

NONFICTION

A Biography of a Feminist Porn Pioneer Bares All

In “Candida Royalle and the Sexual Revolution,” the historian Jane Kamensky presents a raw personal — and cultural — history.

By Rich Juzwiak

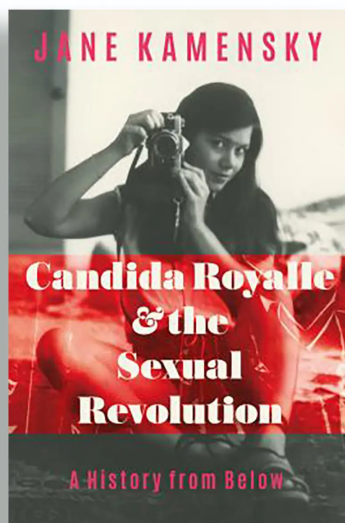
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March 12, 2024

CANDIDA ROYALLE AND THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION: A History From Below, by Jane Kamensky

The idea on which Candida Royalle’s legend rests was as simple as it was brilliant. In 1984, the porn performer and eventual director-producer co-founded Femme Productions with a single goal: to explore women’s fantasies. The hope of Royalle and partner Lauren Niemi was to change porn “from within,” as Royalle explained on a TV show, via “egalitarian” images portraying “regular, joyful lovemaking.”

Emphasizing foreplay and “afterglow,” and avoiding porn’s penchant for proof of male climax, Femme courted a female audience (a widely ignored demographic at the time), featuring material that was somewhere between R- and X-rated. In “Candida Royalle and the Sexual Revolution,” Jane Kamensky, a history professor at Harvard, fleshes out the story.



Royalle was born Candice Vadala in 1950, and she came of age during the sexual revolution. She joined the Women's Liberation Collective of the Bronx Coalition at age 19, and by 1975 (three years after "Deep Throat" had made adult films chic) she was filming porn loops in San Francisco. It was "quick \$ so that I can go after what I want," per one of her diary entries.

She would eventually appear in more than 40 adult films and describe herself as a "porn queen." In front of the camera and then behind it, her work coincided with the attacks on the industry from both the right wing and radical feminists like Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. But there was solidarity, too: Royalle and her peers, including the performer Annie Sprinkle and the High Society publisher Gloria Leonard, formed the de facto support group (and eventual performance art collective) Club 90.

In Kamensky's estimation, Royalle's was "a profoundly, uniquely 20th-century American life, a life like no other, and also like every other." Her finger wasn't merely on the cultural pulse; her body throbbed in sync with the times.

As the title implies, the book interweaves intimate biography and cultural history. Royalle's life story is culled from interviews and a careful excavation of her papers, housed at Harvard Radcliffe Institute; Kamensky reports that she's the first person to access the archive.

From the age of 12, Royalle kept a diary, and her self-reporting is at least as intimate as anything she put into the world publicly. There are bouts of gonorrhea, a hepatitis C diagnosis, multiple abortions, prolific drug use (including a debilitating heroin habit), a suicide note. Royalle writes about her father's abuse of her sister — and her own ensuing despondency. "Why not me?" she wondered.

Kamensky's ambitious project — in which she moves between this raw portraiture and more formal cultural reporting — is a challenging one; she is at pains to avoid ascribing pat reasons for Royalle's choices, while still providing ample context. At times the shifting focus can be disorienting. Royalle's first-grade class picture becomes the jumping-off point for a chapter that touches on the Cold War, Elvis Presley's momentous appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show" and the greater culture's wary regard of teenage girls.

Kamensky's biography has so many stops and starts that at moments reading it amounts to journeying through a life during rush hour. And though the language remains playful and clear even when saturated with information, the resulting density can nonetheless turn the experience into homework.

But that is likely the author's point: Her rigor and thoroughness demand that the reader take seriously an underdog who made her name in a stigmatized industry. This book is a labor of empathy that refuses to simplify or valorize its subject. Included are examples of Royale's immature homophobic and antisemitic comments, vainglorious declarations ("I am an innovator. I have changed the world!"), a lot of hand-wringing over ever getting involved in porn in the first place and a nearly lifelong fixation on men's attention.

Though Femme did command a fair amount of (mostly adult) press, and Royale became a TV and lecture-circuit fixture for her ability to articulate alternate methods within the world of pornographic film, her movie revenue was far from blockbuster, and by her mid-40s she was, in her own words, "a single woman alone who owns no property, no investments, nothing of any real value." She died of ovarian cancer at 64.

But Kamensky asserts Royale's importance. Her revolution never fully revolutionized porn — which in many ways has become more intense and less sensitive — but she left in her wake the opportunity for women to be taken seriously behind the camera; six out of 10 nominees of this year's AVN Award — porn's Oscars — for "Outstanding Directing" are women. And Royale's outspokenness helped normalize the concept of feminist porn.

In a 1981 pitch to several magazines and newspapers, Royale wrote that women in the industry had "long been misunderstood" and "put down," adding, "I would like to help change that." Kamensky not only lays bare her subject's M.O., she aids in its realization. What's more, "Candida Royale and the Sexual Revolution" is a fulfillment of one of Royale's unmet goals: to tell her life story in a book.

CANDIDA ROYALLE AND THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION: A History From Below | By Jane Kamensky | Norton | 512 pp. | \$35