

IT'S NOT EVERY DAY that a fashion model makes the crossover into acting. After all, the vacant stare, the empty-headed gaze that takes a waif onto runways around the world is pretty much a liability for an actor. So it's a pleasant surprise that the British brunette Jessica Clark has adapted her modeling career into a career in television and the movies. Featured recently as the vampire Lilith on the hit HBO series *True Blood*, she can also be seen starring in the lesbian blockbuster *A Perfect Ending*, in which she plays Paris, a high-class call girl who falls in love with a straight married woman. The premise of *A Perfect Ending* is the stuff lesbian fantasies are made of: A frustrated, anorgasmic, middle-aged bombshell hires a much younger sex worker (with a tragic past) to initiate her into the pleasures of lesbian sex. Defenses come down, passions ignite, love also blooms, but there is trouble in paradise for this unlikely pair. Intrigued? Jessica Clark was, and shares with *Curve* all the juicy details about making the film, and tells us what's next in her equally perfect career.

Your acting career is clearly taking off and things are happening for you. Where did you train to be an actor?

My primary training was with Susan Batson in New York, at her acting studio. She's an amazing coach, and she was working a lot with well-known people, including Nicole Kidman, at the time. Working with her is the foundation of who I am as an actress. She was very much my mentor and wanted me to make the transition to being an actor. Ever since I got to L.A. I take classes here, and I have some really great coaches. It's a never-ending process. You always want to get better, more nuanced. You never stop training. It would be like an athlete who stopped working out.

The list of models who've become illustrious actors is not very long. What made you think you could do it?

That was quite a long process for me, because I was very much a model but feeling constricted and not really satisfied.

I felt like I needed something more. I needed a new challenge. People would even say to me on sets, when I was modeling, 'You seem like an actor.' I had a lot of resistance to it, because how do you know if you're good? And it's another career that is not predictable, it's not linear.

When you auditioned for *A Perfect Ending*, did you know that you were getting into the next big lesbian movie?

[Laughs] I actually saw *Elena Undone* at Outfest—the first short film I had done

scenes. There was definitely a conversation I had with Martha [Sanchez, Clark's talent manager] about it. If you're going to do something like that, the relationship and the trust you have with your director has to be so solid, you really have to have a sense of their vision. There are many different ways to shoot a love scene. I think my impression of Nicole's work is that she loved women, first and foremost, the sensuality and beauty of women, and also the beauty of film and cinematography. But, fortunately, I'm not that self-conscious

JESSICA CLARK'S

PERFECT CAREER

WORDS BY MERRYN JOHNS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARINA RICE BADER

as an actor was screening at Outfest too, so I'd come to L.A. for that. It was very much a packed house and you got a sense of the work that [Nicole Conn] has done and people's response to it. So it was very interesting, a year or so later, to be auditioning for her. That was pretty cool.

What was your audition piece?

[Sultry voice] "Nothing is going to happen if you don't want it to, but unless you tell me otherwise, Rebecca, I'm going to kiss you." You know, that scene.

Did you know there would be lots of intimate sex scenes?

Yes, that's something that you have to discuss pretty early on. They had sent me the script before we met, because they wanted to get a sense of how I felt about Paris, and also to be aware of the sex

about my body [laughs]. I thought it was a beautiful story, and I thought it was a story that hadn't really been told or explored. I think that female sexuality is something to be embraced and it should be shown at different ages and places in life, and at different levels of experience. For every

single woman, her sexual being is the result of everything she has experienced, or hasn't experienced. I just don't think there's enough of that three-dimensional depiction of those things. And so I embraced the opportunity to show something different.

Your character, Paris, could have been a cliché—the hooker with a heart of gold—but she's not. Tell us about your way into her as an actor.

I think I really connected to her on a personal level, to her need to have a confident exterior and a very self-assured nature, a sense of personal accomplishment and validation. I related to what she was carrying within her, and the ways in which she is trying to make sense of what happened to her. I really connected to her very spontaneously. I loved that Nicole



HAIR BY ANTHONY PAZOS
MAKEUP BY CANDACE PITTMAN



had given her so many different layers and nuances, and Paris goes through her own metamorphosis as well throughout the film. I took her as a gift and wanted to show all those different parts of her.

The scenes in the hotel room are so suspenseful. Is Rebecca going to let Paris make love to her? How did you approach these scenes?

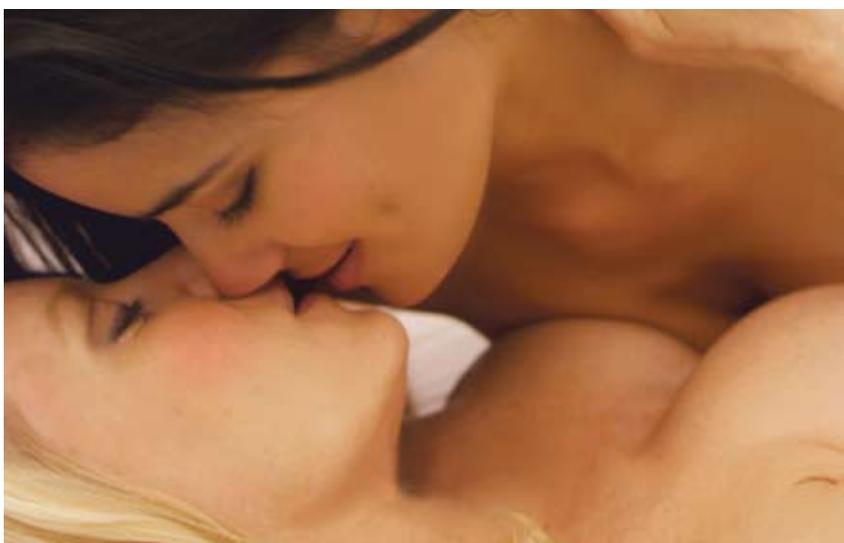
I think she is wanting to give back. She is wanting to give an experience to people, to help them feel a certain way, whether

it's to have their first orgasm or to feel loved—whatever it is, I think that's how she approaches it. Because Rebecca is so nervous and tightly wound, and now she's being driven by instinct. This is what she needs to experience, but she has no idea of how she's going to get there. Paris is able to see that, she is consciously trying to calm her and to get her to be present within herself. I am gay and Barbara [Niven] is not, so in terms of being actresses, she really didn't know what

you do, and I did—or at least I had a better idea than she did, I suppose [laughs]. I think that worked very well for the characters, because that was the case for them as well.

You've been out as a lesbian for some time, and this is a major lesbian film. Are you concerned that you'll be stereotyped as a "lesbian actress"?

It's very easy to get typecast in many different ways. In terms of taking on this project, it wasn't really a concern of mine. Me being out I think is an ongoing thing. It has a relevance to people in the community, who are appreciative of that, but I've yet to see how much it's going to impact my mainstream career. I mean, I got *True Blood* [after *A Perfect Ending*]. I think you have to be smart with the kind of projects you choose anyway, but for me there's no way that I couldn't be out. It's part of who I am and it always will be. If I had to make a choice between having a certain type of career and hiding who I was, I would choose to live my life openly. I'm just as likely to not get a part because I'm really tall as I am not to get a part because I'm gay. I'm going to try and be me and be as honest as I can within the parameters of my privacy. I really don't see why we can't get to a point where [being gay] is a positive point of differentiation.



In the scenes with your fiancé, I totally believed you were straight.

Yes, gay people can play straight. Because you are your character in that moment, and you find things to love and be attracted to or excited by in that character, and through what the other actor is bringing to the table. For me, that's no harder than being angry at them or hurt by them. It's all part of the human experience.

You mentioned privacy earlier, and I was thinking about your relationship status. Do you have anything you'd like to share with us regarding where you are at now, romantically?

Lacey [Stone] and I are no longer together. This is the official announcement.

Was the end of that relationship difficult?

Lacey and I have always had and will continue to have a tremendous amount of love and respect for each other, and that very much hasn't changed and won't change. We shared some amazing years together and I think we'll both always cherish them.

You got married in Puerto Vallarta in 2010. Has the end of the relationship altered your view of gay marriage? Are we really ready for gay marriage?

We're as ready as any other human beings. I think that we—people, essentially—fall in love, you do your best, and that's all you can ever do. But no, it has not in any way changed my views.

That was beautifully answered. I think you would have made a good attorney.

Did you know that was what I wanted to do when I was a little girl?

I did, and it makes me wonder, if you weren't an actor, or you had to choose a second career, what might you do instead?

Oh, wow. I sort of think about it as potentially my third career now, but I write and I always have done, so I would like to think that would be my third chapter, maybe. That's the fantasy. Short stories, a novel.

If Molly Ringwald can do it, you can.

I know, check her out. Actually, there are quite a few actors who write...

In the meantime, what can we look forward to seeing you in next on the big or small screen?

Well, I can tell you that you haven't seen the last of Lilith. I can't really tell you much more, because it hasn't even started filming yet, but you can wait and see! ●

BODY+SOUL

BARBARA NIVEN BARED A LOT MORE THAN SKIN FOR HER ROLE IN A PERFECT ENDING. BY LAURIE K. SCHENDEN

BY THE TIME Barbara Niven got a call from filmmaker Nicole Conn and producer Marina Rice Bader about playing the lead role in *A Perfect Ending*, Niven had pretty much given up on her acting career.

"I love acting so much, and as a woman gets older in Hollywood you get fewer and fewer quality parts you can make a difference with," says Niven, whose credits include a long list of TV shows and Lifetime movies. But when she saw the script, she knew she had to do the film, even though it meant doing naked, intimate love scenes with a much younger actor (Jessica Clark), who also happens to be a model.

"Jessica Clark is just as gorgeous as it gets—I mean, young, gorgeous body, and here I am a grandmother," says Niven. "But I wanted to do it because I wanted to do truth in this movie."

Niven's character, Rebecca, is a frustrated wife who drinks too much. She's judgmental, repressed and tightly wound, but she keeps her demons locked inside herself.

"She's ugly," Niven says, referring not to her character's appearance (she is, in fact, attractive) but to her spirit. "She's never had an orgasm in her life, she's stayed with her husband after he abused her daughter. Who does that? A lot of women do that. But then, Rebecca just decides she does not want to wonder 'What if?' someday. So she decides to change."



In creating the character of Rebecca, Niven “put every woman that I’ve ever known into her. My mother, myself, my daughter—all of us worry about getting older, about losing our looks, about not living our dream, about not fulfilling our purpose. And that’s what Rebecca is doing.”

Although Niven turns 60 in February, she’s fit and beautiful, hardly anyone’s idea of a grandmother. Still, the realization that “it’s going to be you up on that 40-foot screen, naked,” was daunting, although Niven laughs about it now. But she trusted Nicole Conn, whom she’s known since they both lived in Portland, Ore., 25 years ago, and she felt an immediate bond with the newcomer, Clark.

The love scenes are beautifully shot and intimate, revealing a unique chemistry between Rebecca and Paris, Clark’s character.

“I think that we should not judge passion, or what our soul mate looks like,” says Niven. “Or what love looks like, because it’s probably not going to come in this tidy little wrapped package that you think it does.”

Niven and Conn had long conversa-

tions about the demands that society puts on women, and decided that they both wanted to reveal their own truths in the film, right down to showing the stretch marks on an aging woman’s body.

“Hero marks,” says Niven. “Somebody yelled that out in one of the audiences, and that made me feel so much better. My stretch marks are up there [on screen]. People say I’m really, really brave. I still come from my own vulnerabilities and my own fears. This is the most naked I’ve ever been in a movie—and it’s not just physically naked but emotionally naked.”

It helped a lot that she was working with people she trusted, Niven says. “Nicole makes it a safe place to really go there, and Jessica Clark—she and I had such a connection. It wasn’t like we were acting, it was like we were just being.

“People say, ‘Wow, are you really having sex?’ Well, of course you’re not. It’s a dance that you do, and we’re actors. It’s more choreographed than what the end product looks like.” Niven adds, “I’m not a lesbian, I wasn’t sure what to do. We shot the sex scenes in order, because I wanted to use my own vulnerability. So when you

see the first scene and my shirt comes off, my bra starts to come off, you see that Rebecca is crying. That’s actually me crying, because it was scary. But I wanted to use it, because it was appropriate for the character.

“All that vulnerability is me, Barbara. That sex scene where I have the orgasm is the most honest, the most intimate I think I’ve ever been in my life, because I just let the music play inside of me. I’m really happy the way it turned out.”

The film’s theme, the search for perfection, resonated with Niven, who struggled with bulimia for 30 years. “Never feeling perfect enough, or thin enough, or smart enough. Just never feeling good enough, which is what our society says about women anyway.” *A Perfect Ending* gave her the chance to test her limits and face her fears.

“When you have something in your gut that says you have to do it, but your fear is almost overwhelming, I say you have to leap off the cliff and do it, because what I’ve learned is that just beyond your biggest fear is your biggest gold.

“This is the best work I have ever done and probably will ever do.” ■

“I THINK THAT WE SHOULD NOT JUDGE PASSION, OR WHAT OUR SOUL MATE LOOKS LIKE.”





LOVE STORY

LESBIAN FILMMAKER NICOLE CONN WEARS HER HEART ON HER SLEEVE.
BY LAURIE K. SCHENDEN

NICOLE CONN has written five novels, about a dozen screenplays and directed several lesbian feature films that all have at least one thing in common—hot, passionate love.

Her latest film, *A Perfect Ending* has some of the most powerful lesbian love scenes ever recorded on film. Her previous film, *Elena Undone*, is said to have the longest continuous kiss in any film.

Conn will always be known for her first lesbian feature, *Claire of the Moon* (1992), because it was groundbreaking at a time “when there was nothing [lesbian] out there,” she says. It did, however, generate criticism as well, for taking about 104 of its 105 minutes to deliver a payoff.

“I wish I could recut the first 25 minutes. It’s hard for me to watch, it makes me cringe on some levels,” Conn says today. “*Claire of the Moon* is old-time filmmaking—long pauses. It’s cutting before the MTV-style of cutting took over everything. It’s beautifully scored and well acted, but also, I’m proud of what it did for the community.”

Today, nobody could accuse Conn of being a tease. Nearly 15 years after *Claire*, she has let loose with *Elena Undone* and *A Perfect Ending*, delivering the romance, passionate sex, good story and high production values that are the hallmark of mainstream movies.

A Perfect Ending is based on a high-concept one-line description that came from Marina Rice Bader, Conn’s producing partner (the two founded Soul Kiss Films, whose mission is to produce women’s films by a variety of women writers and directors): What would happen if a woman had never had an orgasm by the time she was 50?

“The idea was so compelling for me,” says Conn. “I was in the middle of writing the book for *Elena Undone*, I was under deadline, but I had to drop everything.”

The result is the story of Rebecca, a married woman (Barbara Niven), who meets Paris, a young high-class prostitute (Jessica Clark).

“It’s definitely a love story between Paris and Rebecca. It’s also a vindication and redemption story, and, for me, that’s part of the most critical piece to it,” says Conn. “I don’t really want to reveal all the stuff because of my family, but it’s my story. I know so many other people who’ve had the same experience—families where there are stepchildren.”

While Conn is modest about her technical abilities as a director, there’s no doubt that she has a knack for producing heat.

“I sit in every endless hour of casting and read hundreds and hundreds of women to find those ‘two people,’ because seriously, if you don’t have that [chemistry], what’s the point?” says Conn.

Trisha Todd and Karen Trumbo had it in *Claire of the Moon*, Nekar Zadegan and Traci Dinwiddie had it in *Elena Undone*, and now so do Barbara Niven and Jessica Clark in *A Perfect Ending*.

“I’m telling you, from the minute they were in the audition together [Barbara and Jessica], that was fate,” says Conn. “We met Jessica first, but to be honest, I wasn’t sure she could act, because she’d just come off the modeling circuit and was very new and only had a short [film] under her belt.

“I will tell you, the first day of shooting, she had the hardest day. It wasn’t by design—it was just a scheduling conflict we had, so that we could get Morgan Fairchild. She killed it. I called her manager at

the end of the day and I said, ‘Oh my gosh, this girl is going to explode.’ She is so raw and extraordinary.

“She was willing to try anything I asked of her. I mean, she was just amazing. You just don’t get to work with somebody who is that raw and instinctual at the same time—and then, conversely, somebody who is as seasoned and savvy and brilliant as Barbara Niven. It’s like two ends of the spectrum, and the way they come together just worked in every way.”

While Niven (who’s straight) credits Clark (a lesbian) with helping her in their scenes together, Conn says that it is Niven, the veteran actress, who deserves much of the credit.

“She knows where the person is with the camera, she knows where the light is, she helped everybody that she worked with. Everybody. She’s the most generous actor I’ve ever worked with,” says Conn.

Today, Conn may be our best-known lesbian filmmaker, but it wasn’t always so. She was also attracted to larger budget projects and indie films.

“Quite frankly, I had two huge books that were at William Morris [Agency], that were attached to actors like Ashley Judd and Elizabeth Shue, and I was really going in a completely different direction. But the financing on those big features... you hope all the pieces come together, but they very rarely do.”

While waiting for one of those films to get made, she married human rights activist Gwen Baba and had children. Conn was a hands-on mom and gave up filmmaking altogether, until her son was born premature and disabled.

Out of that journey came the documentary *Little Man*, Conn’s most acclaimed film to date.

Becoming a uniquely lesbian storyteller “just sort of happened,” she says. “I’m a triple Scorpio and I wear my heart on my sleeve. What I’m known for is loving and loving good. I feel that way about the films that I do and the books that I do. I put everything I have into it.”

As she prepares for the DVD release of *A Perfect Ending*, she’s trying to resurrect a film that she started 15 years ago, and she’s writing a book called *Defending Thirds*.

The subject matter? “It’s an epic love story,” she says. What else? ●