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WEB EXCLUSIVE

"Valley" Girls

Three stars of the campy, vampy "Valley of the Dolls" gather for a dishy discussion

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By B. J. Sigesmund

Patty Duke loved the book. Barbara Parkins wanted a role and "went after it hard." But Lee Grant "thought I'd do it and get the hell out. I was so embarrassed."



Then and now: Parkins, Tate and Duke in the 1967 original; Duke, Grant and Parkins at this week's symposium (Andrea Renault—Globe Photos)

Gosh, whatever for? "Valley of the Dolls," the 1967 film based on Jacqueline Susann's blockbuster novel of the same name, helped define the term "camp classic." Never intended to be high cinema, it's an ugly take on beautiful people that continues to keep midnight-movie audiences in stitches. Just weeks after the release of "Isn't She Great," the poorly reviewed Susann biopic starring Bette Midler, three of "Valley's" stars gathered for a symposium in Manhattan Wednesday night. In front of a theater full of fans, they discussed the enduring appeal of a clumsy little film about divas, drug-use and the dark side of show business. The talk was moderated by Whoopi Goldberg, a longtime "Valley" enthusiast who read about the event in a newspaper, called to get a ticket—and was asked to play host on the spot.

Duke was by far the chattiest of the three stars. She said she went after the part because she identified with her character, needy Neely O'Hara, who starts out a struggling actress and ends up a huge Hollywood star addicted to booze and pills (fondly referred to in the

book as "dolls"). Duke herself has battled alcoholism and drug abuse; she once estimated that she'd overdosed on Valium eight times. Duke said that her singing scenes were dubbed with another woman's voice after the film was completed. Of the movie's less-than-stellar premiere, she recalled, "The first problem was the projector was running fast. The second was they were showing this movie."

Parkins said she loved making the film. "I was in heaven," said the woman who played icy, moralistic Anne Welles. She explained that one of her first scenes to be filmed was a shot opposite Judy Garland, who'd been cast as steely Broadway diva Helen Lawson (but who was later replaced by Susan Hayward). The terrified Parkins called Susann, who was a friend, for advice. The author told her to "just get in there and enjoy the dame." On the set, the trio recalled, Garland would lock herself in her dressing room and not come out. Garland's casting was also ironic, considering the character of pill-popping Neely had been heavily based on her. While shooting, said Parkins, "she obviously was using *something* ." Shouted an audience-member: "Dolls!"

Grant had the smallest part of the women present—and said the least during the talk. She played Miriam Polar, the sourpuss sister/manager of wheelchair-bound rock star Tony Polar. Grant, who went on to win an Oscar for her role in 1975's "Shampoo," said that she accepted a part in the film only because it was "a money job, you know." Echoed Goldberg, "I sit in a square [on TV's 'Hollywood Squares']! Yeah, I know."

The actresses spoke of co-star Sharon Tate, who played Jennifer, the porn-star-with-a-heart-of-gold. Tate was killed by Charles Manson and his followers in 1969. "She was as good as she was beautiful," Duke said. "Exactly, she was like a little kitten, so sweet and gentle," Parkins added.

Goldberg said that the more she watches the film, the more serious issues she sees in it—especially in Tate's character. Late in the movie, Jennifer commits suicide because she's going to lose one of her breasts in a mastectomy. "It's indicative of what we see a lot of now with young women and what they do to themselves," Goldberg opined. "'I'm not this enough. I'm not that enough.' Past the parody of the film is a very interesting story of women. Or am I reading way too much into this?" The audience roared. They didn't think so at all.

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