

Won't somebody think of the children? Gonzo puts teens in conversation with porn stars

A new play reveals porn performers can be the key to teen porn literacy, writes Zahra Stardust



Sarah Walker: Sol Rumbi, Ari Maza Long, Sam Salem and Jack Palit in Gonzo.

In September Clare Watson's sold out theatre piece *Gonzo* brought together two demographics whose voices are underrepresented in pornography debates: teenage boys and porn performers.

The Malthouse play, featuring four teens in conversation with queer kink performer Gala Vanting and sex documentarian Helen Betty Corday (aka Liandra Dahl), posits teens as savvy media-literate porn consumers and reveals the potential in engaging with performers to make sense of online pornography.

This is not the first time porn performers have collaborated on projects to discuss sex education, safety and consent, and nor should it be the last. In 2015, Helen Betty Corday worked alongside Fitzroy High School to host five community forums, including 'Pornography and Teenagers: Developing Porn Literacy' (run twice due to high demand), where porn performers spoke alongside sexologists, family planning and psychologists. Health professionals on the panel reported to Helen that 'the presence of a porn performer... removed the scepticism the teenagers had toward community concern and lent credibility to the sexual health nurses in the eye of the teens.'

Porn stars have also created public resources on sex and consent. In a BuzzFeed clip veteran Nina Hartley

reminds viewers that consent may be impaired if a person is intoxicated, and in Stoya's 'Porn Star's Guide to Sexual Consent' she discusses safe words, saying no and the right to retract consent. Gala Vanting runs sex education workshops focusing on women's pleasure, emotional safety, clear communication and avoiding goal-orientation. Even the many 'porn stars without makeup' photo shoots online can 'humanise' performers and illustrate the labour of performing femininity to break down gender stereotypes of the ideal pornographic body.

Gonzo addresses concerns that teenage boys are being increasingly 'exposed' to pornography, learning sexist behaviours, and that porn is affecting relationships. Instead of representing young boys as blank slates upon which media is projected, *Gonzo*, based on peer-led focus groups among teenage boys aged 12-18 in Melbourne, depicts teens as 'conscious and critical consumers' developing a sense of 'porn literacy.'

In digital culture, we are no longer viewers but users who interact, participate and generate content. And indeed, the boys on stage are curious. In the conversational, improvised scene with Gala and Helen, they want to know everything from the artistic aspects of films to maintaining romantic relationships to labour conditions on set. How did you get into it? Have you ever had a bad time at work?

The boys care about the women involved, how they are referred to and whether they are having a good time. They want to know if the activities are consensual and even pay attention to whether the performers are using lube.

Many porn performers – some of whom are mothers and feminists – are invested in political change and actively role-model consensual sexual negotiation, bodily autonomy and respect in their films and behind the scenes footage. Sensate Films let viewers know in advance whether the performers in a scene are an off-screen couple, particularly experienced, fluid bonded, or just have negotiated certain activities in advance.

Madison Young has documented an example of a behind-the-scenes sex scene negotiation where the performers discuss the effects of anti-depressant medication on libido, their preferred speed, pace and pressure of penetration, and how they like to orgasm. Lesbian and same sex attracted women's health project Claude have worked with porn performers to create sexual health resources with information about women's anatomy, pleasure and safety.

The value in speaking with performers is in its deconstruction of the production process. It takes away the power of pornography to be represented as ideal or proscriptive. Instead, it reinforces that performers are 'real people' outside their work personas, invests viewers

in performer health and wellbeing, and helps them differentiate between fantasy and reality.



Gonzo star Gala Vanting suggests porn producers create work that models consent and safer sex practice. Photo: ABC

The irony is that porn performers, those arguably best able to assist in understanding screen sex, are deterred from dialogue with teens. Performers must be vigilant in ensuring their work is only available to 18+ audiences, and face barriers to open discussion of pornography in educational settings. A New Zealand teacher who posed for *Australian Penthouse* was deregistered and in the United States a woman was charged with conduct "unbecoming a teacher" for writing about her prior sex work experience. Porn performers are accused of bias, recruitment or being inappropriate influences for young people instead of experts in the field.



Photo: Sarah Walker

The visual backdrop of *Gonzo* features a montage of pixelated, bouncing breasts, erotic art, neon animation, and pandas masturbating to barrage the audience with both the absurd and the mundane array of clips available on the Internet. The images are juxtaposed with banal conversations among the boys about the Kardashians, Donald Trump, terrible bosses and favourite pets. The message is: pornography is just one of many mediums young people encounter online. It is no more exceptional than other media. And like other media, research indicates that pornography is used for a variety of reasons, including boredom.

Pornography is not a substitute for sex education. But in the absence of comprehensive sex and relationship education, young people are turning to the internet to fill in the gaps. Being competent in mediated sexuality has been identified by Australian researchers as a crucial part of healthy sexual development. Porn literacy could easily be included within sex education curriculums, and porn performers could be a valuable part of this process.

Gonzo takes a step in this direction. Even the plays' title reflects a genre of porn in which the performer interacts directly with and speaks to the camera-person. Bringing teens in conversation with performers is a bold and necessary step towards equipping our youth with porn literacy, sexual ethics, and responsible media consumption. Porn stars hold the key.



Zahra Stardust is writing her PhD on pornography in Australia at the University of New South Wales. She has chapters in books such as Coming Out Like a Porn Star: Pornography, Protection and Privacy (3L Media, 2015), Queer Sex Work (Routledge, 2015) and The DIY Porn Handbook: Documenting Our Own Sexual Revolutions (Greenery Press, 2016). She has published in journals Porn Studies, Research for Sex Work and the World Journal of AIDS, and written articles for The Conversation and Hustler Magazine.