

My night with the Happy Hooker

She was a faded porn star. I was a struggling actor. Together we rocked Amsterdam

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Edinburgh, 1997. I've just finished a performance of my solo show *The Prince Of West End Avenue* when Amelia, my demure young stage manager, appears backstage ashen-faced and trembling: 'There's a... a... lady who says she needs to speak to you. It has to be right away!' Pacing the street outside the Assembly Rooms is a fabulously upholstered grande dame with vixen eyes and gunmetal-grey hair. Her sexual energy shimmers through a rainbow-hued tent dress.

An offer/demand is tendered in Dutch-accented English: 'My name is Xaviera Hollander. I am a writer. Come to Amsterdam. Stay at my house. You will perform your show in my front room for 60 people.' There is something familiar about those vixen eyes. Now I remember! They used to crown a column in *Penthouse* magazine: monthly advice on every imaginable sexual permutation. This is the woman who scaled the heights of the American sex industry, who rose from novice call girl to madam of New York's best-connected brothel, who wrote the ultimate porn bestseller.

I am being commanded to perform in the home of the Happy Hooker.

I mumble something noncommittal and flee in a taxi. My show cannot be performed in a front room. It's a proper play in which I act out all 14 characters. I need sound, lights and a stage manager. Her offer is ridiculous. Still, I can't resist considering it.

A voice, bellowing from the centre of my brain: 'Are you crazy, ya stupid schmuck? This shiksa will eat you for breakfast, then reach for a toothpick!' (The voice in my head is Jackie Mason, the Jewish comic, who functions as my sort of Fairy Godfather).

He's right, of course, but still. . .

Winter 1997: I receive an Xmas fax from Xaviera, full of upbeat news. She has lost weight, she's happy with her 'lady lover', a perfume is to be named after her. The show in her front room this year was the talk of the town. Can I set a date for my visit? I find myself agreeing to December '98, as a warm-up for my season at the Sydney Opera House in January '99.

We discuss money. Jackie Mason deadpans, 'With this lady, the words 'box-office split' take on a whole new meaning.' September 5, 1998: I purchase an Apple iMac computer with e-

mail facility. My first message is from Xaviera ('X'). She promises to send airfare soon from her Swiss bank account. Mmmmm - Swiss bank account. I begin to salivate like Homer Simpson.

My second e-mail is five pages of Jewish jokes, culled from X's website. It transpires that X is actually Jewish. Jackie is suitably shocked.

September 21: X is an insomniac. I get fresh e-mail every day, usually sent around 3am: my X Files are bulging. Her e-mails are warm and friendly, never sexual. Jackie screams, 'Mark my voids, ya little putz. She wants your skinny Jewish ass!'

September 22: The voice in my head is beginning to get to me. I track down the guy who performed in X's front room last year. 'She's great,' he tells me, 'but she lives in a different world. Make sure you set firm boundaries. She'll crush you if you let her.'

October 2: The Prince Of West End Avenue is a full-length play, a comic tragedy set in a Jewish retirement home on New York's Upper West Side. X e-mails me her latest plans for the evening's entertainment. First there's to be a warm-up act, followed by a break for food and drink. Then there's the main attraction - me. Followed by food and drink. Then there's a closing act. Followed by more food and drink.

The opener is a Yiddish folk singer, the closer a 'klezmer marimba player'. ('What exactly is a marimba, Xaviera?' 'Don't bother me with details.') Oy veh - it's going to be a Jewish Woodstock! The opening act, I'm informed, will make the audience weep with his tragic ballads. This is terrible news: my show is a comedy until the last half-hour. I tell X the folk singer is a huge mistake. She ignores me. Jackie Mason burbles, 'I won't say I told you so. I'll only say, didn't I tell you?'

November 19: I send copies of some of X's e-mails to my dad. He thinks this is the most exciting job I've had since I played a yeshiva student alongside Barbra Streisand in Yentl.

November 20: X e-mails me the publicity material she's sending the media. Nestled among my familiar film credits, I spy a new and puzzling one: it seems I also appeared alongside Judy Garland in The Wizard Of Oz.

'Where did you come up with this?' I e-mail. 'Please delete at once. I once recorded an audio cassette of The Wizard, but couldn't possibly have been in the film. I was born 13 years after it came out.' 'Dear K,' comes the reply, 'don't make such a big thing of it. You do play a man in his eighties, so let's not be too nit-picking!' 'Face it, kid,' says Jackie. 'You're a munchkin.'

December 2: Dream I am one of those teenage girls being stalked by a faceless fiend in a slasher movie.

December 11: Big trouble with the klezmer marimba player (X reports that a marimba is a sort of giant xylophone). She sends me a dozen pages of their increasingly rancorous e-mail

dispute. The marimba player demands space to sell his CDs, plus 'quality time' with Xaviera. What's worse, he wants to double his fee. He says the money is vital: he has seven kids to support. X responds that her 84-year-old mother is near death in the hospital (this is news to me). She accuses him of extortion. Marimba Man ignores this; he demands accommodation at her house, plus kosher food. Jackie is impressed.

December 14: X has resolved the dispute with Marimba Man. She also reports that she has sold 10 tickets to a group of Orthodox Jews. Kosher food will be prepared and served by a group of her Jewish gay friends. I fly off to Amsterdam tomorrow. To calm my nerves, I eat a thick bacon sarnie and drink a nice glass of milk.

December 15: Sonia (my director) and I are collected at Schiphol Airport by X's female lover, Dia. We are ferried back to a staid Amsterdam suburb in X's car, which sports a bumper sticker reading Support Wildlife: Vote For An Orgy. The house looks surprisingly respectable - no red flock wall paper and not a chaise longue in sight. 'More Golders Green than New York brothel,' murmurs Sonia. Yet I wonder how many erect nipples and winged phalluses adorn the walls of London NW11.

X shows me her room, pointing proudly to the photo of her current young male lover. He is kneeling beneath a woman in a black leather corset. Out of the woman's exposed crotch, a golden stream shoots into the young man's opened mouth. I feel an urgent urge to visit the toilet myself, if only to splash my face with cold water. I'm not in Kansas any more.

December 16. X exercises a form of benign dictatorship over her young men. They have spent the afternoon in the kitchen preparing mushroom vol-au-vents and kosher meatballs. A hefty man with Chinese eyes whispers to me excitedly in fractured English, 'You must simply please eat my balls before the night becomes finished.'

They have also transformed X's living room into a passable imitation of a theatre. A low wooden platform has been erected to form the stage, there are lights and chairs for 60 people, and a table functions as a box-office. I sip coffee from a BEWARE - SEX MANIAC mug and rehearse my show in front of Sonia and 60 empty seats. An hour before the show, the klezmer marimba player corners me backstage (by the kitchen fridge). He's a born-again Jew with burning brown eyes and curly sidelocks who was recruited through a Yiddish website. Normally, he's a busker; this could be his big break. I know a bad case of jealousy when I see one.

Marimba Man accosts me in guttural Noo Yawk-ese: 'Sooo. . . how's the big star? Nervous? Ya nervous, sport? Eh, sport?' I am bereft of a suitably robust response. Where is Jackie Mason when I really need him? The eyes and sidelocks are thrust menacingly close. His breath reeks of something frightening. A wedge of harsh Yiddish spews forth from foam-flecked lips and he smiles like a wolf.

'Do you know the old curse, sport? Allow me to translate: May you burn like a Sabbath candle!' He turns on his heel and vacates the kitchen. An acrid odour suddenly fills the air. The flames of hell, unleashed by his ancient words? To my relief, one of the entourage enters to rescue a batch of burning vol-au-vents. . . As the audience arrives, I peek out through the kitchen serving-hatch and observe. Half of them are respectable Jewish matrons accompanied by their obedient consorts.

Half are dedicated sexual libertarians, dressed in leather and gold. This 50:50 mix sums up the two halves of Xaviera herself. The Jewish contingent sit dutifully in their uncomfortable chairs and gaze straight ahead. The sexual libertarians laugh wildly, drink wine from plastic beakers, and suck on their joints (marijuana cigarettes, that is).

As the evening commences, I retreat to the kitchen. I can hear the first act draining the audience of every ounce of humour and goodwill with an endless joke about the Pope, followed by the world's longest, most sentimental folk song. Next, X mounts the platform. She sounds exhausted, she has a stinking cold, and her mother is ill. She tells a rambling tale about her meeting with an elderly Jewish Holocaust survivor, to whom she would have loved to dedicate the show but who died just last week. After much self-advertising, she finally introduces the big star. Let the comedy commence! Two hours later, The Prince Of West End Avenue finishes. To silence. Then a standing ovation and a chorus of, 'Bravo!' Just don't ask me how.

X mounts the tiny stage bearing a bouquet of flowers, which she thrusts into my arms. I stagger backwards into a table that holds a glass of lemon tea. The tea flies from the glass, the glass flies from the table and smashes into bits when it hits the stage. A dozen people shout a cheerful, 'Mazel Tov!' I remember that it's very good luck for a Jew to break a glass.

A weight lifts from my shoulders. The Curse of Marimba Man has been broken. I feel a desperate craving for warm beer and a burnt vol-au-vent.

Kerry Shale's audio-cassette reading of The Wizard Of Oz is published by Penguin.

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