

ANIMAL MAGNETISM

ISABELLA ROSSELLINI LOOKS WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE AND SHARES SOME ASTONISHING FACTS OF LIFE FROM THE WORLD OF THE BIRDS AND THE BEES **BY VÉRONIQUE MORIN**

Why on earth would a woman of Isabella Rossellini's stature, success, wealth and beauty, who comes from a bloodline of film royalty — the daughter of Ingrid Bergman and Roberto Rossellini — want to dress up as a male bumblebee and pretend she is screwing a female bee? (And, by the way, “screwing” is, literally, the right word.)

Despite a fulfilling life as an actress, filmmaker, model and writer, Rossellini seems ever curious about sex in the animal kingdom and how different animals copulate. Curiosity has led her to enter this vast world through *Green Porno*, a series of vignettes for the Sundance Channel. She writes and co-produces the series, humorously depicting animals' sex organs and their mating acts.

At 57, she performs a series of mock copulations involving puppet costumes with huge penises, crawling on floors not only as a bee but also as a spider, a fly, an earthworm, a snail and several other insects and marine animals. “Well, sex is not so important,” she says. “It is not so important at all for me,” she clarifies, looking away, searching for a genuine answer and suddenly — no, sexily — revealing a six-strand pearl necklace under the collar of her austere black dress. But it is hard to believe sex isn't that important in her life. Flashing back to the roles she played in her acting career — most memorably, standing naked in the film *Blue Velvet* — or even during her 14 years as the magnetic model for Lancôme cosmetics, to many, Rossellini was the incarnation of sexual allure in its purest sense.

“*Green Porno* is a catchy name. I thought that it was too funny,” Rossellini giggles. “I don't know why people are so obsessed with sex. Perhaps it is due to the fact that it is taboo and repressed ... but, to me, it is a normal part of life.” The *Green Porno* series, all three seasons, is presented on the website of the Sundance film channel, founded and partly funded by Robert Redford. “Bob wanted a format that could fit on the web and



be downloaded on cellphones,” she says. “The short film format, one to two minutes, seemed appropriate for this.” But the length of the films is far less noticeable than the explicit material she mimics on screen.

Astonishing Fact #1 Snails pierce their skin to engage in sex. In one scene, Rossellini imitates this sexual act, emphasizing its sadomasochistic nature. The clip ends with her sighing with orgasmic pleasure.

The project came as “a combination of opportunities.” At the time, Rossellini did not think of herself as a writer or a director, but the challenge piqued her interest. Sundance Channel, which supports experimental films, was losing audience to the Internet. “I was one of the artists who was contacted. They wanted a new series that would fit the

web format and would fit into the category of their ‘green’ programming,” she recounts. “With this project, I’ve been writing my own scripts just as I dreamed of doing when I was a teenager.”

Rossellini was interested in biology (mostly in animal behaviour), but she admits unabashedly that she capitalized on sex to generate public interest. “I thought that when doing short films I would concentrate on sex because there is a great interest in sex out there. A lot of people are interested in sex and doing a series on how animals chew their food or on how their mouths move would not have attracted the same audience,” she says, bursting out laughing. She was also fuelled by a great sense of pleasure while researching, writing, performing and directing the series. “I did the scientific research, I simplified it and I kept what made me laugh about it,” she explains.

Astonishing Fact #2 The male praying mantis continues to have sex with the female “even after she has eaten his head off! His sex drive must be the greatest.” This powerful instinct impresses her most.

Astonishing Fact #3 Penises are species specific, “each one unique to its respective vagina.” To demonstrate, Rossellini walks through a forest of 22 penises taller than she is, pointing out their exceptional design.

“We had so much fun,” recalls Rick Gilbert, series art director and producer, “It’s even funnier because it’s all true.”

Rossellini insists, “If it were just a fantasy, it wouldn’t have been as much fun.” She selected animals that showed the greatest variety in their way of “making love,” as she puts it. “So you can give a sense of the many ways to reproduce.” Her co-director, Torontonian Jody Shapiro, says, “It is fantastic to work on something that talks about the environment and conservation in a subtle way. You don’t feel it’s ▶ *Continued on page 129*



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ISABELLA ROSSELLINI, PHOTOGRAPHED BY PAUL ALEXANDER AT THE ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM, SEPTEMBER 2009

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being forced on you.”

Rossellini agrees. “I learned a lot, especially with marine animals. I found out barnacles have the longest penises of the animal kingdom.”

Astonishing Fact #4 Barnacles, a type of crustacean, beat all species on earth with penises 40 times longer than their bodies. “I’m used to watching insects in my backyard,” she continues. “If I had been born in another century, I could have easily been a naturalist. I am one of those people who like turning rocks over to see what kind of bugs are hiding underneath. I have a lot of animals in my backyard.” Rossellini is referring to her six-acre property on Long Island, N.Y., with its two acres of forest and an abundance of open land for gardening and animals. Rossellini has always been an animal lover, “just like I was born with brown hair,” she says of her natural affinity for creatures. She has dogs there, some rescued (from shelters, for example), others she received from seeing-eye dog breeders. Her menagerie currently includes four dogs, two cats and five chickens.

Astonishing Fact #5 Her favourite discovery about sex and the animal kingdom was that, in some species, there are “sneaky” males. “Sneaky males are considered losers by their own but while the dominant male is busy showing off,” she explains with a broad smile, “the sneaky males actually go and copulate with the females, and it is their babies that are born — all the while the dominant male thinks he is the sire.”

Although the *Green Porno* series is not continuing, it can be seen on the Sundance website. This adventure gave her a taste for more writing. She is now preparing an hour-long TV pilot on the theme of animal reproduction. “I don’t feel a moral responsibility to teach anything. I want my public to laugh and say, ‘I didn’t know that about a fly’ or ‘I didn’t know that about a starfish.’” She wants to instil amusement and wonder. “Wonderment is the first step to respect. But I am not a moralist or a priest. I don’t have a project to change the world.” ■