

An interview with filmmaker Niclas Gillis and Tanisha Lambright of *Hold Me Down*

Norisa Diaz
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Niclas Gillis, the 28-year-old Swedish director and actress Tanisha Lambright, spoke recently to the WSWs about their film *Hold Me Down* (2017). The film depicts a day in the life of Chastity, a 19-year-old single mother who works as a prostitute in an illicit club in the South Bronx, New York, to support her young daughter.

Born and raised in Stockholm, Sweden, Gillis began studying film production at Stockholm University at fifteen.

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Norisa Diaz: Niclas, how did you come to learn of the reality of women like Chastity?

Niclas Gillis: In 2009, I moved to America from Sweden to attend SUNY [The State University of New York] on Long Island. Within three months, I was invited to what I thought was going to be a regular house party in Harlem, but which turned out to be an illicit event similar to the one depicted in the film.

I saw a young woman have sex with a stranger on the floor of a crowded room for single dollar bills and was shocked that, though we were the same age, our realities were so radically different. Afterward, I asked her if she was okay and she told me she had a two-year-old daughter, and this was what she had to do to survive.

That put a worm in my head. I couldn't understand what developed country could allow a young mother to go through this to support her child, and of course I feared for what would become of her daughter. But most troubling of all was that her predicament seemed so common.

I realized that the underlying factors must have existed for such a long period of time and affected so many people. I started to research American history and its bearing on the present day.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, there is almost no country in the developed world in which the disparity between rich and poor is greater than it is here. In spite of the so-called American Dream, the likelihood of a person making it from one end of the economic spectrum to the other is less here than it is in almost any other developed nation.

There seemed to be a great disparity between reality and people's perception of reality. I wanted to make a film that would show very truthfully what reality is like for so many women born into poverty in the United States and give them a platform to tell their own stories in their own voices, and raise awareness about the conditions they face and inspire change.

Norisa Diaz: Tanisha, the vignettes of you and Tianna Allen speaking are extremely powerful in explaining that social mobility is really a fairytale. You say that "this world makes you think you can't be nothing else."

Tanisha Lambright: I am one of the lucky ones that had an outlet like this film. That won't happen for many women who don't have that hope. Most women I know are single mothers. I can name on the fingers of one hand women I know who grew up with a mother and father. I come from where it's just single mothers, and they just do what they have to do to get by. You look on TV and they tell you you can make something of yourself, that is true when you get a head start, or I'm sorry to say this, when you're white.

I know people including myself who have been to college, but it was so hard financially I couldn't finish because of the position I am put in. There are women struggling in poverty and are still trying to get out, but it's so hard. At the end of the day, when I go to school and I go to work and I do all the right things, and I still

have to be in the streets doing side things just to get by, it makes you feel like you'll just never have a way out. It's a never-ending cycle.

The way life is portrayed in this movie is the way it is. Sometimes on TV it's portrayed in a way where it's not scary enough—it doesn't show the truth. It shows the glorified parts, the money, but it doesn't show the rape, the abuse, it doesn't show those things. I am hoping those things help young ladies look at the situation, at this lifestyle, and try not to go down same road.

Norisa Diaz: There are some who argue that one can only make art or music about one's own race, gender, nationality, etc. The artist Dana Schutz, for example, who is white, was attacked for her painting about the black youth, Emmett Till, killed by racists. The story behind your coming to learn of the experience of women in situations such as Chastity's and the production of this film really helps explode those notions.

Niclas Gillis: If we are ever to bring an end to racism, we have to step outside of complacent racism. Because I am not directly affected by this, then "I don't care."

As a humanist, I believe we all matter equally. I believe that we all bleed the same color and we all deserve the same basic human rights, so I don't see a distinction between myself and Tanisha based on the shade of our skin.

Norisa Diaz: There are some academics that emphasize the so-called "agency" or empowerment of sex workers and even call for their unionization. Your film powerfully shows there is little or no choice in the matter.

Niclas Gillis: Sex work encompasses a wide variety of circumstances—fundamentally, whatever two consenting adults should be allowed to do.

This is not a criticism of prostitution as a phenomenon, but a criticism of system that puts certain women in a situation where they have to prostitute to make ends meet. So in that way, prostitution as seen in the context of this film is really a consequence of a much bigger problem as opposed to being the problem itself.

Norisa Diaz: To what degree is it totally "consensual" under capitalism, when you have to make money to meet basic needs and put food on the table?

Tanisha Lambright: To be honest, the way I see it, the

sex business is glorified, which makes it seem like it is something acceptable. What about women and children who are forced economically into prostitution. What about those women? It's not a choice for them. I think it's more about the have and have-nots.

Norisa Diaz: Today we see immigrants being blamed, for poverty, unemployment. Historically, there is a continued use of immigration or race to divide people.

Tanisha Lambright: Immigrants are the scapegoat of everything. The poor are meant to stay poor, the rich are meant to stay rich. It doesn't matter where you were born or if you come to America, you are a minority. If you were born in a social class, especially if you are a minority, you can give up the fact that you will have an equal life or equal anything as a white woman.

Racism and immigrants are being scapegoated. In my mind, everything is a plan for poor people to stay poor, stay in poverty, minorities to stay in low income, it keeps the social status. It's not a secret.

Niclas Gillis: Now we have this man, Trump, who is the president. Power never abdicates. The people in power most often do their best to preserve the current power structure regardless of who suffers.

Norisa Diaz: What is the way forward to eradicate poverty and inequality?

Niclas Gillis: James Baldwin said that not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it's faced, and that really resonates with me. We need to recognize there is a problem.

In my mind, it is imperative that all children regardless of their birth or circumstances have the same access to quality education, quality nutrition, a safe place to live and a visible path out of poverty.

The film can be viewed here.



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