



From Salonika refugee to New York's queen of porn

Chelly Wilson was the Ladino-speaking immigrant who built up one of the most successful porn empires in New York. Naomi Gryn speaks to the director of a new film that tells Chelly's extraordinary story

Valerie Kontakos' captivating documentary, *Queen of the Deuce*, which premieres at this year's UK Jewish Film Festival, reveals how Chelly Wilson, a chain-smoking, hot-headed force of nature, erupted from a patriarchal Jewish family in Salonika in northern Greece. And how, after arriving in New York in 1939, she rose from selling hot dogs and soda to running a porn empire on the Deuce – Times Square's red-light district.

Kontakos, who now lives in Athens, grew up in New York. Her mother was a friend of Chelly's and, as a teenager, Kontakos worked in the box office of the Tivoli (later the Adonis), one of Chelly's six cinemas, which screened Greek films on Sundays; the rest of the week it was gay porn. "It was difficult to forget Chelly, she was so intense," explains Kontakos, who had long wanted to make a film about her.

First, the director needed to persuade Chelly's daughters, Bondi and Paulette, to co-operate. "I think they were afraid it

would be sensational," she says, adding that it was a challenge to make a film "that touches on so many elements of the second half of the 20th century". She does this through home videos and archive footage, some glorious animation to accompany audio recordings of Chelly, and through the intimate recollections of Chelly's family and associates.

Queen of the Deuce recalls the vitality of Salonika's Jewish community before it was destroyed by the Germans during World War II. Chelly's mother tongue was Ladino; she learnt Greek on the streets. Her first marriage was arranged by her father and Chelly was deeply resentful. After the birth of their second child, Paulette, she divorced her husband. Entrusting four-year-old Paulette to a friend in Athens, Chelly took the last boat to America before Greece was engulfed by war. Paulette's older brother, Daniel, was hidden by a non-Jewish lawyer in Salonika.

In New York, Chelly

used earnings from her hot dog stand in Washington Heights to buy newsreel footage to make a film, *Greece on the March*, to raise money for the war effort. She screened it at the Squire, a cinema on

44th Street that she would later own and rename the Cameo, and where she met her second husband, Rex Wilson, a British Jewish projectionist, with whom she had two more children, Bondi and George.

After the war, Chelly brought Daniel and Paulette to New York, and only then did Bondi discover that she was Jewish. "I never knew I had a sister until she arrived from Greece." Fewer than five percent of Salonika's 56,000 Jews had survived the Holocaust and Chelly never spoke about her past.

Then Bondi learnt from a family friend that, despite two marriages, her mother was gay. "In those years, it was not something that you accepted easily," she says. Her mother's live-in lovers

"There were bare breasts, bottoms and lots of slapstick"

Clockwise from top: Chelly doing business; the Adonis Marquee; director Valerie Kontakos



included the singer Noni Kantaraki, for whom Chelly opened a Greek restaurant, Mykonos, where Noni sang every evening. It was "the place to be". Rod Steiger, Shirley Maclaine and Yul Brynner were amongst the stars who dropped by. Chelly imported from the island of Mykonos a live pelican that enjoyed celebrity status, attracting long lines of prospective customers.

Chelly lived above Eros 1, a seedy gay porn cinema on 42nd Street. To enter her apartment, visitors had to walk through the cinema lobby. She held court like a mafia queen, her rasping voice littered with curses, and on Friday nights, she presided over high-stake poker games, which sometimes lasted for several days.

As porn cinema owners moved into production, Chelly set up Chellee Films with a friend, Lee Pomeranz, producing titles such as *Come Ride the Wild Pink Horse*. There were bare breasts, bottoms and lots of slapstick, but it was not yet legal to show sex on screen. By 1969, however, the films had become hardcore.

"When you enjoy something, you want a little more," explains the filmmaker. "The Tivoli was the ultimate experience as far as gay porn goes." Freedom of expression won the battle against America's obscenity laws. The sexual revolution transformed the depiction of women and gay men, with films such as *The Devil in Miss Jones* and *Deep Throat* appealing to mainstream audiences. "There are photographs of Jackie Kennedy with sunglasses and a raincoat walking in to see *The Devil in Miss Jones* on 42nd Street."

Chelly's next production company was Variety Films and her daughter Bondi ran its distribution arm. "My mother would never apologise for who she was or what she did," says Bondi.

New York in the 1970s was a time of innovation, but there was a dark side too. As John Colasanti, manager of Show World Center – a porn palace on the Deuce, where punters could browse titillating magazines and watch live sex – remembers, "I was more afraid walking down 42nd Street at that time than I was in Vietnam."

In the 1990s, Rudy Giuliani, then mayor of New York, forced many adult entertainment shops and cinemas to close. Chelly died on Thanksgiving Day 1994, the same year the Adonis was closed after inspectors reported "high-risk sexual activities" taking place among patrons. It was the end of an era.

A true maverick, Chelly gambled on the opportunities that came her way and defied the odds. "You have to survive," says Kontakos. "That's the bottom line, and I think she did that very well." ■

Queen of the Deuce will be shown at the UK Jewish Film Festival, which runs 9-30 Nov. For info see ukjewishfilm.org.uk or *What's Happening*, p55. Naomi Gryn is a filmmaker and is currently working as the historical consultant on Sky TV's dramatisation of *The Tattooist of Auschwitz*.

COURTESY OF THE WILSON FAMILY; VANGELIS PATSIALOS; OSCAR J RYAN; BRENDEN FREEDMAN

Why I made: The Soldier on Smithdown Road

The Pears Short Film Fund was set up by UK Jewish Film in 2006 to offer opportunities to create cinema engaging with British Jewish life. Previous winners have been shortlisted for Oscars, nominated for BAFTAs and won awards around the world. One of this year's winners, *The Soldier on Smithdown Road*, is set in Liverpool in 1947, during a little-documented spate of antisemitic attacks in the north of England, and it will premiere at this year's UKJF Festival. Here, its writer and co-director Barney Pell Scholes (below) explores the inspiration behind the film

The *Soldier on Smithdown Road*, which is co-directed with Thomas Harnett O'Meara, is based on the experiences of my paternal grandparents, Louis and Rachel (Rae) Scholes. The film retells a story of great family pride and dramatises a largely forgotten event in British Jewish history.

In 1947, in British Mandate Palestine, Zionist paramilitary groups were fighting for an independent Jewish state. One of the most radical and violent of these groups was the Irgun. After British authorities sentenced three Irgun fighters to death, the Irgun kidnapped two British sergeants in retaliation. When the British went ahead with the executions of the Irgun prisoners, the Irgun hanged the British soldiers and booby-trapped their bodies. This episode became known as 'The Sergeants' Affair'.

Graphic pictures of the sergeants' hanging bodies featured on the front pages of several British tabloids. Despite widespread condemnation of the Irgun's actions by both British Jews and the Haganah (the umbrella paramilitary organisation), the headlines triggered a wave of antisemitic rioting across the UK.

In Liverpool, a mob marched towards my great-grandparents' shop on Smithdown Road, where my grandma Rae worked. My grandpa

Louis, who had served as an RAF airman during World War II, put on his uniform and stood outside the shop with a friend to defend it. Facing down the mob, he told them he'd served his country with pride and prevented them from entering the shop. The film is a fictionalised retelling of this piece of family folklore.

As well as telling an exciting story, I wanted to make a film that both explores the precarious nature of being a British Jew and complex questions of identity. Most Jews are painfully familiar with the feeling that their loyalty will always be questioned, and their Judaism will always make them a target in the context of geopolitical events. I wanted the film to address the fact that, even today, too many are willing to stand by and watch as these sorts of events happen.

Liverpudlian Jews are enormously under-represented in the history of British Jewry. Once a thriving community with several synagogues, it now has few Jews left in the city, and the number is dwindling. I want my film to serve as a lasting testimony both to the Liverpool Jewish community and the memory of my grandparents. ■

Barney Pell Scholes is a writer and filmmaker. See barneypellscholes.com; ukjewishfilm.org; *What's Happening*, p55.



The Soldier on Smithdown Road