



SECOND ACT

Paris Is Burning was one of the most successful documentaries of the '90s. What took Jennie Livingston so long to follow up?

By Angelo Pitillo • Photograph by Andrea Chu

SCOTT FITZGERALD'S DICTUM about there being no second acts in American life rings a little hollow in the face of our current pop culture landscape, overpopulated by celebrity has-beens duking it out in televised reality humiliation-fests. But it is true that some first acts are a whole lot tougher to follow than others. And for a fledgling filmmaker, it's hard to imagine a more daunting debut than *Paris Is Burning*, Jennie Livingston's sensational 1990 documentary. Her first film is a visually stunning and thought-provoking chronicle of the '80s Harlem drag ball scene that introduced the world to voguing and to an unforgettable cast of real-life ball legends that included Pepper LaBeija, Willi Ninja and the late, great Dorian Corey. *Paris Is Burning* delighted critics and audiences alike, becoming one of the most popular documentaries of all time.

In the intervening years, her legions of fans have waited in vain for a follow-up, so it's with a sigh of relief and a shiver of excitement that this fall sees the release of the *Paris Is Burning* DVD and of the provocative new short film *Who's the Top?*, Livingston's first project to reach the screen in over a decade. *Who's the Top?* is a fictional narrative about a lesbian poet in the East Village in the mid-'90s who, dissatisfied with her vanilla sex life, begins to explore her S&M fantasies—which in turn take her life in a surprising new direction. The film began life as a feature, not a short, but its subject matter and experimental structure—the heroine's fantasies are acted out as Busby Berkeley-style musical numbers—ultimately proved a tough sell for the

Hollywood money folks. "It's a female story, it's a lesbian story, it's a sex story, it's more like Fellini than your typical Sundance script," says the 43-year-old director. The finished short, which stars Marin Hinkle of TV's *Two and a Half Men*, is currently garnering awards on the festival circuit, and Livingston is happy to have it released, even without the financial backing necessary to turn it into a full-length feature. "When you finish a short there are certain outlets,"

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she explains. "It was just at Lincoln Center, and shorts do get programmed here and there." Yet what matters most is that audiences are getting to see it, she maintains. "Even though it was made by the skin of its teeth, at least my ideas and worldview are out there."

So is Livingston drawn to the hardest row to hoe? "There is probably a perverse part of me that's like, 'I'm going to be the ultimate warrior of filmmakers who's going to do the unproducible project,'" she says with a laugh. "It's certainly not a conscious choice. I think that a lot of it is that the point at which I became interested in film was in high school in the '70s, and the films that I became immensely

excited about were by Fassbinder, early Peter Weir, John Waters, Nicholas Roeg and Werner Herzog. All of them were quintessentially '70s filmmakers—the cinema of the other, the cinema of the unofficial view, the Felliniesque structure that gets into a character's head, not only the man's dream life, but his fantasy life and the world itself transformed into a fantasy."

Currently, Livingston is excited about a personal documentary she's working on called *Earth Camp One*. "It's about how I lost four family members in five years and how I dealt with it. It's going to have some animation about different conceptions of what people think the afterlife is or what science thinks happens when you die." She also has a television project in development based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning book by science writer Natalie Angier *Woman: An Intimate Geography*. Julianne Moore has signed on as narrator. "I have a lot of ongoing things that I'm passionate about," says Livingston. "But the things I'm interested in are just never easy sells." In the end she's comfortable with this state of affairs. "It's true. I never strategized and said, 'OK, I made *Paris Is Burning*, what's the next most likely job?'" she reflects. "But I had a teacher at Yale, where I was an art student, who said 'Why make a picture? There are lots of pictures. There are great pictures in museums all over the world.' And that's how I feel about motion pictures: Why make one if you don't have something that you can do that no one else can do? And what you can do that no one else can do may not appeal to the majority of people. It may be bad, but it is the thing that you can do." ★