

Beyond scratching the surface of engendered bodies

by Laiwan

SKIN DEEP

Produced by Daruma Pictures Inc.
Toronto

Skin Deep is a fictional narrative about an award-winning filmmaker, a lesbian of Japanese descent, named Alex. Thirty-to-forty-something, tough, ambitious and egotistic, she embarks on a new film that her producer describes as "tattoo-woman goes crazy and kills her lover". Alex, however, wanting a larger vision for her film, starts researching experiences of tattooing and places an ad in a tattoo magazine.

Chris works as a mechanic in a small town garage. He sees the ad and writes to Alex. Alex is intrigued by Chris' poetic descriptions of the states of being tattooed and sends him a ticket to come to the big city for an interview.

From here starts the spiraling complexities of two worlds colliding with obsession, misunderstanding and miscommunication.

Chris is attracted to Alex. Alex is too busy and too wrapped up with herself to deal with it. Things become uncomfortable with Chris' strangely intense presence and the slow realisation that Chris, who had passed as a man, is actually a woman.

Chris, with unspoken feelings building up, stalks Alex and invades her personal space. The film climaxes with Chris proclaiming his love to Alex and unable to handle the pain and anguish, he attempts to kill himself uttering "I just want to be normal!"

With this her first feature film, Midi Onodera places into question "What is normal?" Throughout the film, our expectations and assumptions are destabilised by various visual and moral plays.

Keram Malicki-Sanchez, a male actor playing Chris who is transgendered with a woman's body; Dana Brooks, a female actress playing Penny, a woman who passes as a man playing a drag queen; Melanie Nicholls-King playing Montana, Alex's lover and production assistant, who is Black and can speak fluent Japanese, and Natsuko Ohama playing Alex, who is Japanese and cannot speak the language — are examples of how Onodera juggles characters and deftly pits stereotypes against each other. By doing this she undermines our judgemental and essentialist perceptions that form our prejudices. At first glance, both Chris and Penny are definitely not easily identified by gender; this makes the viewer do a double take and makes us question our constructed notions of gender.

However, it's not such an easy task to unravel stereotypes. In other instances Onodera is close to crossing the line to create more stereotypes. The image Onodera creates of Alex is contrary to the demure, submissive, delicate Asian woman, and is instead the aggressive, ambitious, erotically charged tiger-lady. It is uncertain if any stereotype has been dispelled here. However, I'd rather see a take-charge Asian lesbian on film than the ever-so-common images of the studious-dutiful-Asian-daughter or the slutty-bad-girl-behind-the-triad-boss types.

With the portrayal of Chris, however, the task was much more complex. There are no

films I know of that have attempted to reflect the lives and experiences of transgendered peoples, and specifically not stories of 'a man in a woman's body'. The danger of painting Chris as unempowered, inarticulate and victim is countered by the reality that empowerment, the chance to speak, to be heard and to have a safe place in society is very rare for marginalised groups like transgendered people.

Trying to review this film, I realised how intricate and new these issues were and what were Onodera's challenges. I realised too that it raised many complex questions which this review may be too short to analyze, but, I'll tackle some.

At a very basic level this film makes visible the misunderstanding of, and the lack of resources available to, the lives of transsexuals and transgendered peoples. In real life this can



Keram Malicki-Sanchez plays female to male transgendered Chris.
Photo by Candy Pauker

be seen in the current case of *The People of the State of Colorado vs Sharon Clark aka Sean O'Neill*, where O'Neill is being tried for sexual assault and criminal impersonation. His four teenage complainants are ex-girlfriends who claim they did not know O'Neill was a girl, and that this gender deception is tantamount to rape. Another case is that of Teena Brandon aka Brandon Teena, a 21 year old Nebraskan who was raped and murdered by two former male friends who were outraged to find out Brandon had so convincingly passed himself as a man.

These youths who are struggling with issues of identity and sexuality usually find themselves isolated, out of home and school by mid-teens and working the streets to get by. Many do not survive.

At an even more basic level, woven into the heart of these complexities are misogyny and homophobia, both in our external social environment and internalised. In *Skin Deep's* climactic scene, when Chris angrily tells Alex "You like men, REAL men" what is being implied, in contradiction, is both "I am your man...you are not a lesbian" and "I am not a man...am I a lesbian?" Chris' attempt then to kill himself is in response to the futility of this



Dana Brooks plays a woman playing a man doing drag, and Natsuko Ohama plays an award-winning filmmaker, Alex Koyama, in Midi Onodera's dramatic feature debut *Skin Deep*.
Photo by Gabor Jurina

dilemma — the concept of what is real becomes skewed.

For Chris to become empowered he needs compassion, to be heard, to be seen, to be real. From the beginning, his attempts to be who he wants to be is negated by how he is seen and the realities of his biological body. Soon after his arrival, Chris and Alex accidentally bump into a drag queen who hotly retorts "You should watch where you're going, Hong Kong!" When Chris chivalrously steps in, the drag queen belittles "Who do you think you are, baby dyke?" This brief interchange is loaded with a confusion of boundaries: a drag queen — a male dressed as a female; Chris — a female passing as male mistaken as lesbian, and Alex — a female as female as lesbian loaded with the stereotype that all Asians are the same...Hong Kong-Japanese, same dif.

With all of these marginalised identities taking a mixed-up front stage I'm really wondering *What is normal?* With *Skin Deep's* emphasis on the so-called 'abnormal', what I begin to realise is that which is assumed *normal* is that which is dangerous and actually very common. Alex, the successful filmmaker blinded by ambition, too busy to take care of her relationships or herself and too high-achieving to notice who she uses and discards — Alex passes all of this as *normal*, and we as audience fall for it, especially if we feel outrage at how Chris is portrayed, which seems to be a point of contention among audiences.

At the core of Alex's so-called *normalcy* and Chris' disempowerment, are issues of class. Chris, a mechanic, is invited as a research subject to enter Alex's fast-paced, glamorous world. How Chris as research subject becomes demoted to a gopher on Alex's production set is unclear to me. When the production decides Chris has to go due to his strange intensity and his intrusion into Alex's space, the producer

says to Chris "I have a friend with a garage who could use some help" it becomes clear how patronized Chris is in this world.

Alex is never truthful to herself about her using of others to be successful. In her egotism, nothing is more important beyond herself. When she and Montana are breaking up, Montana blames Alex for her poor communication. Alex retorts "This (the relationship) is a luxury...I don't have time to communicate."

In the end, Chris in rage and humiliation tells Alex "I trusted you...When I look in the mirror all I see is a lie. Someone I don't even know." Here, many things are being said. Chris' betrayal is based on his assumption that Alex had the compassion and insight to really see Chris. And yet, Chris too did not know how even he could see his real self. The lie is true on both accounts — to Alex he is not who he is, to himself he is not who he internally is. This trap occurred because there was no basis for understanding, no models for both Chris and Alex. Chris' attempts to be seen were unsuccessful from the beginning, let alone that he was dealing with an insensitive Alex, and

because of this his reaching out became frantic, obsessive, desperate acts — a typical, *normal* human reaction. What Chris needed to do was to untangle the web, the seduction of Alex's *normalcy* and be on his own terms. This he does, packing his bags and leaving Alex to ambition on in this production-valued world.

From images of luscious tattooed bodies in the opening scene, to the intricate soundtrack of drumming from *Chirashi*, Vancouver's Uzume Taiko's first CD, to the rare lesbian of colour gaze established in the first act with Alex and Montana in steamy sex, to the elegant set design of Alex's studio and to the humorous choreography of the drag queen acts — Onodera, even with the struggles of this being an independent, low budget, first feature, has successfully put onto the big screen much to reveal in, contemplate and question oneself about.

This isn't your mainstream-Canadiana, "family-values" content, nor is it your lesbian of colour, Asian/Japanese, feminist, love pic standard. *Skin Deep* is definitely not a comfortable film — neither in the challenging subject matter, nor in the day-to-day filmmaking struggles that Onodera faced over the last six years in researching the script, fundraising, filmmaking or now finding a distributor. It is always this daring and filmmaking integrity that makes Onodera's large body of work unique, troubling, refreshing and controversial, but never Hollywood.

Be warned, Diane Keaton is preparing to produce her version of the Brandon Teena story starring Drew Barrymore based on a homophobic novel by true-crime writer Aphrodite Jones. Yes, Hollywood knows no justice, and capitalism knows no boundaries!

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