secret. When she discovers that she and Wallace are both scheduled to speak at a

conference on prostitution, she decides to tell all to her mom with the camera running. "I'm going to use it as a plot device," she says flippantly, but her anxiety is apparent. Dr. Wallace is horrified by the news; to her credit, she never asks that the camera be turned off. "I don't want people to know my daughter is in the smut industry," she says tearfully. For her, sex workers are victims. She can't accept that a woman with as many career options as her daughter would choose to be a stripper. Query, who clearly has no taste for Oprah-like confessionals, handles the mesh of personal and political in her conflict with her mother a bit too gingerly. It's the big flaw in *Live Nude Girls Unite!*, a film that finds liberation in irony and uplift in ribald wit.