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Angela Robinson Power Steering

By Candace Moore

Director/writer Angela Robinson will take Hollywood by storm this fall with the release of her lesbian-themed, spy-styled romantic comedy *D.E.B.S.*, due out as a feature length through Sony Pictures Screen Gems. Currently helming Disney's blockbuster-to-be *HERBIE*, a 21st century NASCAR adventure starring that beloved white Volkswagen, Robinson started out as a struggling *POWER UP* grant hopeful, fresh out of film school, just four years ago. A little short film-that-could and the right networking opportunities changed her career.

I meet with Robinson at the studio offices of *HERBIE* in Pasadena. Pictures of VWs are tacked up everywhere and we pass one of the Love Bugs used for shooting in the parking garage on our way to grab Cuban food. Over ice teas and while negotiating plantains, we chat about how she got into the driver's seat.



On the set of *D.E.B.S.* the short with Jill Ritchie and Tammy Lynn Michaels

Candace Moore: You studied theatre as an undergraduate, at Brown University, right? What sparked your interest in directing and writing for film?

Angela Robinson: I started primarily in theatre. I had done theatre all through high school and at Brown, and wanted to be a theatre director, so after undergrad I moved to New York. There, I worked at Playwrights Horizons and Second Stage and I ran an off, off, off-Broadway queer theatre company. I was the co-artistic director and we tried to support gay theatre and plays. I did a show called *GIRL TRASH*, which was fun...

C: 'Camp' is obviously an element throughout your work.

A: *Camp's* the origin of a lot of stuff. That project took different texts with lesbian storylines throughout time—from the '20s, the '50s, the '70s, etc.—and played them straight, so that they became very ridiculous to stage. For instance, we adapted this novel, *THE LOVELIEST OF FRIENDS* which was

absurd and melodramatic. My day job then was working as an assistant to a producer at an off-Broadway theatre company, and at night I would go and work on these plays. It got to be where it would be four in the morning, in the freezing cold, I was painting the theatre black. I just thought there has got to be a better way...

C: It was hard to live...



A: I don't think you can really do theatre in New York anymore and not starve without being independently wealthy. The economics of it were also upsetting—tickets were \$75 and \$95—so the only people that had access to seeing the plays were people with money. Theatre in New York was drying up and there were suddenly all of these sitcom stars on Broadway. The whole thing was grim—the NEA was slashing funding for what we were trying to do—I didn't think it was possible to make a living, and I wanted my work to reach a broader audience. I often felt like I was preaching to the converted. I remember I watched that episode of *FRIENDS* where the lesbian moms have a baby...

C: Oh, Ross's ex-wife and her partner...

A: Yeah, and I thought, thirty million people just watched that episode. That did more for gay rights in a half hour, than marching up and down 5th Avenue's done in a decade. It reached more people, and has done more arguably good. I decided, both for personal reasons and to try to get my work out there, that film would be a better medium. So I applied to film schools and I ended up going to NYU.

C: I read an article in the LA Times recently about how the general public's opinion of gays and lesbians has become significantly better in the last fifteen years in America, based on polls on gay rights issues from the late '80s compared to polls now, and I think that's directly related to more positive portrayals in the media, in television particularly...

"I moved here four years ago. I worked the night shift at a trailer house from 5 p.m. to 4 a.m. in the morning."



From the short film *D.E.B.S.* Lucy and Amy hook up

A: I do too.

C: Viewers seem to feel like they know the characters they see depicted personally—it's almost as if TV characters have become people's "Friends," because nowadays people are living within their television sets...

A: I think the media's key. I don't think you can underestimate how much power it has.

C: So you ended up putting aside your initial love, theatre, and began working on something that you thought could be more significant or far-reaching: film. When you got out of film school, did you know that you were going to move to Los Angeles?

A: I did. There were two contingents at NYU. Most people wanted to work in European-based, independent film and stay in New York. I wanted to do big Hollywood movies and work within the studio system. I was a minority actually. So I knew I was moving to LA and that was my goal.

"I had been through the Hollywood ringer and was really depressed and not getting anywhere. It was my dream to do this, I think that I was ready to, and POWER UP gave me the opportunity."

C: When did you graduate?

A: I'm still not technically graduated... (smiles)

C: You haven't finished your final project!?! (laughs)

A: That's where POWER UP came in. It's so financially ridiculous, nearly impossible, to make films. I strung myself out on credit cards, making my shorts. But you needed to make one more short film to graduate, and I categorically refused to spend my own money making another short, because it's \$25,000 minimum.

C: And you're already paying for your education...

A: It's outrageous.

C: What was the first short film you made like?

A: The first short I did was called CHICKULA, TEENAGE VAMPIRE, a mock '50s horror trailer about a lesbian vampire who was seducing/making vampires of the local high school.

C: 'High School' is another running theme in your work!

A: 'High School' is another theme. It's all playing out! Next I made a ten minute documentary called READY, OKAY, which was on the Long Island High School Cheerleading Championships, a couple years before BRING IT ON. And then a film called THE KINSEY THREE, about a trio of bisexual art thieves, which was kind of AUSTIN POWERS-y. I kept doing these things and then there'd be a big movie... So I felt if I could

just get ahead of the curve, I could make a living. THE KINSEY THREE was the last film I did at school, and the one that broke my financial back. I decided that I wouldn't make another short unless someone else paid for it.

C: Were you still in New York when you applied for the POWER UP grant?

A: No, I had moved to LA. I moved here four years ago. I worked the night shift at a trailer house from 5 p.m. to 4 a.m. in the morning. They were crazy hours and your job was to load movies into the computer and digitize footage—stuff like that. There was some cutting but it was mostly assistant editor work and often you'd load in a movie in real time, so I wouldn't watch the movie, I'd write madly in between. Usually I'd try to get all of my work done in the first few hours and then from one in the morning until four in the morning I'd write the screenplay I was working on. You had to be there anyway, so I found it more helpful to write in that way than to just wake up and sit in front of a computer. That's how I supported myself: these odd jobs. I also wrote with a writing partner for a couple of years. We got paid to write this one piece for the Sci Fi channel about witches, so I met a lot of witches...

C: You met witches! As research?

A: We had questions we wanted to ask, so the Sci Fi channel paid for a dinner with witches. They had people representing Wicca and Chaos Magic and Druids and Sex

Magic, all these different poles of magic. They brought out sandwiches and the witches sat around and had a feast and we videotaped it. They're all very normal people. It was great. But it's those times when you're like - I have a weird job.

C: How did you become involved with POWER UP?

A: I was friends with Jamie Babbit who did BUT I'M A CHEERLEADER. I had known her back in New York and Andrea Sperling too, the producer who ended up producing D.E.B.S., and they encouraged me to apply for a POWER UP grant with an idea I had pitched them years before. They said, "You should dig out that script you did." And it got picked!

C: Lee Rose [A GIRL THING] was your writing/directing mentor on the short D.E.B.S. How was it working with her?

A: She was fantastic. She really helped me get over a kind of writing hump and cracked the idea of D.E.B.S. for me.

C: Were you surprised with the attention that the short got? I know you won awards at Gay and Lesbian festivals all over the country.

A: I was really excited by the response to it. I felt like I weirdly wasn't able to participate in much of the festival run of the short. I didn't travel and get to enjoy the reception. We were already in production with the feature length of D.E.B.S., so after Sundance I lost track. I'd get these emails, like it won a festival here or there, but I was so busy. It's too bad, because I really like watching films with a gay audience, because I made it for them, and it's this great reward for the work.

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C: Did you pitch D.E.B.S. as a possible feature, or did someone see the short and ask you to work on a full length?

A: I had written the script while in post production on the short. The last time I made a short, I had some interest about expanding it into a feature, but I didn't have a script ready, so that interest just died. I was determined to not let that happen again and really frantically writing the feature. I wanted it to be that if you liked the short, then you'd like the full length, and we can do it for this budget, 2-4 million dollars. That way there weren't any huge leaps of faith, it was just a really cut and dry efficient decision.

C: You had a business proposal.

A: Exactly. We premiered the short at the Power Premiere. It was great. I met this guy Larry Kennar, a manager and producer at Anonymous Content, and he assaulted me in the lobby and said "ANGELA ROBINSON, come in to my office." So I went into his office and said that I wanted to be the female Sam Raimi to see what he would do with that, and he was like "THAT I can do!" He was really funny, he said "Women action directors—where'd they all go?" He was really into the idea of me as an action director. I was broke, and so he got me a job at THE L WORD.

C: He got you that job? You wrote the script for the episode with Tammy Lynn Michaels as Shane's psycho-one night stand, right? That was funny.

A: Well he introduced me to Ilene [Chaiken, creator of THE L WORD]. She was at the Power Premiere because they were doing the show's roll out. She said she wanted a comic voice in the room for The L Word and we had a good meeting, so they hired me as a staff writer.

C: While expanding D.E.B.S. from a short into a feature length—how has it evolved? It seems like the short was a quirky spoof, but you didn't get into the characters as much as you would obviously with a feature length.

A: The short was a spoof of a WB show basically...

C: With a CHARLIE'S ANGELS kind of feel...

A: Kind of, but it was a mock of a TV show, and it had the "Previously..." and everything. This was one TV show of a larger serialized entity.

C: Did you conceive of it as a possible television show?

A: It was just as a short, as a spoof. It could be a fun TV show, though! While I was working on the short, I thought, wouldn't it be funny if the hero and the villain were in love and that they had to pretend she was kidnapped to carry out their affair?

C: Again and again and again....

A: And the gag was that nobody's catching on to the fact that they were doing it again and again and again. Adapting D.E.B.S. into a feature, I tried to expand on the wrong side of the tracks romance between the two characters, so that it became much more of a classic teen romantic comedy, but set in this crazy spy world. I kept the original premise, but backed up and imagined how the two main characters, Amy, who's a D.E.B. and Lucy, who's a criminal, met. I also didn't think that the high style of the short could sustain itself over a feature, so I had to make the characters and the action style more realistic because I didn't want it to be a super campy movie. I wanted to make something that was accessible and sweet and realistic to a point. In the movie the D.E.B.S. are the antagonists, they're the friends in the high school comedy who don't want you to be with who you are with. Their strict organization acts as the obstacle to Amy and Lucy being together.



Sundance 2003 Alexis Fish, Lisa Thrasher, Stacy Codikow, Angela Robinson, Andrea Sperling & Jamie Babbitt

C: So what are the D.E.B.S., as super spies, fighting for?

A: They're fighting for justice and peace. Whereas Lucy is a criminal, a diamond thief. I had to make her a comic book villain, but the reality of it is just that she's misunderstood. She's not really that bad, at heart she's just LOVEABLE! This kind of goes back to the satire or camp that I began with.

C: You've been so busy! Right now you're directing HERBIE for Disney. How is that going? I'm assuming there's no gay content in that, right, it's more of a mainstream movie...

A: What's funny about that is that it's kind of a coming out movie. Even the producers described it as such. Certainly the marketing is not going to reflect that but its true thematically. That's what attracted it to me. It's all about girl empowerment: Lindsay Lohan plays a girl who wants to be a race car driver and her dad won't let her. So she lives a secret life and dresses up as a boy so that she can race cars and at the end she has to stand up for herself and make her dad accept her for who she really is. Lesbian subject matter is sort of running through it. It's not a gay movie per se, but there are certain things that resonate. It's a girl-power SEABISCUIT with a car. (laughs)

C: Do you feel like you were able to get this job because of the success of D.E.B.S.?

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A: *Oh definitely. I had been through the Hollywood ringer and was really depressed and not getting anywhere. It was my dream to do this, I think that I was ready to, and POWER UP gave me the opportunity. I was able to make a short film produced in a really professional way. I started my relationship with Angela Sperling, an amazing producer. It also stemmed from that night at the Power Premiere, from meeting Larry, who got me the job on THE L WORD and sent D.E.B.S., the short and the feature, to Clint Culpepper of Sony Screen Gems over the Christmas holidays. We met with Clint right before we left for Sundance 2003, and he said he'd make the movie. The short did really well at Sundance and went to Berlin. We spent the next year making the feature of D.E.B.S., we premiered it at Sundance 2004, and it went to Berlin again where we won a Teddy, an audience award. And I met with Disney and got the job on HERBIE right after Sundance. One thing happened right after another. You could link it all back to POWER UP.*

C: What's your next project, are you writing something new?

A: *I'm writing a companion to D.E.B.S. called PINK THUNDER, which is about Lucy's life and friends. It's the Legion of Doom to the D.E.B.S.'s Superfriends! So, I hope to make that after making HERBIE.*

C: Well good luck with everything!

A: Thank you.

POWER UP member Candace Moore is a contributing editor and monthly film critic for Girlfriends Magazine, and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Critical Studies at UCLA's Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media.

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