

(Sex) Toy Stories

Our writer takes in the giggles and the good vibrations at a couple of women-only sex-toy parties.

By Jenni Laidman

Nicole Cissell draws the curtains in the small but elegant living room. Moments later, through the sheers, I see two police officers approach the front door. I knew this was a little naughty, but really, the police?

It's a Friday night in late summer, and Cissell had just emptied a gun case onto a table in the living room of a Smoketown home. What in the world will the police think when that door opens? I'm not the only one wondering this, and laughter grows raucous among the women in the room.

Beneath a dazzling chandelier are a dozen festively colored vibrators and dildos that Cissell toted here in her gun case. It's not illegal. (We're not in Alabama, for pity sake; it *is* illegal there.) It's just a bunch of women attending a version of a Tupperware party that the inventors of multi-level marketing schemes probably didn't envision.

Julia Shultz, the home's owner, slips out the side door and waylays the police before they ring the doorbell. No, this isn't a bust. Someone accidentally tripped the home's security alarm. The police leave without incident.

OK, it would have been a better story had we all been arrested, or had we, at the very least, been able to watch the officers' response to B.O.B — the Battery-Operated Boyfriend, one of the vibrators arrayed on the coffee table. But, really, they probably wouldn't have been scandalized. Quite possibly one of their wives or girlfriends has attended, or even hosted, a party like this.

Mark yourself as completely out-of-the-loop if you didn't know that sex-toy parties are big business in Louisville. Cissell, the Old Louisville resident who makes her living as a distributor for Pure Romance Inc. of Loveland (no kidding), Ohio, says Pure Romance has been around since 1993. Last year, it racked up \$100 million in sales, and it is hardly alone. *Inc.* magazine estimates sex-toy sales account for \$2 billion in spending every year. A quick Internet search found at least nine companies offering home sex-toy parties in Louisville, including Fantasy Inc., a 28-year-old LaGrange company.

A few days later, Cissell wears a tan dress with a ruffled neckline and a full skirt to another gathering, this one a Saturday afternoon party. With her brown rectangular glasses and long brown hair pinned back loosely, she looks like any other businesswoman, just one who happens to carry most of her equipment in bright magenta bags. She and Lisa Harris, who hopes

to become a sex-toy consultant soon, haul the bags into the small furniture-jammed house in Germantown where Jessica Smith will celebrate her 25th birthday with friends and family.

Cissell holds up a blue vibrator called Control Freak. It is shaped like a dolphin.

"I'll never be able to go to an aquarium again," Amanda Singhiser moans.

Cissell demonstrates how the shaft of a lurid red vibrator bends at least 30 degrees and rotates.

"You can use it to stir your coffee," she says.

It's a funny thing: For the many ways we seem casual about sex, for the consistency with which it is the major driver in television and movie plots, for all the explicit song lyrics, sex remains giggle territory. We're nearly as freshly delighted, embarrassed, uncomfortable and curious about it as we were when we first realized that maybe Mom and Dad did it more than once per kid.

Culturally, we remain sexual adolescents. We fumble between knowing sophistication and silliness. Sure, Oprah discussed vibrators on her show, and the women of *Sex in the City* made the Rabbit vibrator famous during the show's first season. But in real life, discussions of such things are strictly best-girlfriend talk (you know, like Carrie and her friends), if the issue is broached at all. We're more comfortable than we were, but we don't leave our vibrators on the nightstand if company will be throwing their coats on the bed. At least not on purpose.

Guests always arrive late at sex-toy parties, say both Cissell and Tricia McDowell of Fantasy Inc. It gives the hostess time to make sure the men are out of the house. On this particular afternoon, Smith's father is sent to the garage.

Was he at all uncomfortable with the fact that his two daughters would be reviewing intercourse and masturbation equipment? "My dad couldn't care less," Jessica says.

(Continued on page 60)



Distributor Nicole Cissell with some of her gal-goods. Photo by John Nation

(Continued from page 58)

In Smoketown, Schultz's husband hangs out down the street with friends. Men aren't welcome at Pure Romance parties, although other companies, including Fantasy Inc., offer co-ed parties. "Men always think we're sitting around in lingerie trying stuff out on each other," Cissell says.

"That's exactly what they said!" Schultz says. "Why would they think that?"

Cissell responds drolly: "Yeah, that's my job. I work in lingerie and sample toys on other women."

It seems men are no good at the whole sex-toy party thing. Cissell allows them to join their significant other in the ordering room — always a private space in the home. "Usually they're so embarrassed, they just give their credit card to their wife or girlfriend and say, 'Let me know when you need me to sign,' and leave the room."

The weird thing is, sex toys have long been male territory. As recently as the 1990s, many catalogs were naked-lady land, aimed at an audience with a primary interest in naked-lady viewing. An Adam & Eve catalog from 1995, with page upon page of vibrators, features a woman on the cover holding her own bowling-ball breasts as though they might fall off, while many hands in black plastic gloves grasp her legs. Despite the creepy assault, her expression is deeply serene. Open the catalog and nearly every page includes multiple images of gymnastic sex acts. Sexy lingerie is advertised as a "gift set."

Clearly, women weren't the target demographic.

McDowell hands me the Fantasy Inc. catalog. She's having a quick smoke before her Saturday-night party starts. Dressed casually in black Capri pants and a silk shirt, her hair is streaked with magenta highlights. She's been a Fantasy representative for eight years, and on this stifflingly hot evening, she'll show the company wares to a trailer-home full of women in their mid-20s to late-40s. The Fantasy Inc. catalog cover features a dewy red rose and a cartoon cupid. The Pure Romance catalog leaves even fewer cues, with photos of fully clothed, attractive, middle-class women. It could be a brochure for home decor or makeup; you just can't tell. The message: Look, girlfriend, people just like you buy massive fuchsia 10-speed vibrators with clitoral stimulating devices shaped like hummingbirds.

Debra Herbenick, the associate director at Indiana University's Center for Sexual Health Promotion, studies the sex-party phenomenon. She says many of these home-party companies actually repackage the products before sending them to customers. "If you go into a store, you'll

often see vibrators packaged with sort of pornstar looking women on the cover. But at a home party, you'll never find that," Herbenick says.

"A lot of women tell stories of boyfriends or husbands bringing home vibrators in (porn-like) packages, and it makes them upset or feel threatened. But packaged in a more attractive way, they're more open to it," she says.

Herbenick's recent study on vibrator use, published this summer in the *Journal of Sexual Medicine*, showed 52 percent of the 3,800 women surveyed in a national sample used a vibrator. And the *Louisville Magazine* survey presented on these pages found that 68 percent of respondents answered "yes" when asked if they have ever used a vibrator, whether alone or with a partner.

For the many ways we seem casual about it, for the consistency with which it is the major driver in TV and movie plots, sex remains giggle territory.

This is quite a change. When Shere Hite conducted her famous survey on women's sexual practices in the supposedly swinging 1970s, vibrator use was rare, with less than 1 percent of women acknowledging such an experience. And a study in 1992 of 18- to 59-year-old women showed only 17 percent found the use of a vibrator or dildo somewhat or very appealing.

In fact, a 1974 article in the *Journal of Popular Culture* quoted physicians saying only a few "sexually dysfunctional females" used vibrators or dildos. Leading sex therapists of the time, who recommended vibrator use for women unable to achieve orgasm any other way, still worried that their patients might become addicted to their mechanical buddy. And even today, a few clinicians fret that vibrators may numb women to non-mechanical arousal — a contention that Herbenick notes is little more than superstition, without supporting data.

The parties I attend follow a pattern that begins with foreplay and ends with heavy equipment. In some ways, the parties resemble wedding showers, with games lightening the mood — but instead of yelling "Bingo!" players shout a phrase one might cry while having sex, a phrase someone else wrote down previously without knowing that a friend would be yelling it.

"Don't stop!"

"Harder! Harder!"

"Oh God, Mick!"

Most partygoers quickly acclimate to all the

sex talk during the party's first half, where the products are lubricants, massagers and fuzzy handcuffs. The consultants dab lotions on the wrists of the partygoers, potions with names heavy on the double entendre: Whipped, Sensations, Lickity Stiff. There are "performance enhancers" called Great Head and Like A Virgin, and beauty products like Body Bling (described as "edible vanilla flakes of shimmering gold"). During a break, McDowell, of Fantasy Inc., has two women try out clitoral stimulating creams. One woman of 25, who already looks as though she'd rather be caged with rabid badgers than at this party, seems terrified that anyone might ask her what the cream feels like. The blush on her cheek is embarrassment, not arousal. But such discom-

fort is an exception and the other guests don't pick on her. This Germantown party on a steamy Saturday afternoon is full of witty, ribald humor, and the partygoers include a mother and her two daughters (something that would surprise one of the sex therapists I mentioned it to).

Mary Rudd says her daughter Jessica "told me I had to be here."

"My mom is so cool," Jessica Smith says.

Experts in human sexuality say these parties play a role in putting women at ease with their sexuality. Amanda Singhiser and Holly Wright, guests at one of Cissell's parties, seem comfortable. At one point, they pick up vibrators and begin fencing.

Then there's the naughty patter to help one embrace personal lustfulness.

"How many party virgins tonight?" Cissell asks. "I'll pop your cherries tonight. I'll try to be real gentle."

McDowell tells her partygoers an involved tale about wearing clitoral jewelry on a trip to the grocery store. The jewelry looks a little scary, sort of like a silver bobby pin or a roach clip with dangling beads. It fits on the clitoris, pinching it lightly. McDowell says she couldn't even make it through the produce aisle in the grips of its constant stimulation. It took her 45 minutes to return to her car. There was a brief burst of laughter as she began the story, but by the time she wraps it up, no one makes a sound. One partygoer bought the jewelry,

(Continued on page 62)

(Continued from page 60)

McDowell tells me. She sells one or two of the \$14.95 items at every party. That's a steal compared to some of the vibrators. Two Pure Romance vibrators — Decadent Indulgence and Bling Bling — are \$99.50 each. Fantasy Inc.'s most expensive vibrators are made of glass, the Nubby and the Smooth. Each goes for \$128.95.

Experts in human sexuality say these parties play a role in putting women at ease with their sexuality.

Both McDowell and Cissell avoid revealing just how much equipment is purchased at each party, but McDowell says \$400 per party is about average.

Besides, sales is only a part of the picture, both women say. What it's really about is education. While that's not immediately obvious, research into sex-toy parties backs them up. Ordering takes place in private — often a bedroom is staked out for these closed-door transactions — and that's where customers may ask serious questions about sexual response, studies show.

During the party, serious doesn't have a chance.

Cissell holds up a device generically called a bullet, a small silver lozenge-shaped vibrator attached to a control by a cord, and warns that nothing with a cord should be inserted in a body cavity. Once it's in, the only way to remove it is by pulling the cord, which can break.

"Explaining to the ER doctors how you got a bullet lodged up inside of you and how you got a huge burn could be a little embarrassing," she says.

"I fell on it!" Amanda Singhiser says in a falsetto, adding to the laughter.

The Nectar Connector, a hummingbird shaped clitoral stimulator, worries the mothers in the group.

"It's that whole Bambi thing," one says. "And if your kids found it, it's 'Mommy! What's that?'"

But the jokey part of the party also plays an educational role, the experts say. "It's a great place to learn," says Jean Campbell, a Louisville marriage and couples therapist and author of *Taking Sexy Back: The Cure for the Sexual Blahs*. "We really are lacking in that kind of sexual information, and that kind of comfort level.

"That's what I like about parties," she says. "It brings it out of the closet." ■

{Staff Picks} Sexy Movies

Looking for a hot flick? Here are a few that made our temperatures rise.



To Die For (1995)

Is blind ambition sexy? Definitely not for lawyers, politicians and reality-TV contestants. But somehow Nicole Kidman, filmed here during her Hollywood ascendancy, laces innocence with connivance as an overly striving but under-talented broadcaster who will stop at nothing to advance her career. Yes, she's murderous and cold, but she's also comical and alluring — and when she meets her own violent end, well, strangely vulnerable.

None of this would work if Kidman weren't so adept at playing Suzanne Stone, who is at once conventionally beautiful and unconventionally pathological. Close-up scenes focus on her flawless face and Breck Girl hair while she delivers the deadpan musings of a mind twisted by a maniacal drive to ascend the broadcast-news ladder. She's so appealing on the surface that you fall for her. But die for her? — well, thank goodness this is only a movie.

Matt Dillon, as her ill-fated husband, and Joaquin Phoenix, as a hormone-crazed adolescent, are helpless against Kidman's sexual power. The scene that still pops up on YouTube has her dancing with a video camera in hand while she lures Phoenix into her bed. But I think the best summation of her character occurs a bit later when, after suggesting to the kid that her husband must die, she impulsively jumps out of the car and shimmyies in the headlights to "Sweet Home Alabama" — tossing her hair, seemingly care-free, at once innocent, darkly humorous (she's just planted the murder seed) and cunningly manipulative — a moment so enticing, so dangerous, and so wrong.

No wonder those East Coast Italians put her on ice.

— Bruce Allar

Vicky Cristina Barcelona (2008)



Woody Allen's *Vicky Cristina Barcelona* is a smart and, quite frankly, very sexy movie. I think most of us, both men and women, might agree that merely the casting of Scarlett Johansson, Penelope Cruz, Rebecca Hall and Javier Bardem promises a sexy movie. But consider also the story of two friends, Vicky (Hall) and Cristina (Johansson), who vacation together in sultry Barcelona, where they meet seductive painter Juan Antonio (Bardem). Recently divorced from his volatile wife (Cruz), Juan Antonio invites both girls to sightsee with him, drink wine and, hopefully, make love. After we've explored the varying passions and personalities of each woman comes the surprise: All three women will end up accepting the invitations. Need I say more?

—Rebecca Bainum Poole

LM Survey Result



I've used a vibrator, whether alone or with a partner:

55% of men; **79%** of women

65% of married people ; **71%** of unmarried people