

*Cinema's prodigal daughter Jennifer Lynch braves the unmapped territory of Bollywood-Hollywood movie making, where chaos is the process and filmmaking doubles as a crash course in acceptance and self-realization.*

JENNIFER LYNCH'S BOLLYWOOD ODYSSEY



# DESPITE THE GODS

A Feature Length Documentary: 85 and 52 mins  
Directed by Penny Vozniak & Produced by Karina Astrup  
[www.despitethegods.com](http://www.despitethegods.com)

Production:

House of Gary

Email: [karina@houseofgary.com](mailto:karina@houseofgary.com)  
Phone: +61 7 3102 3150  
[www.houseofgary.com](http://www.houseofgary.com)



Distribution Worldwide  
& Canada:

Cat & Docs

Email: [cat@catndocs.com](mailto:cat@catndocs.com)  
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Distribution USA:

Apothecary Films

Email: [info@apothecaryfilms.net](mailto:info@apothecaryfilms.net)  
Phone: +1 323 828 7241  
[www.apothecaryfilms.net](http://www.apothecaryfilms.net)



# SYNOPSIS

**800 words**

Welcome to India, home of the world's largest movie industry, where mere mortal film stars are worshiped with the same fervour as timeless Indian Gods; and the new buzzword 'co-production' looms on the lips of Indian financiers keen to form a Bollywood - Hollywood alliance. Yet, co-production of this sort is relatively uncharted territory. It would take immense courage or naivety for a US filmmaker to dive into the chaos that epitomizes filmmaking in India.

In 2008, Jennifer Lynch (daughter of cult director David Lynch), dove headfirst into this very scenario. She had just returned to the Hollywood fold after spending nearly 15 years in exile since being vilified by press and feminist groups for her debut film, *Boxing Helena*. Wounded by the harsh response of her critics, Lynch retreated from the public eye. Her second film, *Surveillance*, had just premiered at Cannes. Bolstered by this success she felt ready to take on more challenging projects. As fate would have it Jennifer meets maverick Indian producer Govind Menon, who invites her to write and direct *Hisss*.

*Hisss* is a tale set in present day India about the vengeful snake Goddess Nagin, a snake-woman who embarks on a murderous path to find her lover. Lynch's cinematic take on the Indian legend is best described as a comedy / horror / action / adventure / musical / creature-feature / love story. *Hisss* is genre defying in every way, but this is familiar territory for Lynch. After all, her film credits include an amputee fairy tale and a romantic serial killer thriller.

Full of excitement, and convinced she is making her career defining film, Jennifer Lynch travels to India with her twelve year old daughter Sydney to begin production. Spirits are high in the land of the Gods, and so are the stakes.

Things go wrong very quickly. Lynch's western need for order, systems and schedules is completely at odds with the Indian crew's decidedly non-linear way of working – and lack of experience with films of this scale. But that's the least of their worries.

Unable to control the chaos surrounding her, Lynch slowly and steadily spirals into a depression as her worst fears are realized: this could be the biggest disaster of her career...another *Boxing Helena*.

It's nothing short of a filmmaker's nightmare. Just a day into the shoot the whole production is held to ransom by a gaffer's strike, forcing the team to re-group and move from Chennai to Kerala, a 24 hour bus journey away. Everything is turned upside down.



Then three weeks into filming the script has to be all but abandoned, dangerously over budget and over schedule, the director, cast and crew find themselves having to 'wing it' for the next six months with no schedule, call sheet or any stunt insurance in sight.

Lynch can only cheerlead and watch in despair as the film strays further and further away from her original script.

Surrounded by a team of truly wonderful Indian crew, her twelve-year-old daughter, and a cast of Bollywood stars, Lynch does her hands-on best to stay sane and guide the production through a minefield of disasters.

The more they plan, the more the Gods laugh. The more they try to lock things down, the more they seem to shift; locations, cast, scripts are constantly rotated, re-invented and improvised depending on what the Indian day brings. A cyclone, strikes and superstitious crew don't do much to help. All differences, apparent and invisible, personal and professional are brought to the surface. A tug of war emerges between Lynch and Menon as they both fight to save the film.

With uncensored candour, Lynch shares the heart-breaking and at times hilarious experience of being a director at the helm of a sinking ship. The camera becomes her confessional; a record of the madness within and without.

But all is not lost. After months of trials and tantrums, Lynch begins to see that Indian chaos at a second glance is actually very organized. To regain control of the film and her sanity she simply needs to let go of control and begin trusting in India, and in herself. Then the real adventure begins.

**Also available upon request are: 50, 100, 200, 250 and 500 word versions.**

## REVIEWS

"This is a penetrating, highly entertaining portrait of Lynch as an artist and single mother living through the despairing lows and exhilarating highs of filming on the subcontinent."

**Richard Kuipers, *Variety***

"It is one of the strongest films about the trials and madness of moviemaking that you will ever encounter."

**Fantasia**

"Despite The Gods is a low budget docu-delight. Lynch is the beating, empathic heart of the film, an endearing combination of raw emotional honesty and self-deprecating humor."

**Samantha Chater, *Indie Wire***

"Simply a wonderful film for any fans of filmmaking and one of my personal favorites of the festival so far."

**David Voigt, *Toronto Independent Film Examiner***

"It's a rare doc that starts out with me not caring about the protagonist and ends with me adding her to my have-dinner-with fantasy list."

**BRIEF reviews by KAT**

"Penny Vozniak's compelling documentary *Despite the Gods* captures the literal blood, sweat and tears involved in the process of making a film."

**Winsome Walker, *Megaphone Oz***

"DESPITE THE GODS is destined to be a classic."

**Rue Morgue**

### **VARIETY FILM REVIEW - By Richard Kuipers**

Almost 20 years after the critical and commercial annihilation of her debut feature, "Boxing Helena," helmer Jennifer Lynch emerges as the strikingly candid subject of "Despite the Gods." Filmed in India while Lynch was directing the trouble-plagued India-U.S. co-production "Hiss" (2010), this is a penetrating, highly entertaining portrait of Lynch as an artist and single mother living through the despairing lows and exhilarating highs of filming on the subcontinent. Mining territory similar to such moviemaking-is-hell essays as "Lost in La Mancha," Penny Vozniak's first docu is a natural for fests, and its hourlong TV version should attract plenty of smallscreen action.

The kind of natural performer documakers dream of, Lynch cuts a compelling figure from the very first frame. Accompanied by her 12-year-old daughter, Sydney, Lynch arrives in Chennai in mid-2008 to

make "Hiss," a sensual fantasy based on an Indian legend about a shape-shifting serpent. Filmed under the title "Nagin: The Snake Woman," the pic reps a \$3 million risk for producer Govind Menon and toplines Mallika Sherawat, a Bollywood star known for her outspoken views on screen sexuality and taboo-busting kissing scenes. The production turns out to be an eight-month ordeal.

During the chaotic pre-production, Lynch recalls her long path back to sobriety following the disaster of directing "Boxing Helena" at the age of 19. With her second feature, "Surveillance," playing the festival circuit, Lynch already senses "Hiss" may suffer the same spectacularly unfortunate fate as "Dune," the third feature made by her father, David Lynch.

With production two days behind schedule after just three days of shooting, such fear seems justified. Among the many setbacks suffered are a technician's strike forcing production to move to Kerala; an 11-day wait for dailies to become available; and cops being called in following complaints about filming at prayer time in a Muslim neighborhood. Showing signs of flagging under pressure, Lynch is told bluntly by producer Menon: "If you can't hack it, quit."

The winning extra dimension to this behind-the-scenes story is the study of motherhood in extremely challenging circumstances. Aware that Sydney's presence on set is creating difficulties, Lynch offers brutally honest reflections on her position as a solo parent with neither the means nor the desire to pack her daughter off elsewhere.

Anything but a chronicle of only doom-and-gloom, the docu is sprinkled with wonderfully funny moments: A caterer reveals an amazing talent for mimicry, and Lynch shows a penchant for hands-on direction where blood-and-guts makeup effects are involved. The final sequence, filmed in 2012, updates viewers on the fate of "Hiss" and brings to the fore a lovely element of romance hinted at previously.

Vozniak's ability to coax frank testimony from everyone is as impressive as her steady handheld camerawork. Other tech aspects are on the money.

## ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

*Despite the Gods* cannot be mistaken for a 'behind the scenes' documentary. In essence, it is a biopic about one of Hollywood's most misunderstood directors.

Firsttime filmmaker Penny Vozniak invites the audience to experience eight uncensored months in the life of Jennifer Lynch in all her incarnations as mother, controversial Hollywood director, and the daughter of David Lynch – as she makes the most ambitious film of her career.

*Despite the Gods* is a happy accident. Vozniak was visiting her friend, *Hisss* producer Govind Menon, on her way to a shoot in Kabul. In the midst of pre-production chaos, Menon pleads with Vozniak to stay for a few extra days and babysit Lynch's daughter, Sydney. By the end of the week, Vozniak knew she had found the consummate documentary muse in Jennifer Lynch. She cancelled her plans and remained in India to shoot a verite-style documentary about Lynch's impending adventure.

Living together in apartments and hotel rooms, the three women (and one pug puppy) bonded. From Bollywood studios, to the jungles of Kerala, Vozniak

remained glued to Lynch's side as the production criss-crossed the country.

The projected 3 month shoot became 8 months, taking its toll on everyone. Working as a solo operator Vozniak filmed daily with no end in sight, often capturing the best moments once the film cameras stopped rolling. Her relationship with Lynch grew increasingly symbiotic over time: Vozniak prying deeper into Lynch's psychological landscape to understand her own unplanned odyssey, and Lynch needing a record of the madness for her own sanity. The final result is an unflinching insight into the realities of movie making on the edge.

Vozniak's intention was clear from the start: to show Lynch's balancing act as both renegade filmmaker and single mother, rather than simply document the movie making process. In *Despite the Gods*, the filmmaker's lot is affectionately exposed as painfully personal, pseudo autobiographical, and loaded with weighty expectations... but as Jennifer Lynch would testify, it is worth every minute of it.



## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

This documentary came into my life unexpectedly. In 2008 I was asked to baby-sit Jennifer Lynch's daughter, Sydney, when I stopped in Mumbai for a few days to visit my dear friend, Govind Menon (a Bollywood director/producer). Pre-production for *Hiss* was just underway and already I could see the tragicomedy of the situation unfolding and the tension between producer and director bubbling under the surface. After only a few days I knew that there was a great story to be told here, (more complex than I first realised) and the rapport between Jennifer and myself was instant and natural. I was granted permission to make this documentary and stayed for the entire 8 months of production.

I feel that Jennifer is an exceptional woman, and she is a documentary filmmaker's dream protagonist: natural, unaffected by the presence of the camera, yet she has that balance of strength and vulnerability that enables her to share even the most intimate moments of her journey without a trace of self-consciousness.

The trust and total compliance of cast and crew enabled me to capture an intimate observational account of the cross-cultural misunderstandings, relationships, and the dashed hopes and dreams behind the scenes that was the *Hiss* experience. Jennifer actually wanted me there in the hardest moments, almost as a witness to the madness she felt she was spiralling into in India – both personally and professionally.

In a nutshell, this film would not have been possible without Jennifer. Her journey is the backbone of the film and she is the brave but flawed warrior-woman heroine. This "movie about a movie-maker" genre of documentary film works best when the lead characters share their inner journey with the audience. *American Movie*, *Burden of Dreams* and *Hearts of Darkness* are good examples of this genre. Jennifer is one of these rare characters. Her willingness to explore herself through the trials of this Hollywood-Bollywood production is the spine of the narrative. It's a heroine's journey in every way, within and without.

I love human journey stories. I wanted to make a film that wasn't about 'how to make a movie', or a glittery peek behind the scenes of Bollywood. I sought to document the personal connections these subjects have to each other, the world around them, and to *Hiss* itself; art definitely mirrors life in this documentary. It's a film about challenging ourselves to rise above difficulties with grace and humour, bravely attempting something new...even when it's tagged as doomed from the start.

These ill-fated journeys are the most tempting ones;

because they are unmapped territory, they promise adventure, high stakes and the greatest bounty - personal growth.

It is important to re-iterate that this is not a typical behind the scenes documentary, or a 'DVD extras' for *Hiss*. It is a story about the realities of being a single, working-mother, cross-cultural misunderstandings, the burden of being Hollywood's prodigal daughter, and hopes and dreams won and lost. It's about failures and compromises, the fear of not living up to our own expectations of ourselves, and not fulfilling the dreams that we believe define who we are.

**Penny Vozniak**  
**Director**

## ABOUT JENNIFER LYNCH



Jennifer Chambers-Lynch is an American film director and screenwriter, best known for writing the book *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer* and for being Hollywood's youngest female writer and director with her 1993 feature film *Boxing Helena*.

Lynch was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the daughter of artist and filmmaker David Lynch and painter Peggy Reavey. At the age of three, Lynch appeared in her father's film *Eraserhead* (released 1978), which David Lynch has said, was inspired by his daughter's birth.

Lynch was educated in Los Angeles and Michigan (at the prestigious Interlochen Arts Academy) and, as a teen, worked as a production assistant on her father's film *Blue Velvet* (1986). Already known for her precocious writing ability, she authored *The Secret Diary of Laura Palmer* to accompany the *Twin Peaks* television show (1990). Next her commissioned screenplay for *Boxing Helena*, which she would later go on to direct, attracted feminist outcry over the sadistic subject matter and accusations of nepotism. This undoubtedly contributed to the movie's critical panning upon its release.

Afterwards, Lynch retreated from the public eye for 15 years, during which time she had daughter Sydney Lynch and later suffered a brutal car accident, causing her to endure 3 consecutive spinal injuries, leaving her wondering if she would ever walk again. Returning to the industry with a new film *Surveillance*, she landed the best director award at the New York City Horror Film Festival - the first time it had been awarded to a woman.

Looking back over her career, she has been quoted as saying "It's great to have fallen flat on my face and to stand up again... I have more to say in a much more mature voice." Currently she has three new films in various stages of production.

## ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

### **Penny Vozniak – Director**

Penny Vozniak shoots and directs documentary films and music videos.

She is currently directing an independent feature documentary shot over 8 years about real-life superheroes called *Ordinary Wonderlands*, and a musical-documentary project in Kabul.

In 2010, Penny was shortlisted for the Shots Magazine Asia Pacific New Director Award for her one-take music video, *Precious*. Since then, she has made a series of single shot dream-themed videos to accompany Appleonia's debut album, 'Oh'.

*Despite the Gods* is Penny's first film.



[www.pennyvoznik.com](http://www.pennyvoznik.com)

# PRODUCTION TEAM

## **Karina Astrup – Producer**



Karina Astrup is an independent producer and company director of House of Gary. With a background in fine arts and media communications, she spent many years managing advertising campaigns in the fields of tvc's, video production, animation, web, radio and print. She then set up her business House of Gary and moved towards the documentary film industry, working for Faraway Productions on SBS film *Fairdinkum Manjit* and accompanying music video *Song Australia*.

She had her debut independent film financed through ABC TV, *6ft Hick: notes from the underground*. This has since screened at 12 Film Festivals around the world including NXNE and Brisbane International Film Festival. It is still traveling and picked up the 'Noisy Cat - Best Music Documentary' award at the Grossman Film Festival in 2011.

Teaming up with Director Penny Vozniak after meeting each other at IDFA in 2010, *Despite the Gods* is House of Gary's second independent film.

## **Melanie Annan – Editor**

Melanie is an experienced editor who works on a large number of award winning dramas, documentaries and music videos.

Her films have been screened internationally at various film festivals including Brooklyn, St Louis, Stuttgart and Sydney. Her television work includes *Bondi Rescue*, which is broadcast around the world to a large audience and also recently *At Home with Julia*, an Australian comedy series which took the country by storm about the current Prime Minister, nominated for an AACTA award.

*Something Fishy*, her latest short film, won Best Editing at the Australian Screen Editors Awards recently, also taking out Best Comedy at the WOW Film Festival. *Australian Summer* won Tropfest, the world's largest short film festival. Danya won Best Editing at Hatch Fest International Film Festival and the lucrative Rosemount Diamond Award at the Jackson Hole Film Festival, USA. *Despite the Gods* is Melanie's first Feature Length documentary.



[www.melanieannan.com](http://www.melanieannan.com)

*Original Score by*..... Jessica Chapnik Kahn  
and Nadav Kahn  
*Script Editor*.....Karin Altmann  
*Sound Design & Mix*..... Nathan Johnson  
*Colour Grade*.....Tamara Seeck  
*Online Editor*.....Nick King  
*Key Artist*.....Jeremy Saunders  
*Location Support*.....Split Image  
*Post-Production facility*.....Bridge Road Post  
*Production Company*.....House of Gary  
*Executive Producer*.....David Michaels  
*Executive Producer*.....Eric Wilkinson

## **APPEARING IN THE FILM:**

Jennifer Lynch	Rajdeep Chaubey
Sydney Lynch	Brad Bryan
Mallika Sherawat	Jessica Jordan
Govind Menon	Robert Kurtzman
Vikram Singh	Dave Greathouse
Divya Dutta	Brian Denski
Raman Trikha	Krishna
Madhu Ambat	Princess Lakshmi Bai
Yogesh Dixit (Yogi)	Jim Robbins
Akhilesh Mizra	Zeppelin the pug
Guatham	And the entire Cast and crew of Hisss
Ud Udayan	

## STILL PHOTOGRAPHS

*The following selection of stills are available in high res upon request:*



Jennifer Lynch directing Hiss in Mumbai.



Jennifer Lynch on set at Filmistan Studios.



Jennifer Lynch after the 'Holi' celebration scene.



Jennifer Lynch directs the 'Holi' scene in Hiss.



Jennifer Lynch directing Mallika Sherawat (Nagin) in a scene from Hiss. Thekkady Jungle, Kerala.



Mallika Sherawat on the set of Hiss.