



Sex and the T.V.

Dennis Hof has a great life. He owns his own business and makes his own rules. But the proprietor of delight and star of HBO's top-rated reality series, Cathouse, can't sit still, and delights in taking his desert party nationwide, spreading his vision of sexual capitalism.

By Evan Dashevsky



HBO/Cathouse

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The world's oldest profession is long overdue some credit for planting the seeds of protocapitalism that grew into the world's first business. Skip ahead a few millennia and we, of course, find the "business" has lost the openness it enjoyed in this country as recently as prospector times. And as for legal recognition, its "deviant" status is a far cry from its standing in other corners of the world, both modern and otherwise.

And yet, after the sun goes down, millions of Americans are tuning in to premium cable to catch an unedited glimpse of the industry that's shunned during the day. "With my TV show I've allowed America into my house, my cathouse—over five million people watch and the ratings are just as good as the day it first aired. I'm a



Left: Some of the girls Broadway it up for *Cathouse: The Musical* on New Year's Eve. Right: Hof outside his Carson City kingdom.



BunnyRanch star Brooke Taylor is ready for her close-up, behind the scenes of *Cathouse*.

rock star now," says Dennis Hof, newly-minted TV star and proprietor of Carson City, Nevada's most infamous, lucrative, and very legal business, the Moonlite BunnyRanch. For more than six years, the nation has been invited to visit "the Ranch" via the HBO series *Cathouse*, which chronicles one of America's very few tax-paying brothels. The show is HBO's highest rated reality program and has allowed Hof to make the transformation from businessman on the outskirts to celebrity-cum-pundit on the A-list. After a morning stop at *The Howard Stern Show*, but before a visit with Tyra and then Maury, this master of publicity stopped by *Smoke* headquarters to rap about his business, newfound fame, and the on-going fight for the right to "party."

Hof commands the attention of any room he enters (not entirely undue to the sheer physical size of the man), but with a broad smile this constant salesman easily charms away any pre-conceptions of his profession. Aside from some frank references describing his chosen trade and a few choice comments on the first thing coming to mind when he sees a woman smoking a cigar, Dennis comes off just as much Panda Bear as he does Huggy. In 1992, after a stint with real estate and "hospitality projects—time shares, hotel projects, etc.," Dennis got into a whole new hospitality game when he purchased the BunnyRanch, a legal brothel with a 40-year history residing between the western tourist Meccas of Reno and Lake Tahoe. But he went from entrepreneur to rock star when he was introduced to America in the 2002 HBO documentary special *Cathouse*. The original *Cathouse* documentary focused America's late night attention on the work lives of the "working girls," customers, and affable owner of the Ranch. The special drew in huge ratings leading to a second special the following year, two seasons of *Cathouse: The Series* (with a third on the way), and even a televised *Cathouse: The Musical* that debuted this past New Year's Eve, which Dennis describes with signature smile in tow: "It used to be Dick Clark in Times Square at midnight, now it's Big Daddy from the BunnyRanch."

Cathouse: The Musical aside, some portions of the series obviously borrow techniques from other "reality" shows in that

certain "behind the scenes" moments are staged in order to push the narrative along. However the most fascinating facets of the franchise stem from the series' unstaged footage. "When we were first trying to make a deal with HBO, we had many meetings on how to put a show together," recalls Dennis, who was courted by both HBO and Showtime to bring the BunnyRanch to the small screen. "We finally came to the conclusion that the best idea would be to put hidden cameras in a couple of rooms and record the negotiations. Then after the negotiations are through, we'll ask the customers to sign a release so we can include it on the show. In a two-week span of filming, 40 out of 45 people signed the releases."

And from that adult-oriented update of *Candid Camera*, a hit show was born, featuring some of the most fascinating documentation of the human condition this side of *National Geographic*. A reality show about a brothel may sound like soft-core porn—and in some instances, that is exactly what this late night fare offers. However, when at its most genuine, the show offers as much fascination as titillation. Capitalism collides with millennia of human instinct as customers negotiate exactly what sort of "party" they want to have with the lady of their choice, such as the case with the 22-year-old virgin being straddled by one of the Ranch's girls as the young man's mother—fearful her grown son isn't interested in women—sits on the bed next to them and the three negotiate the night's deflowering.

"Earth shattering, amazing stuff," salesman Hof boasts with the *Cathouse* logo proudly emblazoned on his golf shirt. "Now, since then, we don't do anymore hidden camera, but the popularity has carried on and the numbers are outrageously high and I think that I single-handedly have sanitized this vice, or at least done a real good job at it."

And sanitizing his business has indeed become another goal for Hof, who is as much a mainstay on primetime cable news talking politics and punditry as he is on late night cable talking commerce and copulation. "I'm pro-legalization nationwide, it's the right thing to do. If you want to eliminate exploitation of

women in this business you legalize it completely. If you want to take disease out of prostitution, you legalize it." Dennis' pro-legalization stance led him to throw his support behind the ill-fated, but well-meaning Presidential campaign of Congressman and advocate of microscopic government, Ron Paul. "When I

into statehood, a tolerance kept with the local population until 1972 when it got officially legalized.

This legal liberation of "sinful" adult behavior is not unknown (or necessarily unwise) in American history. When the consumption of alcohol made the transition from Federal offense to legitimate pastime in 1933, the crime wave associated with prohibition ceded and the gangsters gave way to responsible corporate citizens, got out of the crime game, or—as is the case with at least one prominent Massachusetts family—found their way



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first heard of Ron Paul, I thought 'this guy makes absolutely too much sense.' He's for states rights: if the state wants it, do it. He doesn't think big brother Fed needs to be watching over everybody." After meeting Paul through friend Tucker Carlson during a Nevada campaign stop, Hof and some of the Ranch girls began a "Pimpin' for Paul" drive, which included a donation box at the Ranch which some of the girls asked customers to donate to in lieu of tips. No word on exactly how much made its way to the Paul campaign, but

into politics. One then might be inclined to ask—if one were inclined to get all libertarian about such matters—has prostitution received a seedy reputation, not due to its inherent nature, but due to the illegitimate status it has been given in Puritan-rooted America? "We have a 26-year history with mandatory health checks in Nevada, and with millions of sexual encounters at the Ranch: no problems. If the Health Department were here today, they'd say 'if the bars and discos were as clean as the BunnyRanch, there wouldn't be any problems.' Nevada is the first state in the United States to eradicate syphilis—partially because of the cleanliness of the brothels."

Of course, the Nevada city most often associated with indulgence, Las Vegas, doesn't allow legal prostitution. Due to a provision of Nevada State Law, only counties with a population under 400,000 can authorize legal brothels (effectively designed to rule out Vegas, the only county that even comes close to that mark in the desert state). But this allows for a social experiment



Long day at the office. Dennis enjoying a cigar with some co-workers.

in man-made laws governing over nature-made activity: and the facts of the matter, as Dennis is happy to point out, mainly fall on his side of the fence: “Vegas has 3,000 active pimps working—it’s out of hand. They arrest a couple thousand people a month. Las Vegas had 368 cases of illegal prostitutes who, after they were arrested got tested and were confirmed to have HIV—these are girls who are working *after* they’ve got HIV.”

With only a handful of legal competition in the state, the BunnyRanch has become a desert sex empire. “The only people exploited at the BunnyRanch are the customers. Because as a male, we never get enough sex with enough different girls. And here they have the opportunity to do that—but they have to pay for it.” And pay for it they do—anywhere from a few hundred dollars to a few hundred thousand. The girls themselves split the money they make with the house 50-50, and make a very good living—with the top tier making six figures out of what is essentially a part-time position. “A good percentage of these girls have corporations, financial advisors—the typical girl works a week to 10 days a month and works 10 or 11 months a year.” In truth, many of the girls you find at the Ranch (or on its virtual outpost: www.BunnyRanch.com) are not drop-dead gorgeous in the traditional sense. But, as the man in charge will attest to, his is a business where success is achieved as much with psychology as it is with biology: “If you get an 18-year old that’s stunningly beautiful: perfect body and face—she’s going to make a lot of money. But if you show me a 38-year old who’s had two children and an extra 25 pounds on her, but has great people skills—that girl will make more money every time.”

None of the girls at the Ranch are required to be with any man they don’t feel comfortable with, but Hof describes the front of the Ranch, where initial deals take place as “basically, the best singles bar in the world—except the odds are *real good* for a man.” Dennis has designed his Ranch to be a last oasis of manly pleasures, complete with full-service bar and always-stocked humidifier. And thanks to that Nevada libertarian streak, lighting

up with your favorite cigar inside the Ranch remains kosher—the girls trend towards the flavored smokes (they love the CAO flavored), “This is the only place in America where you can enjoy a drink, smoke a cigar, and hang with a beautiful girl 24 hours a day—you can’t do that in L.A., you can’t do that in New York. And the ranch has provided that for 53 years. And the girls are always found with cigars—they found it’s real good from a business point of view. You see, guys want to hang with girls who are one of the guys. And it’s a nice disarming way for the girl to socialize with a guy before getting to business.” Another big attraction

is customers coming over to enjoy a cigar with Hof who is often found with stogie in hand while conversing with the clientel. “My customers are there mainly for the girls. But the secondary reason is for me. I’m a star now—they want to know *me*. At the Ranch, we all sit around enjoying some smokes and talk and have a great time doing it. Smoking cigars can be a bonding experience with the customers—and they all want to enjoy some time with the King.”

And while making the most out of his slide into stardom, there’s still one term often thrown his way he takes issue with: the dreaded “P-word.” “Usually, I’m offended by the word ‘pimp.’ Because I’m not a pimp, I’m a businessman with a license to do what I do.” Of course, in some circles, “pimp” has made the transition from criminal to cool—enough that it’s used to sell energy drinks and included in the title of a popular MTV show aimed at teenagers. “In the last seven or eight years, ‘pimping’ got cool: ‘pimp my ride,’ ‘I pimped-out my apartment.’ Lil Jon, Snoop—they all wish they were me. If Snoop said ‘Dennis is a big pimp’ that means I’m the cool guy, the big dog. But if a businessman or a legislator started talking to me about being a pimp, I’d say ‘excuse me, I am not a pimp.’”

For now, part of Hof’s job description has become to live the good life and embody the fantasy he sells (or at least rents out). Living “the lifestyle everyone thinks Hefner leads,” dating various girlfriends at the ranch (he doesn’t date “civilians”), answering to no one but himself, and enjoying his new visibility. When looking to the future, Dennis recalls the previous owner of the Ranch, an elderly man who, with no family, ended up leaving every girl at the ranch he ever slept with a million dollars. “And you know, my money’s going to go the same way. I’ve been a serial monogamist since I was 17. I don’t have any family, I’m set up the same way. I’m thinking about turning the BunnyRanch into an employee-owned company when I’m gone, so everyone will be taken care of.” Until then, for at least one man in the desert, everyday is still a party. **S**