# 'Lovelace' Falls Limp Despite Its Relatively Strong Cast

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When *Deep Throat* was released in 1972, there was no other movie like it at the time. For starters, the pornographic film was the first frothy soiree to actually have a "story" and the film's star, Linda Lovelace, had more than a knack for fellatio—some actually called her skills art. The combination of porn newbie and plot-in-porn—as outlandish as that plot was—added more fuel to the sexual revolution of the era. And suddenly, at 22, the woman who was born Linda Susan Boreman—a gal who had gone by the nickname "Holy Holy" in her teens —had become a worldwide porn superstar. Six years later, Lovelace denounced her porn career and in the years that followed, she published a memoir ("Ordeal"), which chronicled the untold story of her short-lived adult film journey, and eventually went on to become a spokesperson for the anti-pornography movement.
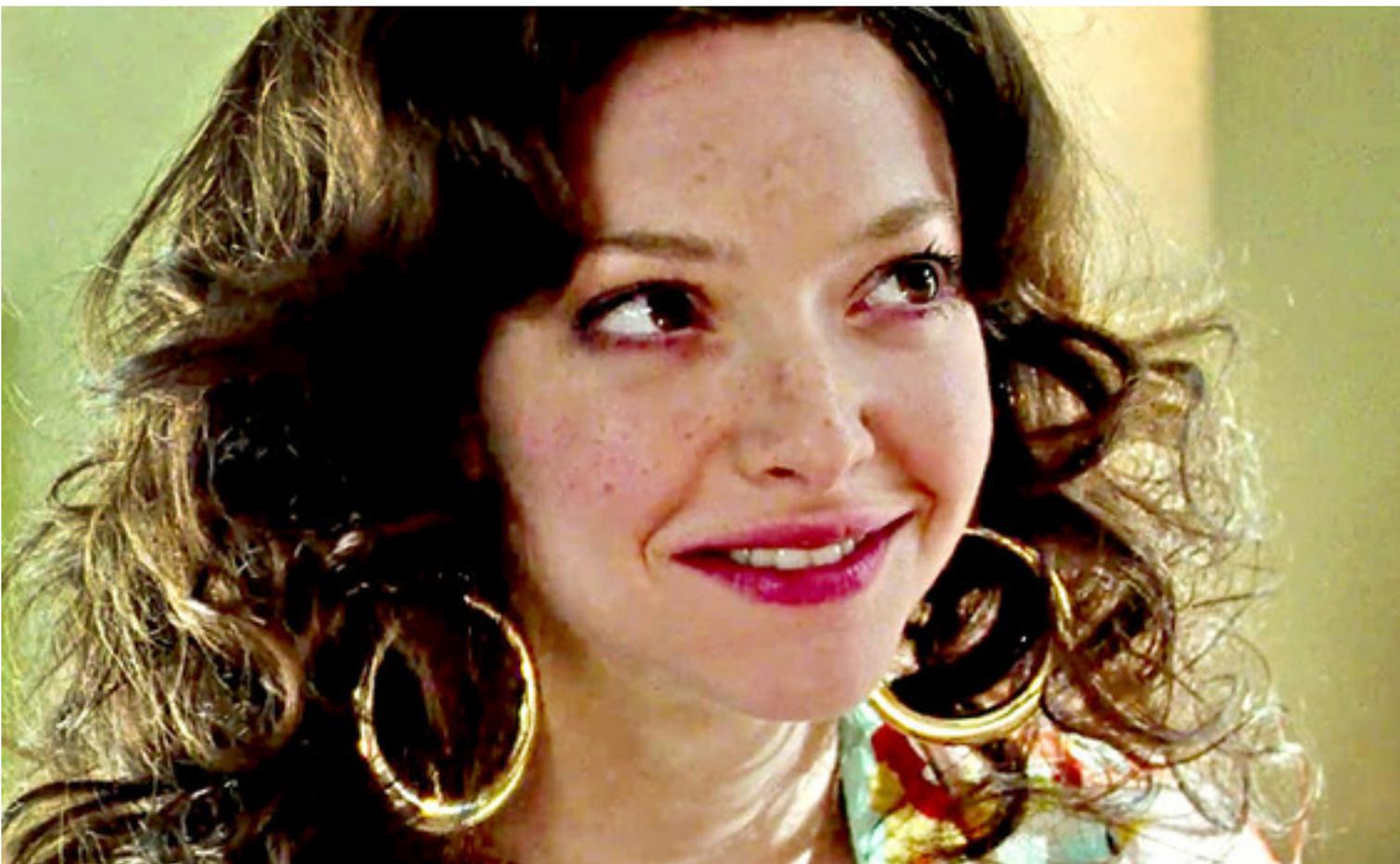
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What was the impetus for Lovelace's significant transformation? And what did she learn about herself—and life— after leaping off the porn mattress?

Those are certainly interesting questions and it would have been even more interesting to explore them in a story. Unfortunately, that's not the tale *Lovelace* wants to tell. Instead, what directors Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman (*Howl, The Celluloid Closet*) have apparently guided screenwriter Andy Bellin—not the first writer on

this project, by the way—to create is a kind of '70s peep show/costume party featuring broadstrokes of an iconic figure in an iconic era, all the while hoping that it captures the deeper layers of a woman's haunting psychological journey.

They don't quite pull it off. The irony—*Lovelace* just isn't that deep.

Amanda Seyfried (*Les Misérables, Mamma Mia*) morphs into the title role here. We first discover young Linda being lured into the swarmy clutches of charismatic hustler Chuck Traynor (Peter Sarsgaard). This Linda is sweet and naïve, although she's had some challenges—she gave away her baby after a teen pregnancy and her parents, particularly her mother, are conservative and a bit controlling. Chuck's not that different, although Linda isn't able to see that initially. He opens up a whole new sexual world to Linda and eventually convinces her to make some adult film shorts. So adept at oral sex is Linda, that Chuck suddenly sees dollar signs and is soon setting up meetings with porn industry filmmakers—wonderfully performed with opportunistic sleaze by Bobby Cannavale, Chris Noth and Hank Azaria.

The filmmakers take us all the way through the making of *Deep Throat*, its extraordinary success and some of the challenges Linda faces along the way. And in a nice move, the film pivots from what we've experienced and begins filling in some missing pieces—a kind of flashback/reflection seen through Linda's eyes. Chuck, we discover, is far more dangerous—physically, psychologically—than we are led to believe. It's an effective tool and adds some needed richness in this outing, but not enough to keep it fully erect.

The biggest mistake the fimmakers fail to pull off is to effectively convince us of Linda's magnanimous transformation. There's not enough in the script to show us Linda's inner world and we're asked to take blind leaps when she moves from being a naïve, doe-eyed lass to a young woman who, apparently, has come into her own sexually, boasting a newfound sexual freedom that inspires the masses. Seyfried's acting range is limited, too—she lacks true presence here and can't quite cough up the whole Linda. Meanwhile, Sarsgaard—one of the industry's more captivating performers of late—captures Chuck to winning ends but the script nearly turns him into a caricature.

We do get is a chilling, downright haunting portrait of Linda's mother—what an interesting, clenched-jawed beast this woman is. Played by Sharon Stone, she is actually one of the best things to watch on screen. That's good. But not great. Surely, the filmmakers wanted their audience to connect more with the porn star they've been shining the spotlight on and not a middle-aged woman playing her mother.

Still, *Lovelace* is wonderfully shot and unravels steadily. And while it tends to go overboard, bludgeoning us with '70s flair—the music, the clothes, the cars, OK, we get it—there's enough to keep us relatively interested in what might happen next. But unlike, say, *Boogie Nights*, which did a wonderful job diving into the inner emotional layers of Mark Wahlberg's porn titan Dirk Diggler, it falls short of being the knockout that it could have been. We never really know Linda Lovelace in this outing—not really. We're given scenes and situations but by keeping us on the surface of a life, the filmmakers never give us a full life to truly care about.

That's what porn does. It's not what the directors of a biopic should have been aiming for.

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