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Guest Author: Beverly Gray



If you've been reading this site for any length of time, you know I've written a book about 1970s Hollywood called [The Stewardess Is Flying the Plane](#) that comes out this November. The movies wouldn't have been what they were in that decade without the guiding spirit of Roger Corman, and though I didn't stumble onto Beverly Gray's biography, [Roger Corman: Blood-Sucking Vampires, Flesh-Eating Cockroaches and Driller Killers](#), I'm sure I'll be dropping anecdotes from it in interviews this fall (fully credited, of course). After earning her PhD in American literature at UCLA, Beverly spent nearly a decade in the film industry, much of it with Corman (as she explains below). She teaches screenwriting at UCLA Extension, covers the entertainment world for the *Hollywood Reporter*, and has also written a biography of the most recent of Corman's protegés to win the Oscar, [Ron Howard](#). So when Jimmy McDonough's [Big Bosoms and Square Jaws](#) showed up, I thought she'd be a natural to talk about the other great pioneer of the '60s/'70s exploitation flick, Russ Meyer. And she didn't disappoint...

The Lowdown on Two Low-Budget Guys

by Beverly Gray

Three decades ago, my pal Stan Berkowitz applied for a job with low-rent movie maven Roger Corman. He hoped to parlay his UCLA film degree into a chance to make biker movies and women-in-prison flicks for Corman's New World Pictures. By coincidence, I was up for the same Corman job. I got hired, and Stan went to work for Russ Meyer.

Why did I--and not Stan--get the gig as Roger Corman's assistant? At the time I hired on, I was completing my PhD dissertation on the fiction of Vladimir Nabokov. That tells you something about Roger Corman: he's impressed by intellectual credentials. And he likes to hire women, not only as eye-candy in front of the cameras but also as the brains behind them. Gale Anne Hurd, who graduated from being Corman's assistant to producing *The Terminator*, explained to me the basic Corman logic: women are smarter, work cheaper, and are more loyal.

While I was learning the ABCs of low-budget filmmaking from Roger Corman, my friend

Stan survived Russ Meyer's *Supervixens*. On the set he saw plenty of women, most of them flaunting the audacious "Guns of Navarone" bazooms that were Meyer's stock in trade. But on the production team there was not a female to be found, and the pneumatic starlets were strictly off-limits. Meyer made movies to feed his personal obsessions. He wanted his crews, like himself, in a permanent state of arousal.

Jimmy McDonough's *Big Bosoms and Square Jaws* is an affectionate analysis of what made Meyer tick. McDonough's exhaustive--though sometimes exhausting--account of Meyer's life and loves makes plain that the director's appeal derived from his ability, in an era before sex became ubiquitous, to blend vibrant visuals with a cocky blue-collar machismo. As Meyer himself put it, "I'm just some guy from Oakland living out my fantasies on film, foisting my personal tastes on the world. I give the people what they want."

I learned from McDonough's book that the filmmaker nicknamed "King Leer" bore little resemblance to Roger Corman, the still-reigning King of the Bs. Yes, they belonged to the same generation, coming of age during World War II. Both went the independent route, personally financing their films, and controlling them from inception through distribution. Both took the genre film to outrageous extremes, and in the process both amassed tidy fortunes.

In other ways, though, they couldn't be more different. Corman projects the air of a hip intellectual, with progressive politics and patrician manners. Meyer, by contrast, reveled in being a red-blooded anti-commie working stiff. Corman has been married for over thirty years; Meyer indulged in a string of lurid marriages and affairs, though his closest relationships may have been with the old army buddies for whom he served as an unlikely father figure. Corman experimented with multiple genres, flirting with the art film, inventing the horror comedy, launching trends (in '60s movies like *The Wild Angels* and *The Trip*) by trying to capture the raw energy of the youth culture. He loves to quote the *New York Times*: "What is *Jaws*, if not a Roger Corman movie on a big budget?" Meyer had his great moment of notoriety in 1970, when 20th Century Fox invited him to direct *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. But Meyer's subject was--first, last, and always--sex, and eventually the raincoat brigade moved beyond him, in search of a franker and less artful form of titillation.

Today Corman, at seventy-nine, is still churning out monster movies; a man of his restless temperament just doesn't know how to quit working. Meyer passed away last September, at eighty-two, but his mind had abandoned him a decade earlier. He might have been his own most perceptive critic when, in a 1978 interview, he told a young reporter, "If I wasn't so into tits, I probably could've been a great filmmaker."

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