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**Porn, Pedagogy, and Persistence:  
An Interview with Wicked Contract Performer jessica drake**

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**Abstract**

In this interview, adult performer jessica drake reflects on her twenty-year career working in the pornography industry. She discusses the ways in which the business of pornography has changed during this time, including the evolution of industry testing protocols, as well as her experience directing a line of explicit sex education films for Wicked Pictures. She talks about the importance of sexual agency, authenticity, and consent in pornography and considers her longevity and success as both a performer and director.

**Keywords:** pornography industry, sexual agency, authenticity, consent, sex education.

**Introduction**

Adult performer jessica drake – her name in lower-case letters by design – might be one of the most recognizable porn performers working today. Blonde and beautiful in a Hollywood starlet kind of way, her career as both a performer and director has spanned

twenty years, giving her a front row seat to an industry that has undergone dramatic economic, technological, and cultural shifts, especially over the past decade.

Raised as a Jehovah's Witness in Texas, where abstinence-only sex education was the norm, drake was going to college and working as a stripper in the late 1990s, when she began meeting featured dancers associated with the porn industry. She started working in porn, and a few years later, signed an exclusive contract with Wicked Pictures, a studio which, according to drake, "was the machine that made the superstars".

A winner of multiple AVN Awards – affectionately known as the "Oscars of porn" – drake actively resists stereotypes. She is known for her charity work, advocacy for sex worker rights, and involvement with HIV prevention and education. She is a certified sex educator who regularly lectures at universities on topics that include sexual wellness, empowerment, and consent. In 2011 she began directing a series of explicit sex education videos, jessica drake's Guide to Wicked Sex. To date, she has made fifteen educational films about fellatio, foreplay, threesomes, plus-size sex, and, most recently, senior sex.

In what follows, drake discusses how the business of pornography has changed over the past twenty years, the evolution of industry testing protocols, and her passion for sex education. She talks about the importance of sexual agency, authenticity, and consent in pornography, and the seriousness with which she approaches her film projects.

## **Interview**

### **Lynn Comella: What was the porn industry like in 1999 when you started performing and how has it changed since then?**

**jessica drake:** In a lot of ways, the industry is completely different from how it used to be, but there are still similarities. When I started, it was very star minded. You aspired to be the biggest name you could be. You aspired to be a contract performer with a big studio. The gonzo and feature worlds were the two main areas of porn. Studios were massive and they were churning out some pretty great content. The dominant studios at the time were Wicked, Vivid, and VCA. Not all the big studios exist anymore, and none of them exist in the same way. When piracy took over our industry, about ten years ago,

everybody had to change everything in order to survive and many didn't. Or they did change, and they still didn't survive.

The economic collapse of 2008 coincided with the massive piracy problem. I think everybody sort of scrambled and didn't know what they were going to do. Many studios just went out of business. Other studios became content distributors. Wicked is one of the few studios that really kept on trying to do what we do best: create high quality, bigger budget adult content. We saw more of that [content] back then. Now, there are fewer big budget productions. Also, studios exist just for websites now and that was never a thing before. Obviously, camming is now huge, too, and platforms that give performers the ability to create their own content, like OnlyFans, is one of the biggest changes we've seen. Those platforms put control in the hands of the performers, and I think that sort of mirrors the way it was back then, because performers were extremely invested in their brand and their image.

It wasn't just the studio system that was affected by piracy. Everything was affected, including performer rates, which started dropping, because companies were trying to be more competitive. Sometimes people would come in and really undercut performers. For example, we used to be paid to shoot a box cover separate from a movie. Being chosen as a box cover girl for a feature was great. It was another job. You'd be paid \$1000 to be on a box cover to promote a movie. That doesn't happen anymore, at all, with the exception of Wicked's bigger budget movies. Being paid for box covers [used to be a thing]. Magazine work used to be a thing. It's barely a thing now. I marvel that there's still a print readership. But, I mean, some of these things are coming back. I think some people really love to be able to pick something up and flip through it, and fans like to have something they can actually touch and bring to us [at clubs and conventions] for us to sign.

### **Comella: What are some other changes you've seen?**

**drake:** I'm a condom-only performer. The only scenes I ever did without a condom, and there was only a handful, was with the person I was married to at the time, so we were fluid bonded. I remember being told, even back then, that nobody wanted to see porn with condoms. I was told that I wasn't going to last in this industry and that I'd never make

any money for myself. I've seen a lot of changes regarding that. I came in as a condom-only performer because to me that made sense. I didn't know at the time that there had been transmissions of HIV in the industry the year before I started. Anytime anything like that happens today, we know about it immediately. That's also a big thing that's changed. I watched our testing system evolve. I remember my first trip to the Adult Industry Medical Healthcare Foundation (AIM). They had us watch a video that explained what you could expect [working in porn]. After the video, you were asked if you had any questions. I still remember my first test. The PASS system, which is the system we use today, didn't exist. We had paper tests that we would exchange before a scene. AIM was a lot of things to a lot of people: It provided performer resources and people to talk to. Don't get me wrong. The testing facilities we have today are super friendly, but there are a couple of different testing centers for people to go to and it's more of a medical feel as opposed to a personal resource.

Back then, testing was every 30 days. Now it's every 14 days. We are now tested for more STIs. The turnaround time on testing is super-fast, so that's one area where we've really improved. That, and now pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) is a thing. I've been on Truvada for over two years. People sometimes say: «But you're a condom only performer. Why?» Well, condoms break, and I'm still engaging in the riskier sexual activities on set. I do all of the extreme sex acts. I take facials, for example. So, for me, PrEP was the right thing. We didn't have that resource back when I started in the industry. I really wish we would have. I think that's something more performers today should be talking about.

When I first started in the industry I was only working with people I knew. When you wanted to book talent, it was a question of who is on this person's list [of who they'll shoot with]? Who's on their no list? If you were working with someone for the first time, you'd sit down and have a conversation. You'd say: "I like this. Don't ever do this to me". We would have that exchange. Coming from that time in the industry is why today, as a director, all of my talent does that. The first time I directed was 2007-08 and then I started the line of educational videos in 2011. I have never created an onset environment that doesn't include those talks. Before we had feminist, ethical porn, before that became

a branding thing, people were already taking care of people. We were already doing it. It was part of the work environment. The industry modeled that whole exchange.

### **Comella: What about personal branding and authenticity?**

**drake:** I think authenticity is much more relevant today than it was before. Before it was more about creating a very polished, finished image. That's great. Fantasy is fantastic. But at the same time, speaking to my longevity in this industry, I've found that being very raw, really vulnerable and accessible, creates more interest and fans want that. They want more than a photoshopped image.

In the era before social media, fans could meet a performer at a trade show or a strip club. Everything is so real time now, as it happens. Before social media was a massive thing, my first clue that fans were looking for realness was that Wicked used to put a lot of DVD extras on all of our movies. In one, the camera person filmed me sitting on the floor in a t-shirt, eating pie with a fork right out of the pie pan. I got more fan attention from those few seconds. They were like: «Oh my God. You're a hot chick eating pie on the floor».

I think we are at a crossroads right now. We are stuck between what existed before, the more corporate mentality, and what inevitably has become more important to fans, which is interaction. Performers have more agency, and often more authenticity, when they have control over the content they are creating. Authenticity is a buzzword now, but during my entire career, I had a policy that I wouldn't do anything on camera that I didn't do and enjoy in my own life. At times, I have become frustrated when distribution mandates or puts in place certain requirements about what I need to do on a shoot: I have to do softcore, triple X, shoot a certain run-time, so sometimes some of the authenticity is lost, because we have to go back and shoot content for different distribution streams. Sometimes the organization of the industry makes it hard to capture authenticity. At the end of the day, you are a business and you are fighting to be part of different media and distribution streams that want different things.

## **Comella: What inspired you to begin making explicit sex education videos?**

**drake:** I came from a place where I really didn't get a realistic sex education. I think most of us really didn't get the sex education that we now, as adults, would've hoped we'd gotten back then. I knew the birds and the bees, but it was very fear-based; it wasn't really informative and real. The more I traveled the country, the more I encountered people who were raised that way, even in more strict environments. I think that people deserve to know some of the truths about having sex. The good and the bad.

Two very pivotal things happened to me before I decided to become an educator. First, a woman came to me in her forties and she'd never had an orgasm. I felt immediately compelled to do something to help her. It was before I started the sex education series. I communicated with her via email and we talked a lot. I referred her to as many resources as I could. I also told her she should grab a Hitachi [vibrator] and spend some time with herself.

The other very pivotal thing that happened, much like the woman who whispered into my ear about not having orgasms, was that a couple came to me at an event and the woman said: «I think there's something wrong with me. I just can't do it like you do it». What are you talking about? I asked: «In your movies, you are having sex and all of the sudden you are having anal sex». I was like: «Whoa. Whoa» What you aren't seeing, I told her, is all the prep work that goes into that and all the movie magic that happens long before the cameras are rolling. There's the warming up and the lubing and the re-lubing. All of that. I talked to them for a while, and that was about the same time I was beginning to create the line of instructional videos.

What is happening is that we have a generation – a few generations, actually – whose only ideas about sex have come from seeing it on the computer. And a lot of the time, depending on what type of adult product they are watching, they end up with some really unrealistic expectations: body-wise, performance-wise, stamina-wise, and in terms of flexibility and creativity. You name it. I think it's important to be able to differentiate that. I think there's a lot of great things you can take away from porn, especially from the type of adult movies that Wicked makes. If you can take the sense of adventure from porn, the role playing and inspiration to try new things, to be spontaneous and creative, I

think that's wonderful. It is not, however, a step-by-step way to have penetrative sex. I point that out to people.

When I started creating the Guide to Wicked Sex, I instantly became more aware of the sex that I am portraying in movies. For us in the industry, it is a run-time issue. There's a reason why they don't show every bit of anal play in every scene I do. It's because we can't have an hour long warm up. We can't show that. I try to explain that to people. You wouldn't learn how – and I know this is cliché – but you wouldn't learn how to drive from watching the *Fast and the Furious*. It's important to remind people of that.

### **Comella: What's it like on set when you're making one of your sex education films?**

**drake:** When I do my instructional videos, they are such a labor of love. I shoot them at my house, because I have complete control over my environment. When my talent is there, they know they are there all day. They know it's a long day. They know what's involved. But I cater to them. The more you take care of your talent and the more comfortable they are, the more they give you and I've just been so fortunate with my casting. I've gotten such authenticity and chemistry [on set]. I put people together who really want to have sex. I know that sounds obvious, but it doesn't always work out that way.

From the start, I chose to only work with people who were on my list, because chemistry to me is really important. I don't like to fake it. It is not always easy to do what we do. Our days are long. We are tired. Sometimes we don't want to have sex at that moment. It might take more to get in the mood. But when you have somebody that you have that chemistry with, it really changes everything. It is less of a job and more of you living out a fantasy.

So, I cast [my films] very carefully. I get people who are really into the topic, whatever the topic is. They are people who really enjoy whatever that act is – if it's anal, if it's threesomes. From there, I make them really comfortable. Who turns you on? What do you want to do? We do the interview portion of the instructional. I try to make them really comfortable. I might start out with scripted interview questions, but I always deviate. I never say this is going to be quick and easy. It will be a bit of work. I also do all my own catering. We always have the biggest spread of food.

In terms of the shoot: I block out what I need to show viewers, but aside from that I don't orchestrate the sex. I tell performers what I want to end up with, and then I see what happens. I let nature take its course. I might switch them up if I need a specific position, but my goal... when I shot female masturbation I didn't tell performers how to masturbate, but I had a table of sex toys. Use them, don't use them. Use one, use two, use three. I got some amazing orgasms from performers. Julia Ann used a body wand and loved it so much she took it home. I couldn't even ask her to leave it behind! It's just better when you don't direct them, because you see authentic sex.

**Comella: For your most recent education film you collaborated with author and senior sexpert Joan Price to make *Guide to Wicked Sex: Senior Sex*. What was that process like?**

**drake:** I wanted to collaborate with Joan since I first met her five or six years ago. It took me a while to convince her, because she didn't think her fan base would accept a hardcore product. One of the things that finally compelled her to do it was that she asked her subscribers on her email list if they'd be interested in such a film and people were very positive. This is an underserved group of people who deserve all of the sexual information and de-stigmatization they can get. I was thrilled when Joan said yes and [the experience of] shooting the movie was fantastic. The youngest person in it was 69 years old. No one had any on-camera sexual experience. One couple had been together for a long time and another couple hooked up just for the purpose of the movie. I did that on purpose, because there are so many seniors who are divorced or who have lost a spouse, so how do we talk about dating apps and STIs and safer sex with this population? I think projects like *Senior Sex* are really necessary and are the key to getting attention from major organizations like AASECT [the American Association of Sexuality Educators, Counselors and Therapists] that have dismissed some of the things I've done because I am a porn performer.

**Comella: What accounts for your staying power in an industry where many performers burn out very quickly?**



**drake:** I would say that a great deal of my longevity in the industry hinges on aligning myself with a company that shares the same views as me. Wicked has always taken a hard stance for the performer. We are still condom only. The other thing is that I am really persistent. I'm a really hard worker. I may not always be the hottest chick in the room, but I show up. I will be on time. I do my job to the best of my ability. I've always taken acting in movies very seriously. When I started working with Wicked, I took acting classes. I took workshops. I read books. I got really serious about every single project I've done. For *Manhunters* I became a certified fugitive recovery agent. For *Speed* I got my motorcycle license. This is why I get so offended when people say: «It's just porn. We fast forward through that acting stuff anyway» But not everybody does, and we've created some exceptional projects for people.

I think that even though I became successful – which feels weird to say – even though I became a name, I am still the same person. I have changed, obviously, because we all change over time, but the older I get the less fucks I give and the more I become aware of myself. We get to know ourselves better. But I am still the same person I was before I got into porn. I am super grateful for what I have, and I know where I came from. I am lucky and I'm so privileged. This is so important to me as an activist and an ally and an advocate for the things I care passionately about. I just try to use my powers for good.