L.A. Confidential

HIV panic seized straight porn last year. Now, with high-tech testing and condom catchup, the industry is rushing to prevent an epidemic.

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When the definitive history of that great American pastime pornography is penned, an entire chapter will be devoted to 1998. That was the year HIV took a wrecking ball to the wall of denial erected around the men and women who populate and copulate in California's San Fernando Valley -- the Hollywood of hetero humping.

It's a big business but a small world. The 250 studios in this smoggy suburban LA valley produce the majority of the 9,000 straight X-rated titles -- with sales of $3.5 billion -- released annually in the United States. Everybody knows everybody and every body; acquaintances are, by definition, lovers. The industry's stable of 400 or so performers makes up a kind of small-pond ecosystem, where a single harmful microorganism, once introduced, can threaten all life.

For 16 years HIV cast few shadows on these fast-buck fuck-fests. However quickly the virus panicked gay porndom -- popularizing condom use by the late '80s -- it was business as usual in the straight studios. The epidemic intervened rarely, most notably when John Holmes, the super-endowed bad-boy star of 2,274 porn films, tested positive in 1985 and died of AIDS three years later.

A careless set of precautions prevailed. The industry took the most cursory steps to protect its "talent" by relying only on ELISAs (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay, the standard HIV antibody test) for each actor every 30 to 90 days. Performers were issued "clean" health certificates, routinely photocopied to keep on file with each shoot. Some studios allowed condoms, but the common view that rubbers smother the lusty flames of video sex, coupled with stiff competition from rubberless Europeans, kept the majority of actors unsheathed.

"We played 24 hours a day, and the bell of responsibility never rang," says Bill Margold, a 27-year industry veteran turned producer and the founder of Protecting Adult Welfare (PAW), a triple-X crisis center. "We were aware HIV was out there, lurking, only we didn't think it could happen to us. People just didn't think of themselves as at risk."

Then came 1998, and first one, then three, then five infections. "It'll be known as the year that recess was over in the playpen of the damned," Margold says. "People got really freaked out."

The freakout commenced in January, when Tricia Devereaux, 23, a fresh-faced, bright-eyed Midwesterner, tested positive. Devereaux (she asked to be identified only by her porn name) was the canary in the carnal coal mine. Next it was reported that 25-year-old Brooke Ashley -- who starred, with 50 men, in *The World's Greatest Anal Gang Bang* -- tested positive. In April, long-timer Marc Wallice, who had some 1,500 titles under his belt, including *Anal Anarchy, Anal Savage* and *The Creasemaster,* got the bad news, as did single-name Euro-newcomer Caroline, of *Lewd Conduct, Part 1* fame. May brought word to veteran Kimberly Jade.

Tricia Devereaux, 23, has the cheerleader's wholesomeness that many men crave, even in their porn. Her most memorable starring role was likely *A Day in the Life of a Prostitute,* though fans also cite *Gregory Dark's Shocking Truths, Part I.* What was a nice girl like Devereaux doing in a place like the Valley? In late 1995, when Devereaux was a college student in Ohio, stripping at a local club to support herself and her then-husband, some visiting industry people invited her to Los Angeles. She did six movies in one weekend while also cramming for midterms. Over the next six months she flew out six more times, all expenses paid, made dozens of films and earned as much as $1,000 for each half-day scene. "My career took off, but not outrageously," she says. "I'm not one of your major stars, but people know my name."

Getting infected "devastated me," Devereaux says. "I feel bitter and betrayed." She had been routinely assured by producers that the established method of weeding out HIV positive actors was effective protection. Like everyone else, she took her ELISAs. "I was hoping beyond hope that it was anything but HIV," she says. Word of her infection spread like wildfire. "The clinic called my agent, and the agency knew before I did," she says. "I had to stop answering my phone that weekend because of all the calls. My ex-fiance [a porn director] knew in two hours." A second test confirmed it.

During her short career, Devereaux kept meticulous records "of everything I did, in every scene, in every movie, with every person." It was a habit of professionalism rather than a premonition of danger. "There's this whole personal-fan-club thing," she says. "It's almost a stalker mentality. Guys at conventions come up and say, 'You did this and this in that scene with so-and-so.' I needed to know as much about myself as those guys did!"

Devereaux's books fascinated Sharon Mitchell, locally famous as the industry's leader in the AIDS fight. "The attitude in this business toward HIV has always been ghastly," Mitchell, 41, says. "The denial is preposterous. We have high-risk categories the CDC never even heard of, like men sharing needles to inject erection drugs into their penises." She adds, "That was before Viagra, of course." The porn star-turned-HIV counselor saw the records as a "genealogy" of Devereaux's possible exposures to HIV. Poring over them with Margold, Mitchell worked round-the-clock to contact Devereaux's 75 on-screen sex partners and urged them to get tested. The crisis canceled the usual rules of HIV confidentiality. Companies' shoots were briefly shut down, and actors were quarantined until cleared as negative. As Mitchell and Margold learned of each performer's positive test result, they played connect the dots. "The genealogies we did were stellar," Mitchell says. "We reached a point where we could do one in under six hours. It was an incredible collective effort, and one that I have poured my life into."

Devereaux's genealogy pointed Mitchell directly toward Marc Wallice. Devereaux had worked with him twice in the fall of 1997, and had never worked with the other three women who tested positive; she also says she never shot up drugs and had sex with only one man outside the industry, who's HIV negative.

Soon an industry backlash dubbed Wallice "Patient Zero," and rumors flew that he used needles or did gay outcalls; that he had known he was positive for a year, and forged negative test results. But Mitchell dismisses the gossip as irrelevant, and Devereaux herself refuses to cast blame: "I wanted to be able to tell everyone, 'Hey, I got this outside the business. You don't need to worry.'" Many in the industry were only too eager to encourage this view. "They were too scared to admit it was coming from within our circle," she says. "Many still don't want to believe it was from Marc. They realize 'I could have gotten it from him too.'"

Marc Wallice is long and lanky, a soft-spoken, hard-luck kind of guy, who started in porn 17 years ago, when Tricia Devereaux was in kindergarten. "It was great back then," says Wallice, 39. "We felt like rebels. Every time you went to work it was like going to a little party with family and friends, and getting paid, too. A day at the beach."

Wallice says that the threat of HIV occurred to most straight actors only when testing began in 1990. "It was just something you shrugged off," he recalls. "You figured, 'It'll never be me.' And when everyone tested negative at first, we thought, 'All right! It doesn't affect us.'"

But last March, Mitchell came knocking on his door. "I had no clue," he says. "I was very surprised when those girls came up positive. I was linked to them sexually, so I had to have tests done," he says. "All the rumors about me knowing I was positive are ridiculous. I'd worked with 10 girls a month and got ELISAs every three months."

Wallice got tested, and then vanished from sight. "I didn't want to know. I spent six weeks saying, 'Fuck everybody,' checked into a hotel and spent every penny on cocaine," he says. "I went through $6,000. I had fun. I ignored everything, like it wasn't happening." But when he came down, "I said, 'Oh man, I'm fucking HIV positive. Life is over as I know it.' I'd been making lots of money. To have that shut down with nothing to do and nowhere to go was beyond intense."

In April 1998, while Wallice was hiding from his ELISA, industry leaders called an emergency meeting at the Sportsmen's Lodge, on Ventura Boulevard, in the heart of the Valley. More than 300 people -- triple-X producers, directors, actors, distributors, video-store owners -- packed a ballroom usually reserved for weddings and bar mitzvahs to talk about sex, death and latex. With grim resolve, Sharon Mitchell announced that Wallice had tested positive. "I hadn't had a face-to-face disclosure with him yet, but I had hundreds of people at risk," she says. "I had no choice."

After hours of debate, a consensus emerged. Despite grumblings over the presumed financial downside, 13 of the producers, including those from the biggest studios such as VCA Productions, Video Team, Afro-Centric Productions and Vivid Video agreed to better protection for their talent. They instituted new condom-only policies for anal and vaginal intercourse as well as mandatory PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests, which detect HIV DNA in the blood, have a shorter window

period and are more accurate than ELISAs.

Soon after the Sportsmen's Lodge powwow, Mitchell founded the nonprofit Adult Industry Medical Healthcare (AIM) to offer AIDS-related care, support and education as well as to track rates of infection. "We formed an agency in an outbreak," she says. "The talent in this industry has always been viewed as expendable. AIM can't motivate people, but it can give them information to help save their lives. Sure, a little compliance from producers and manufacturers would help."

Mitchell began meeting with doctors to set up PCR testing of all actors. "When you're working with 40 people a month, an ELISA test every six months just doesn't cut it," she says. "Imagine the number of people potentially exposed in six months." PCR tests are now given monthly, and any two consecutive negatives are considered OK to work. Actors get certificates with raised seals for authenticity, no photocopies. "We call it 'No feel, no deal,'" says Bill Margold. Anyone testing positive is prohibited from performing in a sex scene. "In the straight industry, a positive test result means an actor is out of the business," says Mitchell. "Companies offered the actors who tested positive other jobs in the industry. We do look after our own, but not as damn good as we could."

This is a sentiment Jeffrey Laurence, MD, director of AIDS research at New York Hospital, would agree with. He dismisses the use of PCRs sans latex for prevention as "ridiculous. The way that PCR is done, the virus has a window of opportunity of seven to 10 days. A PCR every 30 days may be marginally better than an ELISA, but the only effective prevention is a condom."

Mitchell acknowledges these limitations. "We know the holes. But without PCR, it's amazing how many people would be exposed," she says. "Each time someone takes a PCR test at AIM, they sign a partner-notification release. I get written permission so I can do a genealogy. We're way into the solution." In fact, since May 1998 no new industry infections have been reported.

Whether mandatory monthly PCRs will protect the sexual ecology of this unique culture remains to be seen. But one thing is certain: The weaker the condom code, the worse the chances. According to insiders like former porn star Nina Hartley, now a producer-director of "condom positive" X-rated movies, about 30 percent of studios require latex, while "half the producers don't encourage condom use, but they accept it. About 20 percent say, 'No condom' -- but they're the basement companies." Mitchell calls them "the little guys who get girls right off the bus," and adds, "Those are the ones that drive me crazy."

Safe Sex 101 has been a considerable success, according to Mitchell. "Since last year's outbreak, the industry has changed tremendously," she says. "The environment has become aware. The girls want to partake in their health care." Hartley agrees, pointing out that the community has incorporated latex in a spirit of pride, if not solidarity. "They now realize, 'This is the pool I'm in. If I'm going to stay in it, I'm going to have to deal,'' she say. "For men, it's become a sign of studliness to be versatile enough to wear condoms. It's like, 'I can fuck and use a condom and still keep my dick hard.'" For women, who have more to fear, it's more complicated. "Women have to learn to stand up and say, 'No condom, no scene.' For some, just being told they're allowed to is

all they need."

Although women performers may not be mobilizing as a political force, they increasingly recognize their position in the industry. As Mark Kearns, an editor at *Adult Video News,* the LA-based trade monthly, says, “Ultimately, women have the power because they sell the project. They might be able to ignore the crew, camera and lights. But who can ignore the fact that you might be getting a deadly disease?”

The millions of men who watch porn, for one. While no polls have been taken, the prevailing view is that straight men like their small-screen sex skin to skin. “They don’t want to watch the NFL play touch football,” says PAW condom crusader Bill Margold. “It’s supposed to be a vicarious thrill -- sex without a net. The net they can get at home.”

There’s no net at studios like Legend and Extreme, where condoms are banned (though PCR testing is required). “The companies going condom-only are just trying to be P.C. And it won’t work,” says Legend’s Jeff Steward. “A movie that relies on sex will sink with a condom.”

While this assumption is apparently supported by the fact that over the past year, the number of latex-only companies has fallen from 13 to nine, condom converts such as Russell Hampshire, owner of powerhouse VCA Productions, say that their sales have not been affected.

Whether this success will be undermined by no-rubber companies’ efforts to capitalize on their competitors’ caution is a question. JM Productions’ ads in the trade press, for example, feature a cartoon man strangling a life-size condom, with the tagline “No Fucking Condoms!!!” And Extreme runs an ad touting itself as “The Bareback Vigilante: We Never Use Condoms.”

Many in the industry, not least the actors, publicly bad-mouth this anti-rubber rhetoric. It is especially galling to Tricia Devereaux. “I obviously wish I’d never gotten infected,” she says. “If other performers would learn from it, it would mean something. But when I see these companies bragging that they don’t use condoms, it disgusts me.”

Yet Mitchell warns against any rush to judgment. She says that Extreme, which has an account at AIM, not only tests its actors every 14 days (as opposed to the standard 30) but is one of the few companies that covers the $85 PCR fee for its talent. “They don’t want to be accused of someone blindly walking into the high-risk situations they put people in,” she says. “It’s not like a girl gets hired and gets badgered into not using a condom. These companies are clear about it. They’re being as responsible as they can, considering.” And to the many cynics who dismiss the porn industry as a machine of exploitation devoid of responsibility and self-respect, Mitchell says: “We’re in the middle of a transition here. It’s like when we went from organized crime to paying taxes. If we got through that, we can get through a little health care.”

Others are less confident. “For condom-only policies across the board, it’ll take more infections to turn up,” says Wallice, who has found editing and other off-camera work in the industry. “HIV was big for a moment, and now it’s back to normal. No one is scared.” Devereaux adds: “A few friends quit for a while because they were shaken up, but most went back. That’s a pattern when there’s

an HIV scare. Or people start using condoms, then migrate back to no condoms."

But not Devereaux. She has said goodbye to all that. "Firemen and policemen don't go to funerals because it reminds them that they could die in the line of duty," she says of her role as the industry's wakeup call. "I thought people wouldn't want to even look at me because I'd remind them of what could happen to them." For Devereaux "it was time to leave LA."

That meant coming home, to family, friends and a small Midwestern town -- where she keeps her HIV status a secret. "This small town would crucify her," says Devereaux's mother, who minces no words when the subject turns to porn. "I love my daughter, but I hate Tricia Devereaux. We always told her to get the hell out of the porn business. She wouldn't have HIV if she had." Even Devereaux's brother initially hinted that she might not be welcome in his house. "I was heartbroken," she says. "But he changed his mind real quick after seeing me -- I was still his little sister." Few people outside her family know. Devereaux had to rely on the Internet to find a doctor, and has never visited the local hospital's HIV support group.

But only a woman intent on coming out of hiding would pose on the cover of *POZ.* "As far as I know, there is no place in this town that has access to *POZ,*" Devereaux says. "I'm not planning on staying here anyway. I'll either go to grad school or, if I'm shunned out of my community, move back to LA. I could do extra work, obviously in mainstream movies." But the small screen still seems to hold the most allure for Devereaux, who wants to have children one day. "Did you see the storyline on *Chicago Hope* with the HIV positive woman who wants to have a baby?" she asks excitedly. "I was like, 'This is so cool!' I guess if I was lucky enough to get a soap opera part or something, I'd be incredibly happy."

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