

Toronto INTERNATIONAL Film Festival

Skin Deep

Director: Midi Onodera • **Coproducers:** Midi Onodera, Phillip Ing, Mehernaz Lentin
Cowriters: Midi Onodera, Barbara O'Kelly
Diary by: Teresa Iezzi

Late 1970s: A Toronto woman relieves an unfortunate cab driver of his genitalia and affixes the ill-gotten unit to her body in an attempt to "prove her manhood" to her girlfriend with whom she has been living in the guise of a man.

Spring/summer 1989: The memory of media accounts of this and other plights of the gender confused are stored in the brain of filmmaker Midi Onodera, becoming part of her research on gender roles and sexual orientation and fodder for the fictional narrative which will eventually become her first feature film.

Skin Deep, cowritten by Barbara O'Kelly, revolves around a self-assured independent filmmaker and the imbrolio resulting from her involvement with a sexually enigmatic figure while making a movie about the psychological landscape of tattooing. "The film is about seeing what's beyond the surface and about compassion for the individual," says Onodera.

Initial financial support for the film comes from the Canada Council in the form of a B grant, a living subsidy for artists, and a \$5,000 Ontario Arts Council Screenwriting grant.

Fall 1990: Phillip Ing, who worked as associate producer on the CBC series *Inside Stories*, comes on board as producer. The project receives production funding from

Canada Council (\$40,000) and the OAC (\$50,000).

Spring 1991: An additional \$6,375 is received from the Liaison of Independent Filmmakers of Toronto's Racial Equity Fund, a small fund from the Ontario Film Development Corporation. The LIFT money encourages the use of apprentices from minority groups in the production of the film. The Toronto Lesbian and Gay Community Appeal also chips in \$2,000.

May 1993: Mehernaz Lentin, coproducer of the short film *What About Dad*, joins Ing as producer. Regional entities of the National Film Board pony up additional dough for production: money comes from the Ontario Region for apprenticeships as well as from Studio D in Montreal. NFB Calgary kicks in a camera assistant. Onodera says the film's strong training initiative is instrumental in obtaining financing.

Casting is swift. Female and male actors are considered when casting for the androgynous transgender Chris Black character. Keram Malicki-Sanchez (*Catwalk*) is chosen for the role and, in a testament to this casting coup, Onodera later reports animated debates erupting among audience members after screenings as to the gender of the character.

Canadian-born Natsuko Ohama is cast in the lead role and powers through rehearsals despite being "a little disoriented" after a cab accident in New York.

June 1993: Ing and Lentin negotiate deferrals for cast, crew and suppliers.

June 21, 1993: With a total budget of just under \$150,000, shooting begins at a Toronto warehouse on property controlled by the Toronto Harbour Commission. The going rate for the site is \$1,500 per day.

Onodera et al procure the location for \$100.

With gargantuan raccoons, aircraft din and 100 degree weather providing amusing distraction, the film is shot in three weeks with five-day work weeks. Volunteer support abounds. MAC donates cosmetics, artists supply

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free murals and artwork. The entire art department budget is \$6,000, roughly the cost of the gown donated by designer Wayne Clark, notes Ing. Director Deepa Mehta lends a hand as mentor.

The NFB's Ontario Regional French Productions lends support in the form of an editing suite.

September 1993: The rough cut of *Sadness of the Moon* (the film's working title so far) is shown at a private screening for buyers and distributors during the Toronto Festival of Festivals. It becomes apparent that additional shooting is required to bridge certain scenes.

November 1993: Four days of pickups that must be matched to summer footage are shot during

the season's first snowfall. Malicki-Sanchez gets frostbite. "The cast was incredibly dedicated," says Onodera.

Canada Council contributes \$20,000 for post-production.

December 1993: Further post-production financing comes from the National Association of Japanese Canadians from a special fund which is part of the community's redress money from the Canadian government (see WWII human rights violations).

January 1994: Ing and Lentin take the rough cut to Cinemart, a five-day preproduction market in Rotterdam, and garner attention from European buyers. An additional \$20,000 in post money comes from the OAC.

October 1994: The film becomes an official coproduction of the NFB through Studio D.

Sadness of the Moon grows irksome name-wise (there were too many "moon things" going on at the time) and the film is rechristened *Skin Deep*.

November 1994: The film is sent to Studio D for mixing. deluxe toronto, Sound House, Film Effects and Tattersall Sound help out with post-production facilities and talent.

Late January 1995: The newly minted film goes to the Rotterdam International Film Festival where it meets with sold-out screenings.

March and April 1995: *Skin Deep* is shown at the Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals in London and Turin, respectively. The subject matter proves too much for British sensibilities and a stink is duly raised. According to Onodera, while the current climate of lesbian films offers soft

romanticism, *Skin Deep* is an "in your face, don't fuck with me kind of film - it stands out in the genre."

June 1995: *Skin Deep* is shown at the New York Gay and Lesbian Film Festival. Madonna is there. Enough said.

July 1995: Fabulous reviews are had at the Los Angeles G/L Film Festival.

August 1995: Despite their praise for the film, distribution agencies are in a cautious phase. Confident that a significant audience exists, the filmmakers try to set up their own distribution links. The film is shown at the Montreal World Film Festival. Having navigated the process of making a "totally independent film," Onodera expresses concern about the difficulties facing independents. "Voices are being lost," she says.

September 1995: *Skin Deep* appears at the Toronto International Film Festival.