CAMILLE PAGLIA AND GLENN BELVERIO

(THE ARTIST FORMERLY KNOWN AS GLENNDA ORGASM)

PAY HOMAGE TO THE QUEEN OF CAMP,

JACQUELINE SUSANN

EDITOR'S NOTE: Jacqueline Susann has risen! In October, Grove Press re-released the late novelist's campy 1966 blockbuster, "Valley of the Dolls," which had been out of print for 15 years. On Nov. 14-15, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art held a "Jacqueline Susann Weekend," featuring a screening of the 20th Century Fox film based on the novel, starring Patty Duke, Barbara Parkins and Sharon Tate. And earlier this week, Fox released the film on video for the first time. In honor of this Jackie S. revival, Salon's Camillle Paglia engaged in a Platonic dialogue with her friend and video collaborator, Glenn Belverio, the Artist Formerly Known as Glennda Orgasm. A New York fashion stylist, Belverio is assistant fashion editor of Irish Marie Claire, as well as of Madison magazine, premiering in spring 1998.

Paglia: We are here to honor our Uranian Aphrodite and our Diotima, Jacqueline Susann --

goddess, priestess, Muse!

Belverio: It's about time that tribute is being paid to Jacqueline Susann, because so much of pop culture now is informed by what she did -- "Melrose Place" and so on. I mean, people go on and on about Jackie Collins and the dirty books that she wrote, but no one realizes that Jacqueline Susann started that whole genre of adult books.

Paglia: Harold Robbins also deserves credit. It was Susann and Robbins together who are the fonts of so much contemporary discourse about pop. For me, "Valley of the Dolls," like "Auntie Mame," is one of the great books of the postwar era. There are very few so-called "serious" novels following World War II that mean anything to me. I just don't identify at all with any of those major heavy-hitters of fiction -- Bellow, Malamud, Grass, Pynchon, and so on. For me there's "Auntie Mame," "Valley of the Dolls," Mary McCarthy's "The Group" -- and very little else, except Tennessee Williams' plays. I just feel that Jacqueline Susann was in sync with the *Zeitgeist* in many crucial ways. Her prose is our common language, our demotic -- it's where English IS -- it's the way English is spoken today, in the street and in the marketplace. It's not this reactionary, bourgeois, moralistic, gassy effusion that suffocates "serious" fiction.

Belverio: It's really important that this book has come out now, because you'd be surprised at how many 20-something fags are walking around New York who have never even HEARD of Jacqueline Susann!

Paglia: You're kidding!

Belverio: I was on a date with a producer for the RuPaul show, 29 years old, and he had a Jackie Collins book in his apartment. And I said, "Oh, Jacqueline Susann paved the way for Jackie Collins," and he went, "Who?" I said, "'Valley of the Dolls'! You're a producer for the RuPaul show, it's like this camp show, and you don't know who

Jacqueline Susann is?!"

Paglia: Oh, my God!

Belverio: I was SHOCKED! You know how I'm like this encyclopedia, so I went through this whole capsule history about Jacqueline Susann, including "Valley of the Dolls" and of course "The Love Machine," which is about the TV industry -- which is what he was doing. It's crucial that these books are being re-released. People have to read them. It's perfect for the pop culture moment now.

Paglia: I absolutely agree. I've described in my memoir about Stephen Jarratt in "Vamps & Tramps" ("My Brothers in Crime") what an enormous impact "Valley of the Dolls" had on me in college and how odd it was that I always had the same reactions to things as gay men. How did you get interested in it?

Belverio: You know, this book came out the year I was born --1966. And my mother was a HUGE fan of the book. Back in the 1960s and early '70s, my mother was a dead ringer for Jacqueline Susann! She had big black wigs; she wore outfits like Jacqueline Susann; she was very dramatic. Now I know that my mother was the way she was because of this book. She used to take pills -- she was inspired by this book to take Valium! She read the book from cover to cover when it came out. One of my earliest memories is that when I was 7 years old, my mother woke me up in the middle of the night during a thunder and lightning storm -- high drama, of course! -- it was 1 a.m., and she made me watch "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" on TV! When I was 7! She was just like Jacqueline Susann -- this big larger-than-life woman coming into my bedroom with her big black wig!

Paglia: (Laughing) She forced you to watch that movie when you were 7? It probably traumatized you forever! Elizabeth Taylor is in a fright wig in that movie!

Belverio: It's affected the whole rest of my life from that moment on. My mother was exactly like Jacqueline Susann -- brash, ballsy -- her life was all about drama.

Paglia: I really think Jacqueline Susann saw into the heart of modern Hollywood. She had the quality of the old Jewish matriarchs -- a dominatrix style, combined with the business shrewdness of the Eastern European Jewish immigrants who created Hollywood and made it an "empire of their own," to quote the title of Neal Gabler's fine book about early Hollywood. Plus Susann had such a sense of performance. There are three different areas here: the self-assertive outspokenness of Jewish women; the pragmatic business sense without illusions -- no illusions about life; and then, what's also in Jewish history, the incredible instinct for performance in music, vaudeville, show business in general. This is one reason I love Susann's writing -- because she sees everything in terms of performance -- a major arts principle eons before those dopey postmodernist theorists got hold of it. Just flipping through "Valley of the Dolls," I see that every scene, every single exchange, is always keyed to performance. People have noticed that Harold Robbins' and Jacqueline Susann's books are practically screenplays; they're all ready to be movies. Everything's keyed to how people look, what they're wearing, how they're behaving. And it's done so economically. That's what's so amazing to me. Everything is BOOM, BOOM, BOOM -- whereas all these other serious novels of her period and ours are so verbose --

Belverio: Too many words! Excess words!

Paglia: Yes, too many words that get in the way! But she visualizes everything. And there's a punchy, masculine, brazen quality to her writing that I identify with as a reader and now as a writer.

Belverio: Critics always put down her writing style.

Paglia: From then to now, the literary establishment has refused to regard her as a serious writer. She's considered a "trash" novelist, with no redeeming literary qualities.

Belverio: That's so elitist!

Paglia: But I know exactly what they're talking about. And I see why they can't possibly understand how she's a good writer. Because the kind of language that she uses and the kind of imagination she has are totally contemporary. And those people are stuck in the past -- they're walking ghouls who believe that the language of Tolstoy and the rest of the great 19th century novelists, as well as the ironic wordplay of Joyce and the hot-house modernists, is somehow the language of today. The way most of today's "serious" novelists and essayists write is dead as a doornail! So I can see exactly what they find as too harsh in Susann -- their ears hurt! Just as they find ME too abrasive -- they would say "vulgar"-- for their pretentious, elitist and, to me, very bourgeois style.

Belverio: She has a working-class style.

Paglia: Yes, she's a working-class gal. She's like early Joan Crawford.

Belverio: Or early Streisand.

Paglia: Well, Streisand was a little more emotive, a bit more "hurt" and removed. I think Jacqueline Susann was much more brass tacks -- "Sit down! We'll cut this contract." Susann was someone you'd want to send out to negotiate your contracts for you. Whereas early Streisand was a real chanteuse; she didn't have the hard shell. She was too self-involved. She's always been like that, although she's a great artist. But Susann's someone you don't want to mess with -- she played hardball, she saw the world the way it was. So I admire her as a person and as a businesswoman. She was more like Madonna, who has that hard, shrewd, commercial quality and is able to be a one-woman industry. Of

course, Susann also had the support of a hard-driving husband, while Madonna's done it on her own.

Belverio: You know, I was expecting to be disappointed by the design of the new edition of "Valley of the Dolls," but it's amazing! It's so great -- the pink cover and cut-out pills, and then you open it up, and there are the three actresses from the 1967 film.

Paglia: When did you see the film for the first time?

Belverio: I knew about the book when I was a kid, but I had never seen the film. When I moved to New York in 1987, I went through this very dour socialist period when I was a feminist gay activist, and I had a falling out with camp -- even though I'd been a very campy kid and teenager. But in New York I got very serious and political. Then in 1989 I got to know the drag queen, Endive, who was best friends with Lypsinka. So we went over to Lypsinka's apartment one day. I'm in combat boots; everything's for the gay cause, for AIDS, etc., and Lypsinka sits me down and makes me watch "Valley of the Dolls." Lypsinka and Endive are laughing and carrying on, and I'm going, "I don't get it." Then all of a sudden it seeped in. And it was shortly after I saw the film that I began doing drag. So you could say I had a conversion experience -- "Valley of the Dolls" allowed me to rediscover my camp roots. But even after I started doing drag and had my cable TV show and videos as Glennda Orgasm, I still retained my political message. That's what made me different -- I was campy, but I had something to say, unlike the other drag queens. I was almost satirizing my position in the gay political landscape.

Paglia: I remember you saying it's very revealing whom one identifies with in "Valley of the Dolls".

Belverio: Yes! I'm Barbara Parkins as Anne Welles, the good girl from Lawrenceville,

Massechusetts, Because I'm the good girl who came to New York from Hope, New Jersey, a small town. I came to New York innocent, naive, green, simple. Anne Welles got mixed up with a bad man -- Lyon Burke, the gigolo -- and I got mixed up with bad men. That was my life! Anne Welles had a brief dalliance with pills in the movie, and she survives it. She's a dilettante pillhead. I did the same thing. I went through a period where I was taking Canadian codeines, and I was completely addicted to them. But I was never the sort of person who would become a slave to it. That's what's different about the book and the movie. In the book, Anne Welles does become a slave to it; she sinks into the hell of pills. Which is why I love Barbara Parkins' characterization in the movie -- because she walks away from pills and walks away from the bad man, and she walks through the New England snow at the end with her head held high. And that's so ME now -- I'm a survivor; I look out for myself; and I don't let anything enslave me.

Paglia: And you said about me that I'm Susan Hayward as superstar Helen Lawson.

Belverio: (Laughing) You're just like Helen Lawson -- tough and brash -- "Get that girl out of here!" You don't want any competition -- you just plow them under! You don't put up with any bullshit. You're the real professional, kind of a loner -- you don't want people in your dressing room.

Paglia: (Laughing) Yes -- she's a monster! Helen Lawson is also like Jacqueline Susann, don't you think?

Belverio: Exactly. It's very interesting that in the book, Helen Lawson has this friendship with Anne Welles, which is not in the movie. Helen's part is way too small in the movie. So I'm Anne Welles, and you're Helen Lawson and we have a friendship, just like in the book. But you've never turned on me, like Helen Lawson!

Paglia: In the book there's also much more homosexuality.

Belverio: Yes, lesbianism and heterosexual anal sex! Jennifer's involved with her Swiss girlfriend, who's not in the movie at all -- and then Jennifer has anal sex with Tony. "Turn over!" he tells her. "You know what I want to do! Now *turn over!*" He's so crass.

Paglia: And the book ends darkly, while the movie doesn't.

Belverio: I like the book because it has a film noir ending, which would have been perfect for the movie.

Paglia: But they couldn't get away with it then.

Belverio: No, they couldn't. But it's so great. "It's New Year's Eve," Anne goes, "I'll just take another doll!" But I like the way the movie ends, since I don't want a film noir ending in MY life!

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