



VICKY JONES, 38

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AMY MORGAN, 30

Star of *Touch*. "I don't just want to play comedy wench or wide-eyed ingenue, I want to play the kind of parts these two want to write"

PHOEBE WALLER-BRIDGE, 31

Writer and star of *Fleabag* and co-producer of *Touch*. "I'd just like my tits to be that much bigger — does that make me a terrible feminist?"

THREE TIMES A LADETTTE

A generation of young writers are redefining the way female sexuality is portrayed. The creators of the hit show *Fleabag* tell *Katie Glass* what happens when feminism and porn culture collide. Portrait by *Matt Holyoak*

In a boho restaurant in a hipster enclave of west London, Phoebe Waller-Bridge, Vicky Jones and Amy Morgan are sitting on mismatched furniture, quaffing champagne and debating whether to order the duck profiteroles. "I don't want to pressure anyone — but I definitely want them," Waller-Bridge grins. I'd suggested we keep this meeting casual and low-key. By the time the photoshoot ends we're three bottles in.

Superficially, Waller-Bridge is everything you'd expect if you have watched *Fleabag*, the darkly comic BBC show she wrote and starred in, and which she originally co-created as a stage play with Jones. Waller-Bridge played the eponymous *Fleabag*, a glamorously shambolic twentysomething woman chaotically negotiating modern London life. It screened on BBC3 last summer, then BBC2 in the autumn, while Amazon aired it in the US. Last month, Waller-Bridge picked up a Bafta for the role.

Like Lena Dunham's *Girls* before it — and *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones* before that — *Fleabag*'s appeal lay in how it reflected the experiences of a generation of young women, as we watch *Fleabag* ricochet between one-night stands, breakdowns, feminist retreat centres and her stepmother's penis sculpture exhibition. Most of all, though, *Fleabag*'s genius was »»→

in reflecting a contemporary shift in the way many young women talk and think about sex. Joining a new wave of outrageous and explicitly honest women, such as the comedian Amy Schumer (who wrote *Trainwreck*), Taylor Schilling (*Orange Is the New Black*), Annie Mumolo and Kristen Wiig (*Bridesmaids*), and Dunham.

“We loved *Girls*,” Waller-Bridge says. “It was such a huge defining moment for people talking about women’s experiences truthfully. It had a huge impact on us.”

Today we’re meeting to discuss *Touch*, a play Waller-Bridge and Jones are producing through their theatre company DryWrite. Jones wrote it. Morgan — best known for appearing in ITV’s Edwardian drama *Mr Selfridge* — will play the lead.

They are still working on the script, but their excitement about working together is palpable. Hanging out with them feels like having a sleepover with three girly mates. They shout over each other as they debate feminism, the pros and cons of dating apps and crack jokes about porn.

Thrillingly, Jones and Waller-Bridge’s friendship seems rather similar to that of Fleabag and Boo, her best friend in the show. Waller-Bridge shares Fleabag’s naughty cackle and dishevelled elegance — and of course her vintage pin-up looks. Jones, like Boo, is blonde, gentler, softer, calmer.

“The things that happen in the show never happened to us, but they were hugely inspired by our relationship,” Waller-Bridge explains. “There were lines that I stole verbatim from things Vicky said in real life.”

Jones and Waller-Bridge have known each other for more than a decade since Jones (a Birmingham University politics graduate) was fired from directing a play that Waller-Bridge was starring in. Waller-Bridge walked out in solidarity. They spent their twenties on nights out, sleeping around, crashing back home, debating the issues that trouble modern women, such as, “I’d just like my tits to be that much bigger, does that make me a terrible feminist?” — as Waller-Bridge says, gesturing at her breasts.

They formed their theatre company in 2007 and began writing about issues affecting young women. Waller-Bridge originally wrote Fleabag for DryWrite when she was 26, taking it to the Edinburgh festival. It was nominated for an Olivier and won her the Critics’ Circle award for most promising playwright. The BBC snapped it up.

No doubt what made Fleabag appealing to young women also made it shocking to others. Plenty of people found the show crude. Certainly, DryWrite’s work never shies away from exploring the grubbier aspects of young women’s sex lives. Fleabag sleeps around, sexts men and is addicted to porn. Yet Waller-Bridge denies that the show was crass. Nothing graphic was ever depicted onscreen and details were “never

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gratuitous”, she says. “It’s the language, the unabashedness, not apologising and not being embarrassed that’s shocking.”

She and Jones believe women’s emancipation is inextricably bound to their sexual liberation — a sentiment that has appealed to screenwriters since Ingmar Bergman. If for Bergman that meant *Summer with Monika*, for millennials such as Jones, Waller-Bridge, Dunham et al, it means oversharing intimate details of characters’ sex lives. Most striking about Fleabag, however, isn’t how promiscuous she is, but how complex. Not just a sexually swaggering ladette, she is also emotionally fraught, broken by grief, and riddled with anger — all of which fuels her casual sexual encounters. Ultimately, it is Fleabag’s contradictory feelings about her sexual adventures that make her story so poignant, and chimes with real women’s experiences.

The show also had a knack for humorously skewering young women’s paradoxical positions on feminism. In one scene, Fleabag explodes to her father: “I have a horrible feeling that I’m a greedy, perverted, selfish, apathetic, cynical, depraved, morally bankrupt woman who can’t even call herself a feminist.”

“Well, you get all that from your mother,” he deadpans.

On another occasion, a feminist lecturer asks her audience if anyone would give up



KINDRED SPIRIT Lena Dunham, whose frank and funny TV series, *Girls*, inspired Fleabag

five years of their life for a perfect body. Fleabag and her sister shoot their hands up — only to find they are alone.

One groundbreaking aspect of Fleabag was how it tackled porn and porn culture’s effect on young women — a subject, until then, usually discussed in relation to men. Waller-Bridge watched porn from her early twenties. “I think having a healthy relationship with porn is a hard thing to do,” she says. “Fleabag’s problem is she has watched so much of it that she’s become desensitised by sex. She’s watching so much, she believes that her own value is based on how sexually attractive she is. The world is about being young, beautiful and f***able, that’s her philosophy — even though deep down she desperately wants somebody to prove her wrong.”

Flea was actually Waller-Bridge’s family nickname, but she insists the show is “not autobiographical” — just “really, really personal”. “There were times in my life I felt really Fleabaggy — I think if you’re not writing from yourself people can feel it.” Fleabag’s outlandishness perhaps felt more surprising given Waller-Bridge’s own rather middle-class background. Ex-Rada, her previous roles include appearing in the Margaret Thatcher biopic *The Iron Lady* and playing a young barrister (who sleeps with someone to get information) in the ITV drama *Broadchurch*.

Fleabag seems to have been born out of Waller-Bridge’s frustration at traditional female roles. She says she got sick of trooping to auditions that were always for “the girl everyone wants to f*** or the girl no one wants to f***”. So she wrote herself a more interesting role.

Part of what made Fleabag so brilliant was its nuance. The show posed questions — can feminists watch porn? Is sending sexts degrading? — none of which was answered. “We’re more interested in asking the questions than having the answers,” Waller-Bridge says. “The truth is massively conflicted anyway,” Jones adds. “The best you can do is talk honestly about it.”

Their new show, *Touch*, follows a woman in her early thirties, torn between embracing sexual freedom and craving a relationship. Dee (played by Morgan) abandons her life in Wales, where her friends are all coupled-up, for a poky flat in London and a messy sex life.

“It’s something I think about all the time,” Jones says. “Women have every right to embrace and enjoy a free sex life and have sex as and when they want, and I’ve had a great time doing that, but on the other hand when women have sex they want love and some future to it.”

“There are some women who are quite sexualised and get off on having one-night stands,” Waller-Bridge says. “In my twenties, dear lord — I wasn’t looking for love...” “But when you’re 33, it’s different,” Jones interrupts.



PET PEEVES Fleabag, played by Phoebe Waller-Bridge (right), in her guinea pig-themed cafe with her best friend, Boo (Jenny Rainsford)

If *Touch* seems a follow-up to Fleabag’s twentysomething story, perhaps it’s because DryWrite have grown-up. Now 31, Waller-Bridge is married to the documentary-maker Conor Woodman. Jones is 38, and — after years of internet dating — has for several months been with a guy she met on OkCupid.

“[*Touch*] is about where I’ve been in my thirties,” Jones says. “The panic of ‘OMG, I’m never going to meet anyone,’ then ‘I don’t care, I don’t want to be in a relationship.’” She feels it’s a conflict that haunts many women. “We may be feminists, we may be working hard, we may have careers, we may in many ways be perceived to be successful, but if we don’t have that relationship, we think we’ve failed. There were plenty of nights when Phoebe and I would come home and end up talking about being single. It’s about women in those cycles. And how Tinder and internet dating has made it worse. I think women feel bad about themselves because of that culture. I don’t really have an answer, but I just wanted to look at the nature of that.”

Jones read Nancy Jo Sales’s book *American Girls* — an examination of how social media impacts on teenage girls — and Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* while writing *Touch*. The play examines the subtle ways women are undermined by dating apps, and makes several digs at them.

“The things about [dating apps] that have made them easier to use also make them false — things like swiping or the minimal things you put about yourself,” Jones says. “It all gears more and more towards porny instant gratification, tits out, face made-up looking like you’re ready for sex.”

Morgan agrees. “I’ve been single for about three years. I did download Tinder. I think I went on one date. It doesn’t matter how much you talk to someone on a phone, you don’t know until you meet them. I may as well just meet someone — that was my conclusion in the end.”

Morgan, a gorgeous, baby-faced 30-year-old Welsh blonde, is rather too young to

play Dee. But she begged Waller-Bridge and Jones to be involved. “I’d do anything for these two. I’ve always loved their stuff. It’s hard to know where Phoebe stops and Vicky begins,” she laughs.

She met Waller-Bridge in 2012, when they were performing *Hay Fever* in the West End with Olivia Colman (whom Waller-Bridge later convinced to play Fleabag’s bitchy passive-aggressive stepmother). It was an awakening for Morgan: “That’s when I realised I was a feminist,” she says. “I’d probably always been a feminist, but I entered a world of conversations, people asking me how I felt about feminism. I don’t think anyone had even asked me about it before.” That Christmas she went home to Bridgend and was watching the news with her parents when she burst out at the telly: “This is misogynistic bullshit!” “They looked at me, like, ‘Are you all right?’” For Christmas, her dad bought her a book on the suffragettes, “which was adorable”. She has since joined the Women’s Equality Party.

Touch will be Morgan’s first modern role in a CV dominated by period parts. “The most joyful thing is that Amy hasn’t been out of a corset for about 10 years,” Waller-Bridge laughs. “She burns so brightly in a corset, we were, like, ‘Imagine Amy out of a corset!’ And our brains exploded.”

Morgan feels it’s important “to feel like you’re doing parts that you want to play ... I don’t just want to play ‘comedy wench’ or ‘wide-eyed ingenue’, I want to play the

“TINDER AND INTERNET DATING’S MADE IT WORSE. I THINK WOMEN FEEL BAD ABOUT THEMSELVES BECAUSE OF THAT CULTURE”

kind of parts these two want to write.” Six months after our first meeting I catch up with the girls at the Soho Theatre for a reading of *Touch*. I can report that it is hilarious. As promised, it is a romp through Dee’s sex life — dates with arrogant young men, lesbian encounters, kinky Tory boys, bullying boyfriends, social media and dating apps. Like Fleabag, *Touch* has depth, as Dee grapples with conflicting motives. In one scene, debating whether to let a man spank her, she muses: “I like bossy men ... but it doesn’t sit well with my feminism.”

Jones is fascinated by such paradoxes. On the one hand she feels that women are liberated by sexual openness — “It’d be sad if a woman lived her whole life and didn’t try something she wanted to try sexually; there are so many things!” — on the other, she’s suspicious that some experiences sold as sexually empowering are a con. When her friends took pole-dancing classes, she declined. Still, she admits that when they all went to Glastonbury, she was begging them to teach her their moves. “So, it’s complicated,” she laughs.

Since our first meeting, Waller-Bridge has become a Bafta winner. And a star. She’s met her heroes, including Lena Dunham, who emailed her after watching Fleabag “saying she really loved it. I went to have a drink with her — me, Vicky and Lena in New York — it was so cool,” she cackles. “It’s a bit of a whirlwind. A lot of it doesn’t feel real.”

She is taking her own advice for staying grounded: “When something great happens in your career you should get straight back to work.” Right now she is hardly leaving the house, having been commissioned by BBC America to write an eight-part spy thriller, *Killing Eve*, about a psychopathic assassin. She also has a role in the new *Han Solo* film and a second series of Fleabag has just been confirmed. “The story itself I haven’t decided on yet.”

She has even been touted as the next Doctor Who — a rumour she says is untrue, but adds: “It’s a brilliant time to have a woman [as the Doctor]. The show is crying out for it. It’s a character that lends itself so brilliantly to being played by any gender.”

It leads me to wonder aloud: could Fleabag have been played by a man? Waller-Bridge laughs. It turns out she has seen it done. For her birthday, Waller-Bridge’s husband made a tape of his friends performing Fleabag’s lines from the show. “It was really striking. The bravado didn’t seem that extraordinary in the men’s mouths, but the vulnerability really did.” This feels very revealing: indicating the way sexually open women — such as Fleabag and Dee — are judged more harshly than men. Also, it suggests that while DryWrite’s stories focus on young women, they reveal something about all of us ■

Touch, Soho Theatre, London W1, July 6-Aug 12