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Sook-Yin Lee and Lindsay Beamish pose for photographers during a photo session for their film *Shortbus* at the Cannes film festival.

Explicit film gives Canadian actress maximum exposure

BY MICHAEL GILTZ

CANNES, France — The most attention-getting film at the 59th annual Cannes Film Festival is *Shortbus*, director John Cameron Mitchell's follow-up to the cult hit musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*. The film's been on everyone's radar for years because Mitchell solicited actors who were willing to have sex on camera. The press screening at Cannes was a sold-out free-for-all as countless journalists were turned away and the official premiere featured warm applause and a standing ovation.

But anyone expecting hot-and-heavy action should look elsewhere. What everyone is commenting on is the film's sweetness, with the *New York Times* saying *Shortbus* is "less shocking than disarming."

And at the centre of the ensemble is Vancouver's Sook-Yin Lee, whom *Screen International* singled out as "a real revelation. [Lee] brings not only deft comic timing but also a gritty emotional intensity."

In the film, Lee plays Sofia, a New York City sex therapist who has never had an orgasm. Her solution? Head to *Shortbus*, a utopian happening where anything goes sexually and the only rule is to have no rules. Along with Sofia and her husband Rob, there's a dominatrix, a gay couple who are feeling they've become too routine, group orgies and a vampy master of ceremonies played by Justin Bond of the acclaimed duo Kiki & Herb.

It's easily the best film role yet for Lee, who was a VJ on Much Music for a number of years and now hosts a CBC radio show called *Definitely Not The Opera*. You might assume anyone willing to do a role that involves explicit sex scenes (however silly, funny and sweet they're played) would be brave in her private life. But Lee says it's the other way around.

"I was a very socially awkward teenager — typical adolescent things. When I became unable to talk, I dovetailed all those emotions into artwork."

But clearly the 30-something Lee isn't that timid. When she was 15, her parents' marriage collapsed. Lee left school and

dived into the Vancouver arts scene, trusting to her intuition.

"My instinct guides me well and there are a lot of good people out there," says Lee, who adds, "I was very lucky, too."

She wrote songs, played in an art rock band called Bob's Your Uncle and ultimately moved to Toronto. Lee's TV appearances include *The Newsroom* and *Sliders* in the U.S. She has a major role in Thom Fitzgerald's *3 Needles*.

Lee is certainly proud of the project, which was a labor of love.

And though a very savvy woman, Lee is a bit shocked when she looks ahead to all the attention. "Oh my God, is this a big deal?" she laughs. "Maybe I've just been in denial over the whole thing."

Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in New York. He is in Cannes for this year's festival.