

November 11, 2007

Little Girl Sold, and Other Tales of the Sex Trade

By JOHN ANDERSON

ONE of the bigger hurdles in producing “[Holly](#),” a drama about sex trafficking, was finding a Vietnamese girl to play the title character, a 12-year-old sold into the notorious Cambodian brothel town known as K11.

All things considered, it would have been easier to secure a Vietnamese sex worker than it was to get a Vietnamese actress. “That is a very sad statement,” said Guy Jacobson, a producer and writer of the film. “And a very true statement.”

“Holly” is one of several recent films that explore sex trafficking, a phenomenon the [United Nations](#) Office on Drugs and Crime describes as the world’s fastest-growing criminal enterprise. The recent “[Trade](#),” which starred [Kevin Kline](#), followed human cargo being smuggled from Mexico to New Jersey. “Very Young Girls,” a new documentary produced for Showtime by David Schisgall, confines itself to New York City but reveals a homegrown world of predatory sex and the legal view that the seller, rather than the buyer, is culpable.

“Holly,” however, exists in a world without borders. The inspiration, said Mr. Jacobson, a lawyer and investment banker, came from a trip he took to Phnom Penh. “I was walking in the street in the middle of the day and found myself surrounded by a group of about 15 little girls, some as young as 5, who were very aggressively soliciting me for prostitution,” he said. “One of the girls said, ‘I yum yum very good, I no money today, mama-san boxing me.’ Which we use, word for word, in the film.”

The incident motivated Mr. Jacobson, through his Priority Films, to write and produce “Holly,” which was financed by an Israeli real estate developer, Amit Kort, and his wife, Smadar. After reading the script, Mr. Jacobson said, they offered him whatever he needed, which in the end was several million dollars.

The movie, which opened in limited release on Friday, stars [Ron Livingston](#) (“[Office Space](#),” “[Music Within](#)”) as Patrick, an American drifter who tries to save the title character from a life trapped in what has become the sexual speak-easy of the Western world. Holly, whose family has sold her to Cambodian traffickers, is played by Thuy Nguyen, who is now 14. Mr. Jacobson and the director, Guy Moshe, found her in Los Angeles.

“We wanted a real Vietnamese girl, a tough Vietnamese girl,” Mr. Jacobson said. “We tried to get a girl from Vietnam, but the government wouldn’t let us. And we tried casting Thai actresses. We tried Indonesian girls. But no Vietnamese girls. We were desperate, so we went to Little Saigon,” the Vietnamese community in Los Angeles. At the very end of an open casting call Ms. Nguyen walked in.

“The director asked her something,” he recalled. “She gave him a look like, ‘Who the heck do you think you are?’ And we said, ‘We found who we need.’”

In Mr. Livingston, they found an advocate as well as an actor.

“There’s a misconception that this is a different part of the world, and it’s a cultural thing we don’t understand,” Mr. Livingston said of child prostitution in Southeast Asia. “That’s not true. When I went to lunch with Thuy, you could have lit a fire with the looks I got from the local Cambodian people. They didn’t condone it. They didn’t approve. It horrified, sickened and disgusted them. But they were afraid to say anything because they knew that the amount of money I had in my pocket could buy the police.

“The truth is, the governments in these countries get far more money from the United States and the U.N. than they do from pedophiles,” Mr. Livingston said. “So it’s really a matter of the United States saying: ‘You know those millions in aid? You’re not going to get it unless you stop this.’ If we said it and meant it, it would be stopped tomorrow.”

But even in the United States, as pointed out by “Very Young Girls,” laws often don’t work in the girls’ favor. “If a 40-year-old man has sex with a 14-year-old girl and gets caught, he goes to jail forever, and the girl will get treatment,” Mr. Schisgall said. “But if he gives her 60 bucks, he’s probably going to go home. And she’s going to be put in the judicial system.”

“Very Young Girls” developed out of a proposed series Mr. Schisgall was working on for [MTV](#). It wasn’t sold, but he knew he had enough material for a feature-length movie about the sex trade. Through an anonymous source he acquired home movies made by two pimps that showed them recruiting girls from the streets of New York City. And he met Rachel Lloyd, founder of Girls Educational and Mentoring Services, an advocacy and support group for exploited girls and women.

“Rachel is not only the one who told us all about this,” Mr. Schisgall said, “but she experienced this herself, pulled herself out of it and now works to help other children.”

Although Mr. Schisgall and Mr. Jacobson took pains not to make their movies heavy issue-based films that would alienate audiences, attracting crowds is an uphill battle. “Trade,” which had a name star in Mr. Kline, had a woeful opening weekend of \$118,000 and has made less than \$600,000 worldwide since opening Sept. 28. Children and exploitative sex, it needn’t be said, are not typically the means to big box-office numbers.

“Right now audiences don’t want anything serious,” said Paul Dergarabedian of the box-office monitor Media by Numbers, citing the successes of [“The Game Plan,”](#) [“Bee Movie”](#) and the spate of horror films in small theaters. “Not every movie is made to make big money. A large number of films are made each year simply because the story has to be told.”

Mr. Jacobson, of course, agrees. In addition to “Holly” he’s produced two spinoff documentaries on child trafficking and founded the Redlight Children Campaign ([redlightchildren.org](#)) to promote awareness of the issue and enforcement of existing laws. Like the documentary [“Darfur Now,”](#) “Holly” is more about promoting awareness than specific legislation.

“It’s something we could do a lot to help, and in doing so we would also help ourselves greatly,” Mr. Livingston said. “To be cynical, if you want to say America stands for something, and we’re trying to make the world a better place and bring freedom and human rights everywhere, why don’t we start with the 12-year-old girls who are being raped in back alleys? Seems like that would be a good thing to fix.”

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