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VTR Productions
The Lynne Gordon Show
Show No: A-126
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Guest: Baba Yaga, Stripper
Director: D. McGuire
Time: 26 minutes

[Show Intro]

LG: She's a former stripper and the founder of BEAVER, an organization that acts as a voice for prostitutes, strippers, porno actresses, and topless waitresses and we'll meet her in a moment.

[Show Begins]

LG: BEAVER stands for Better End All Vicious Erotic Repression and it is Canada's first organizational voice for prostitutes and, as she says, for other workers of the flesh. Baba Yaga is the organization's founder and she claims that if there's anything women need to be more 'objective' about, it is sex" I guess first of all Baba, what do you mean women need to be more objective about sex?

MDS: Well it seems that women have never been able to really view their bodies in a positive way. So one of the reasons that I say that I think women should be more objective about sex is so that they can begin to look at their bodies in a way that is not mixed up with a lot of judgment about what kind of... well first of all, moral judgement about whether or not they are sluts and whether they are virtuous...

LG: Wouldn't that kind of objectivity be something we need from men also? Men are the ones that more tend to label women.

MDS: Yeah, I think it's because of men's... Well it's because of the vulnerable position women are put in, it makes it difficult for them to be...

LG: You mean put in in society?

MDS: Yeah, put in in society. And the very face that their bodies seem to have a lot of importance. But it's not women who have been able to say what sort of identification with their bodies that they'd like to have. They've been sort of put into different roles.

LG: Before we go into how that applies in today's society, we'd like to know a little bit more about you because I think people come to certain ideas through their backgrounds, and through a lot of problems and emotions. Let me know, how did you start out, by the way, how

did you finally become a prostitute. You didn't start out as one of course. What was the thing that led you to prostitution?

MDS: In my case I was working in a night club as a go-go dancer and I'd never been in a nightclub before and suddenly I was seeing a lot of things that were going on around me and I was being approached a lot by pimps and also by clients who were interested in buying my services. I became very curious about the exchange of money for sex and I wanted to find out what it's really like. I didn't have any moral objection to having sex with a stranger.

LG: But let me ask you something Baba. At that time, when you went into go-go dancing, what brought you even into that? You were married at the time weren't you?

MDS: Yeah well, I was seeking employment.

LG: You need money actually, is that it?

MDS: Well my husband decided, or we both decided, that he would stay at home and take the role of housewife. And that I would...

LG: [inaudible comment "househusband" maybe?] Because he couldn't make money, was that the reason?

MDS: Well he had been working as a labourer, but it was just a decision we made. I thought I would enjoy working. I thought go-go dancing might be kind of fun and actually it was. I became quite involved in dance as a medium through working in night clubs. I became quite involved in artistic expression of dance. The prostitution was kind of something that was running parallel with these other activities. They go on in the same space as a rule.

LG: Did you feel that as a woman dancing and making a living as a go-go dancer, that that is a natural progression?

MDS: No. No, I don't think that's necessarily a natural progression at all. I think it's really important that go-go dancers and strippers be respected as go-go dancers and strippers, and it not be assumed that they are actually prostitutes because most of them are not. Why should those two things necessarily go on in the same space?

LG: What made you then go over the line from go-go dancing and go into prostitution?

MDS: Well I never went over the line in the sense that I didn't give up dancing to become a prostitute. I was pretty much a dilettante when it came to prostitution. And this is why I don't talk about myself as an ex-prostitute particularly because I don't think I can ever say that I was a professional. I think a professional is someone who goes out and makes their living—who sets out every night or day and says "while I'm going to make X amount of money today" and sets

out to do it. Where I always waited until people approached me and if I liked them and if I thought it was a good situation.

LG: What do you mean by good? Was it for money at that time or just something you were searching for in terms of your own self?

MDS: Well naturally there's money involved. I wasn't searching for love and affection or any of these things. It's as if someone is offering you a job that's is going to take 45-mins of your time and if you don't have anything else to do and it's a job that you feel you can do, which I felt it was a job I could do, and if I didn't think it would bother me or hurt me, and...

LG: How did you know that, Baba, before you went into a relationship? That's really the only thing that concerns me. And it interests me. How did you know?

MDS: Well it concerns a lot of. A lot my friends are concerned about that too.

LG: What I guess is never really explained is that prostitution is not just an exchange of sex for money, it means much more than that in many cases. It's beatings, murder, disease, and loneliness. I'd like to explore that a little, we'll come back in a minute and talk to you about it Baba.

[commercial break]

LG: Baba, when you were married and you went to do go-go dancing, partly to make money, partly it was an extension of you—you wanted some kind of fulfilment and you found that. We're talking about prostitution and that sadly, I think most prostitutes are between criminals and cops, you know? And what happens when you go in with someone you really don't know what the experience is because you are then, saying: "OK I'm yours, I'm being paid" which is sad because it's the same kind of thing that goes on in society all the time. Women are always giving their bodies or their minds for a certain amount of payment and they don't realize that. But again we were discussing the problems of murder and disease and beatings and the kind of quote kinky sex that might go on that you might not want. And you really don't have control of that do you?

MDS: Well I think you have to realize, if you can put yourself in the position of the client for a moment, that he also is buying a service. He wants to have an experience. So it is important that he makes clear what he does want and in order to do that he's going to have to discuss it with the prostitute ahead of time. So that if he wants some kind of kinky sex, and he doesn't discuss that with her, then he's probably not going to get it. Even if he wanted to force her, most of the time a lot of kinky sex involves role playing on the part both people. And the prostitute has to be able to do that role playing. So he's probably going to discuss it with her ahead of time and there are many prostitutes who specialize in role playing encounters.

LG: Were you concerned about the physical damage?

MDS: Physical damage, in terms of knowing if the person is actually going to turn around and beat you up, and it's not something you agreed on ahead of time, I just use my intuition about people and I never had any bad experiences. I think most prostitutes work on intuition and this is of course, like I said, that I was quite selective. The problem is that because of the semi-legal, or actually illegal status of the activity the prostitute can't really call on anybody, like the police, if she is indeed molested or beaten or something, whereas the wife can—or anybody in a normal encounter can call on the police and say: "I'm being beaten up."

LG: Would you like to see then prostitution decriminalized, taken out of the Criminal Code. It seems odd if you look at it, that the police or the state should be involved in whatever sex goes on between a man and a woman, especially if they are involved that they don't feel that the man should be pulled in. I don't quite understand that. If the man is the buyer of this commodity, why isn't he subject to jail?

MDS: Well this is what I call the double standard of the law enforcement, which is based on the moral double standard that if a man has many sexual experiences that it enhances his reputation and his prowess, but if a woman has many sexual experiences it degrades her. So the law steps in supposedly to protect the virtue of women. There are a lot of other reasons, it has been suggested that that's not the actual reason the law is enforced against women and not against men.

LG: What do you think are the other reasons?

MDS: Well one of the reasons that I suppose is that the police are actually men and they have some sympathy with the male power to buy prostitutes and not get in any trouble. That they respect the fact that well men do have this need and at the same time they are respected members of the community. And we don't want to rock the boat by ruining their careers. Then every once in a while they will take a case, if they seem to be on a real witch hunt, which is what seems to be happening in Ontario at this time, they will take a particular incident such as the Judge in Ottawa and make a great display of it in the newspapers therefore...

LG: The judge in Ottawa, explain that?

MDS: The judge in Ottawa who was seeing a prostitute in his office, I believe, and in this case he was also if not arrested, I think he was arrested and he was certainly talked about in the newspaper and it was a great scandal.

LG: And in this case there was a great deal of sympathy for the judge because it might ruin his career?

MDS: That's right, where no one talked about her position. Of course she didn't have a career and she never will.

LG: And according to society anyone who indulges in this kind of prostitution or selling of a body, is not to be considered as worthwhile in this society.

MDS: Well supposedly they don't care about themselves. So they're not important.

LG: Let me ask you something Baba. First of all what did it do to your own particular marriage? You're going out into the...

MDS: Nothing. [laughter]

LG: Did you stay married?

MDS: I stayed married for a good six years afterward. This is a hard thing for other people to understand and I think it was a very exceptional situation. And I'm not going to try and make it—to push it on other people. My husband was pretty supportive and helped me in many ways not become guilt ridden about what I was doing. He was in a position where he could have said—he could have used it against me and he didn't.

LG: Use it against you in what way?

He could have just been very, well we had arguments about other things and he could have said: "what do you think you're doing going out and messing around." What I mean is that he wasn't possessive and he was understanding about the kind of emotional stress that I might have been going through because there is an emotional stress. You meet a lot of people who, loneliness, you mentioned loneliness earlier, and this is really one of the major reasons men go to prostitutes. And their seeking something, some sort of fulfillment—and most of the time they don't get it, you know. And they think that it's sex, you see, and actually it's much more than that that they're seeking. They're seeking some kind of wholeness in their life and you know a prostitute can't give that to them any more than any other person probably.

LG I'm interested in how you personally handled this. You also went—there was a change in your life when you went to a lesbian conference, was it? Or you were given a book by Jill Johnston on lesbian society. What did that do? How did that effect you?

MDS: That affected me as a woman, not particularly as a prostitute, but just as a woman. I decided that in order to really find out who I was, it was going to be necessary for me to spend more time with women and less time with men. And that was when I left my husband.

LG: Did you also leave prostitution at that time?

MDS: I wasn't, like I said, I was never a professional prostitute so I didn't—I wasn't working as a prostitute at the time that's for sure. But later I kept, I still have that part of me and I had still done that work and I felt I should still be able to talk about it. And I also felt that I should be able to, as a dancer, I should be able to continue dancing and to dance in a more feminist

environment. That is when I ran into the problem of women and their bodies. And women looking at other women's bodies and having a hard time because they are afraid they are going to end up look at another woman's body the same way men do.

to spend more time with women. I wasn't working with as a prostitute at that time. I tried to continue dancing in a more feminist context.

LG: Did you find that you were a lesbian? Is that what happened when you got this book? Did you find that you prefer women?

MDS: I made a choice to go in that direction and at this point I would identify myself sexually as a bisexual rather than as a lesbian. But there was a period in my life when I was just a lesbian.

LG: Well what period in your life did you become political about this and felt that you wanted to help other people? How did you think you could help other people? What kind of changes were you looking for?

MDS: The first encounter I had with politics was when I got involved in the women's movement through reading Jill Johnston's book which is a very political book *Lesbian Nation* (1973). And then I would go to consciousness raising groups or just to rap sessions and I would talk about myself and I immediately encountered a lot of blocks in women against excepting this whole group of women who are selling some part of their body to men and it was hard for me to understand because as I saw it most of these other women were also selling some of their time to what they call the male establishment. You know, they were working as secretaries or whatever. And most of them had to conform to some kind of male standard to make their living.

LG: I guess that's the area that's very confusing to the general public when you equate what women, who have been treated as second class citizens have been doing for years, either in law... till we change the family law meant that if a woman got married she promised her exclusive services to the man for room and board. Or in jobs she was in ghetto jobs where because she was not encouraged to go out with the work force she didn't stay committed and therefore was always low labour pool. So I guess the confusion comes when you talk about prostitution or selling your body the same as that, is that we are trying to change that. We are trying to change women as second class citizens. And I'd like to come back in a minute to ask you is that what you'd like to do, is change what is happening to women, even as prostitutes or even as second class citizens rather than perpetuating it.

[commercial break]

LG: Baba, we should explain what BEAVER means, which you became the founder in Canada for BEAVER and I'd like to know if you feel the same problem exists in Canada as it does in the States because the sister organization or the same organization as COYOTE which is represented by Margo Saint James. What is BEAVER?

MDS: BEAVER is a political advocacy group for prostitutes and other workers of the flesh as you said in the introduction. We're basically lobbying to change the law against prostitution. To have prostitution lifted from the Criminal Code completely, which is called decriminalization. And this is in contrast to legalization, which many people think is the most liberal thing to do with prostitution. Actually legalization is not what most prostitutes want because it highly regulates their lives and the kind of legalization that we've seen in Nevada, Germany, and even actually in parts of Canada where they've sort of de facto legalized prostitution. I don't know if you want me to talk more about that?

LG: Yeah, what do you mean?

MDS: Let's talk about the situation in Toronto. There was a large crackdown on massage parlours following the murder of a thirteen year old shoeshine boy on Young Street. Now, the results of this crackdown were that the licenses for massage parlours were increased from about \$55 to \$3,300. Then there were a series of stricter by-law regulations about where they could be and what sort of structures they could be. So almost all of them were forced to close down. Then some of them reopened buying these more expensive licenses and right away it's sort of suspect because you know the city government is making quite a bit of money by selling these expensive licenses.

LG: The government becomes the pimp...

MDS: Right. What happens at the same time is that there are a lot of street arrests, so women can be forced to work inside of massage parlours, you see because there's a lot of complaints about women on the street. It doesn't look nice, so they're arrested—they're forced into the massage parlours, but what they're doing stays illegal, so that the owner sort of gets to clean his nose by buying this license and maybe sometimes have women sign these papers where they say "I'm not going to touch any genital areas"—they're really subtly written—but actually that's exactly what she is doing. She's working in a parlour as a prostitute. She can still be arrested because she is still receiving money for sex, she's still soliciting.

LG: So in other words, it's a very abstract, obtuse and it's a very unfair law. Because it's legalized and it doesn't involve the government, but you'd like to decriminalize it and that is different in what area? What does that mean?

MDS: That means the laws against prostitution, the soliciting laws, the being an inmate of a Bawdy House, which could be your own house—you see as soon as you have an act of prostitution in a bedroom, then that's a Bawdy house.. We'd like to see those laws removed.

LG: And just keep it sex between men and women so that if there are problems...

MDS: As simple as possible. If there's going to be any sort of regulation. We're not really talking about the type of regulation we'd like to see because we have an awful lot of ways to get rid of what we think are very backwards [laws]...

LG: Baba, If you could have some of the laws changed and if women were not—and you'd like to change some of the ways women are treated as second class citizens—would you choose, or do you think women would choose prostitution as a way of life? Or has it been a mixture of reasons: the unemployment, our society, a sort of...

MDS: The way I see it is at this point there are obviously lot of women working as prostitutes who would rather not be there and this is a very bad situation for everyone involved. It's bad for the woman because she probably doesn't care very much about herself or she may not take care of her body—the spread or venereal disease this type of thing. At the same time it's also not good for the client because maybe the prostitute hates men. We feel if prostitution was decriminalized...

LG: Alright I'll have to stop on that because we'll talk on decriminalization and watch what BEAVER is doing. Good luck to you Baba.

[Roll Credits]

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