

cover story

Let's talk about sex

How did an ex-psychiatric nurse end up running half Melbourne's adult entertainment industry? **Claire Halliday** reports.

It's 4.30pm and Maxine Fensom is sipping a glass of chardonnay in her office upstairs at Richmond's Central Club Hotel. Today, like every Tuesday, the 25 strippers on her books come in to sort out their pay. It's an unpretentious space — the floor coverings are yesteryear pub-style, richly patterned and worn in parts from the tread of many feet. Along one wall is a battered couch.

There's a knock at the door and the first of Fensom's employees walks in — a woman with a sweet face and a handbag containing a small white dog.

Fensom invites her in with a sweep of her hand and an offer of wine. "I'll just move these things," she says as she scoops a collection of lacy G-strings, Santa-inspired negligees and calendars of barely-dressed women from the couch. The woman is here to go over her coming week's roster of parties and hostess work.

On the desk in front of her are a collection of mobile phones and pagers. Spend 10 minutes with Fensom and the beep, ring and buzz of incoming calls becomes background noise. Two phones ring at once and she juggles between calls.

"A stripper for next Friday? Day or night? So it's a buck's party?" Fensom pulls the phone from her ear to nod at the woman with the fluffy dog. The woman nods back her availability. "No problem. I have just the girl."

Even those outside of the adult entertainment industry know Fensom's name. Drive along Punt Road and there she is, staring out from the promotional billboards dressed in fake fur to advertise the "naughty" lunches she hosts in her Richmond restaurant. Then there's her stripping agency — the biggest in town — her website (which gets a million hits a month), the lingerie range and her regular porn parties. When Channel Nine's *The Footy Show* want some women to dress up the occasional segment, or *Rove Live's* production team need a venue to do a stripping-related sketch, it's her they call.

Fensom, 45, works hard but lives well. Her house, a tri-level warehouse space, is comfortably stylish. She drives a canary yellow MR2 convertible which she describes as "totally impractical" but "fun to drive and get the looks". There's a bit of flash and trash about her, but that's only part of the Maxine Fensom story.

Many people assume that her tale is that of working girl made good, an assumption that annoys Fensom. "That's not the way it was with me," she says. "People have a skewed view of the adult industry. We're educated people running a business like any other business. There is some trash, of course, but there are a lot of good people too. There's nothing wrong with being a working girl but it's not my go. I wouldn't take my clothes off. I love sex and I have an open mind but when it comes to myself, I'm modest really."

Maxine the entrepreneur: "People have a skewed view of the industry ... We're running a business like any other business."

PICTURE: ROB BANKS

Yet here she is, nudging 10pm on a Thursday night at the Comic's Lounge in West Melbourne, hosting one of her regular porn parties. It's all round tables, sticky carpet and bourbon and Coke. There's a naked woman strutting up and down the walkway that juts from the stage. She bends over in front of a man still dressed in his work suit and tie and plays with a sex toy. For the cost of a \$50 ticket he will see nearly three hours of women performing similar acts. For the audience it's titillation. For Fensom it's business, and a nice little earner.

Later in the evening she takes to the stage to read out raffle ticket numbers for door prizes including pornographic magazines, a blow-up doll and a voucher to an inner-suburban brothel. The latter is won by a woman in her 50s — one half of just five couples in the audience — who tells Fensom that she has been married for 28 years.

Caught up in the moment, the woman unbuttons her shirt to reveal a lacy black bra and does her own little catwalk shuffle to the laughter and applause of the men seated around the stage.

"Could you believe that?" says Fensom back at her front table, flanked by her personal assistant, Chanel.

Also with Fensom is her partner of 10 years, Michael Banks, a police detective she met when he turned up to one of her "naughty" lunches with the drug squad. Dressed in baggy jeans and a white T-shirt, he is quiet and obliging, the opposite of Fensom's brashness and bravado.

The collision of their two worlds has not been without its problems. For Banks, the pressure of police life coupled with his association with Fensom has occasionally put strain on the relationship. Then there was the time, a few years ago, when the vice squad tried to bust her for prostitution after questioning the content of her porn parties.

"I'm sure it hasn't always been easy for Michael to be with me. I think he's got the rough end of the stick sometimes. Probably stuff I haven't even heard about. But I love him and we're really happy," Fensom says. "He's really a lovely man."

Fensom never meant to end up in the sex industry. Brought up by her single mother, she trained as a psychiatric nurse but found the work depressing and turned to her true passions — dancing and acting. With the help of her mother, also a nurse, she set up a dance troupe called the High-Rise City Dancers and offered them for promotional work around town.

"We were doing lingerie parades — sexy but tasteful — and we opened at every club in Melbourne. John Farnham shows. The Palace, everywhere. That was a very successful business for a number of years."

Along the way there was some voice-over work for a company which ran 0055 telephone lines. Fensom was the astrologist. The gig led to a daily horoscope segment on Channel Nine's *In Mel-*

bourne Today, hosted by Ernie Sigley and Denise Drysdale.

"Every Monday morning I'd be at Channel Nine at 6am and we'd tape the week's shows. I really thought that was my big break." It wasn't. She lasted three years before being pulled aside by a producer. "He said that I was too old, that I had no talent, and that nobody liked me — even Kerry Packer," she says. "I was absolutely devastated."

In the same week, a dance troupe from Perth hit the Melbourne scene. They targeted the same venues that she had worked regularly, undercut her by half and went nude.

"How could we compete? I was out of work and had no business. Pretty much all in five days. I had a mortgage. It was a real turning point. I had to change my life. I didn't know how I was going to make my money."

She answered an ad for a topless waitress that promised \$400 a week. "I agonised over it. Then I just went, 'OK, I do topless down the beach — I'll go for it.'" Dressed in a marching girl outfit and serving beers to the punters, she lasted one week.

"So then I went down to the Middle Park Hotel and the guy there said I could have the room to put on shows. I didn't know what to call it and he said, 'Why not Maxine's?' I started getting buck's parties and then it just grew. The girls started getting direct approaches asking them to do shows and I thought, 'hang on, I should be getting that work'. So it started."

Four years ago she took a lease on the room above the Central Club Hotel and opened Maxine's Naughty Lunches, where Melbourne's middle management pay \$85 for lunch and a little titillation to help them celebrate their sales figures.

This Friday lunchtime, just before Christmas, things are in full swing at Maxine's. The 30 or so men are mainly dressed in suits and ties and three of Maxine's girls, wearing scanty fur-trimmed Santa outfits, are serving them wild duck risotto. It's all harmless fun with a bit of flirting here and there, as the girls perch on the punters' knees. The lunch is punctuated by 10-minute strip shows on the stage at the front of the room; one girl sheds her clothes to the strains of Marilyn Monroe's *Heatwave*, another bumps and grinds her way through Berlin's *Take My Breath Away*.

Fensom is a rarity in an industry notorious for exploiting its staff. The 25 women who work for her all get a retaining wage and superannuation instead of being paid per booking. Her staff are a mix of professional strippers and women seeking a bit of extra cash on the side of motherhood or other work. She finds most through word of mouth ("the women who want stripping work will find you").

If the stripper has been to private parties, then she will pay Fensom her 10 per cent commission.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 6

primer

TOMORROW'S CONVERSATION TOPICS TODAY

WATCH IT, BILL

Bill Gates hopes you like his new wristwatch. He eschews the platinum Piaget timepieces sported by other billionaires and wears a Dick Tracy style watch called SPOT (Smart Personal Objects Technology). Bill's watch, the prototype of a tech toy Microsoft launched this week with watchmakers Suunto and Fossil, adjusts time zones automatically for travellers, and receives updates on news, weather, and even appointments and grocery lists ("get milk") via FM transmission. The big watches also can receive text messages and stockmarket reports ("Hi Bill, UR still v v rich!").



GRANNY DAY CARE

Forget spendthrift generation Y. US magazine *Entrepreneur* reports that retirees over 68 spend about 14 per cent of the consumer dollar, about \$588 billion. The fastest growing franchises in the US are devoted to senior care, especially those firms planning to keep ageing boomers out of nursing homes. "Numerous studies point to the same trend: as we age, we want to stay in our own homes," says Allen Riggs, president of ComfortKeepers, an in-home senior-care provider. "Even if assistance is needed, people want that assistance in their homes." Meanwhile, Jeff Huber, of Home Instead Senior Care, predicts: "Elder care will replace child care as the number-one social issue in North America."



MARLBORO COUNTRY

No Smoking signs may be going up across Western Europe, but Big Tobacco has been welcomed into Serbia. *Time* magazine reports that both Philip Morris International (maker of Marlboro) and British American Tobacco (Dunhill) have bought Serbian tobacco factories and plan to make their big brands there. The apparatchiks of the EU are unimpressed with this growth in the European cigarette market, but the Serbian Government is delighted. "Just having Philip Morris and BAT here is worth more than a thousand years of preaching how business-friendly Serbia is," Aleksandar Vlahovic, the Serbian Minister of Economy and Privatisation, told *Time*. "If there are no bigwigs around, no one believes you."

THE AMISH DIET

Guess which ethnic group in America has the lowest levels of obesity? The Old Order Amish. Despite a diet big on meat, potatoes, gravy, cakes, cheese and cream, only 4 per cent of this group of neo-Luddite farmers are obese. "So what's their secret?" asks the *Los Angeles Times*. "Exercise, people. Exercise." Although the Amish don't do aerobics, the average Old Order man spends 10 hours a week on vigorous activities such as baling hay, shoeing horses or shovelling sod, while the women spend their time weeding the vegetable patch, hauling heavy baskets and washing by hand in large coppers. And they walk everywhere. Proof that a life of repetitive manual toil will keep you slim. But will mainstream fatties turn Amish to lose the lard?



Michelle Griffin

cover story



Just another day at the office: Maxine Fensom juggles requests for strippers. PICTURE: HEATH MISSEN

FROM PAGE 4

If Fensom has had a big week of her own restaurant lunches, boat cruises or porn parties, it will be the woman who can expect to receive a fat envelope of cash. In a good week her girls can earn \$1200.

Fensom's strippers, she says, are strictly strippers. There are very clear lines in the industry that are rarely crossed. "Strippers don't do topless. Topless don't strip and strippers do not do escorts. And escorts do not strip," she says.

The following Tuesday at the weekly pay session, Fensom's girls are unhappy. At a private party the previous Saturday night some of her strippers were hostessing, bikini-clad, at a buck's function. The murmur among the women since is that one of them — a young stripper — went further than she should. Her reward for the private showing was, according to the other strippers, a mere \$50.

Fensom is unsentimentally business-like. Dissatisfaction is not good for her girls. "I've been in this business for 15 years and I have a good reputation. I don't want that compromised," she tells the offender.

Reputation though, is not the only issue. In Fensom's eyes, the safety of all the women was compromised and safety in the industry is something she takes very seriously. She supports legalised brothels and is anti-street prostitution. "The worldwide sex industry is becoming more mainstream, which can only add to more acceptance and more safety for those working within it." The growth of table-top dancing clubs is positive too, she believes — another way the industry can crawl out of its seedy reputation and move forward into licensed legality.

"There needs to be some sort of code of conduct in the adult industry and there is none at the moment ... there's nothing that covers strippers at all. If you work in a tabletop club and you break your ankle, it's a case of see you when you get better."

Fensom lobbies for better recognition of the

adult industry and more rights for those working within it whenever there is an opportunity, and is also a member of the government advisory committee which looks at adult industry issues.

She is also behind the Adult Industry Awards, now in its third year. The last one, held in November, was a grand black tie event held at the Grand Hyatt at which 32 awards, including best brothel and best solo escort, were made.

Fensom is a self-confessed self-promoter. In a move she admits was heavy with publicity prospects, but also earnest in its desire for political change, she ran as a candidate for the state election in 2002 with policies that combined an increase in sentencing for perpetrators of violent crime, better awareness around issues of drug rehabilitation and freedom to purchase non-violent erotica.

"I know I had the best-looking how to vote card," she says with a laugh. "I had a great reaction. The Liberal Party gave me their first preference, which was a killer for me and a killer for them. I had the world media ringing me to ask for my opinion on political issues ... I think next election I might run for the Senate."

She sees her time in the industry lasting another five years or so. Then, maybe, she'll keep the name and let someone else be the public face. "You see a lot of human nature at its worst in this business. It has to make an impact." In the meantime, having licensed out her business to Sydney four years ago, she plans to target other states too.

"I'm still very hungry and still want to conquer the world," Fensom says. "Anyone who thinks of adult entertainment, I want them to think of Maxine's."

It's a long way from the days when Fensom was reticent about divulging her occupation. "I used to hide it but now I'm proud of it. I pay my taxes and I run a legitimate business and I run it well. I don't cheapen women. I don't make anyone do anything they don't want to do. They get paid, they come to me and tell me what they're prepared to do and what they won't do," she says.

THE FACTS: AUSTRALIA'S SEX INDUSTRY

- The sex industry's official publication, *The Eros Journal*, says sex is one of Australia's most rapidly expanding industries. The turnover for 2002 was \$1.5 billion.
- Australian men make nearly 12 million visits to sex workers each year. That's more than two visits a year for each male over 18 years.
- Australian women buy 1 million vibrators each year.
- The Canberra-based X-rated movie industry is the fifth largest manufacturer, and one of

the largest export-revenue earners, in the nation's capital. Annual turnover is \$34 million.

- Half of Australia Post's Express Courier division in Canberra is dedicated to running adult videos to the rest of Australia, with one third of these going to Queensland.
- Last year, 62,500 people paid \$12 each to visit the sex-industry trade fair, Sexpo, at the Melbourne Exhibition Centre.
- An estimated 40 stripping agencies operate in Melbourne.