Loewenberg
On Screen, Off Screen & Behind the Scenes

Sexy Beijing — Beijing’s own version of “Sex and the City” — turned Anna Sophie Loewenberg, the star and producer, into an internet celebrity. Since its debut in 2006, Sexy Beijing has become one of the most popular online TV series about China, and has been featured on the BBC, CNN, NPR and even the Today Show. But behind that success is Anna Sophie Loewenberg’s passion for making documentary films, and for telling stories about people on the margins. Besides Sexy Beijing, she produced China Pirates, her own 2003 documentary about punk rock and pirated media in Beijing, and also worked on the PBS documentaries Riding Rails in China and Sketching the Silk Road. She recently took time off from filming Sexy Beijing to produce The Siberian Butterfly, her new 30-minute documentary about a gay papercut artist in China. Asian Jewish Life sat down with filmmaker Anna Sophie Loewenberg to learn more about her documentary work, her inspiration, the future for Sexy Beijing, and more.

Asian Jewish Life (AJL): Your first documentary feature was China Pirates, a 2003 film about punk rock and pirated media in Beijing. How did you become interested in the documentary form?

Anna Sophie Loewenberg (ASL): I was never really in documentary, I was always in print. I was in the middle of getting my master’s degree in journalism [from Columbia University], and I had this opportunity to take this video editing class. They had these fellowships from the state of California, I was in San Francisco, and so I learned how to cut documentaries during that six-month fellowship. So that was what got me into that form. I thought it was great, because a lot of the things I cover are culture, especially music. I just found that it was so refreshing to be able to not be writing about it, but to actually be able to present the sound that I wanted people to hear.

There were some guys who, back in the nineties, did a lot of filming, a couple of Americans when I was living here and I played in a band. I remember it crossed
my mind, I thought, I never really paint pictures or film anything, I always kind of write about it. But, you know, that was a little pre-the-mini-DV revolution... and also pre-Youtube. I think that one of the most defining things was Youtube. You know, China Pirates was just this one project I did, but I think that was the reason I became committed to production. It was sort of the whole beginning of our company and Sexy Beijing and all of that. I was working with Jeremy [Goldkorn] from Danwei.org and Luke Mines, and so they wanted to launch a show for Youtube. I think that kind of digital revolution in mini-DV, I think the fact that Youtube was there, so it caused a lot more people to film on DV. And for us, it was a reason to launch a show.

AJL: So, how has your newest documentary project, Siberian Butterfly, turned out for you?

ASL: I’ve been working on it for a long time, and it’s definitely one of my longest projects. Our [Sexy Beijing] pieces are usually very short form, only 10 minutes, so that’s a very different kind of energy; this is a half an hour. But I’m also trying to do something a little different and go a little deeper. So this was kind of my opportunity to go a little deeper. It’s been really challenging. I think it’s been a lot more challenging that I thought it would, because, for one thing, I’m not really using all of the usual Sexy Beijing structure and the Sexy Beijing tricks that help me to tell stories in a kind of lighthearted way. I had a few different versions of this piece but I really wanted it to be about his processes as an artist. So there are all of these different parts to his story — how he got to Beijing, and about his family. But I really wanted it to be this really intimate portrait of how somebody uses their creativity to express parts of themselves that, otherwise, they don’t have a place to talk about. I wanted it to be about that creative process. So that’s a very quiet and intimate thing to look at and solitary in a lot of ways. So I think the editing process, for one thing, I spent a lot more time filming. I tried to just spend a lot more time with him.

AJL: Where do you hope to screen Siberian Butterfly?

ASL: Well, actually, the artist was invited to an exhibition in Los Angeles, and in Sweden, so they’re going to take the documentary to those exhibitions. Those exhibitions are going to happen in late March. We’re going to screen it in Beijing for sure. But we’re also trying to see if we can put together some big, fabulous event. I don’t know, we’re still kind of working on it. It will screen in Beijing for sure.

We wanted to be able to do [a screening in Beijing] for him, because it’s this very establishment, traditional art form. So in some ways, it’s a lot easier for him to make that leap into shows with foreigners. I think that happens a lot in China, that maybe Chinese accept it a lot less quickly, especially if it’s a traditional form like this. Whereas, he said when he went to get his visa in the US Embassy, for example, he just basically showed them a couple of pictures and said, “This is what I do,” and they said, “Visa granted.” People see immediately that this is someone who is gay and has a different perspective, and what he’s doing is really unique, you know? So I
think we wanted to do something special for him in Beijing just for that reason too. I wouldn’t say Beijing is his home turf, but at least in his home turf of China, to give him a space to show his art.

AJL: So you still have plans to shoot more *Sexy Beijing* episodes in the future?

ASL: Yes, definitely. I think that with the momentum of the whole following on the Internet and all that, keeping that momentum important for a certain period of time. But then it’s so difficult to monetize content on the Internet, not just for us but for most people. So at a certain point, I just had to reassess where I was putting my energy. I thought, well, we have this body of work and I just had to think about what is going to sustain *Sexy Beijing* long term.

But, ideally, I would like to. I don’t have any specific plans right now, but I definitely think about, after this project is over, maybe transitioning back into doing a shorter form and posting more regularly.

I think what’s interesting is that China is changing so fast as well, so the Beijing we were filming back in 2006 is such a different place. Now I’ll go out to shoot and it’ll be like, half the people on the street already know what *Sexy Beijing* is in certain neighborhoods. The mission then was that we were shooting things and telling stories that weren’t really in the news or on the Internet, and I think that’s a little bit different now.

AJL: Some of my favorite *Sexy Beijing* episodes explored the experience of being Jewish in China. Do you still hope to continue doing that in the series? And if so, what topics would you like to cover?

ASL: I have definitely talked around some different ideas with friends. One of the great things about *Sexy Beijing* is that we have our website, but we have some different shows within that, so not everything has to be a *Sexy Beijing*. We do that with music, we do that with *The Hard Hat Show*. One idea we had was to do one just about Jewish culture or Israeli culture even. We could do something that has recipes, or looking at the way Jews do business in China and stereotypes about that. And then just in terms of *Sexy Beijing*, the show, I think the next one I would do, if it had a Jewish theme, would be Jewish men and their Chinese wives.

AJL: Congratulations on getting engaged! Could you tell us more about your fiancee and how you met?

ASL: I met him through another friend of mine who is also from Venezuela, an artist who has helped me to shoot some of the episodes. We were at this bar called Punk in Sanlitun, and we had just been filming this fashion show. By this time it was about midnight or so, and this group of Columbian and Venezuelan guys, including this friend of mine, were going to some clubs. So I just saw this guy and said, “Hi, nice to meet you.”

So about three hours later, at about 3am, we ended up in this other club. I said hello and immediately saw his eyes light up. I was still carrying all my camera stuff, I had my big backpack and everything, but I could just tell he was totally into me. He was taken with me for some reason. I don’t know what kind of drug he was on, but he was really wanting to talk to me. So
we started talking. I was just immediately very impressed by how articulate he was, and just by who he was. His friends were all artists, his best friend was a chef in this famous restaurant in Beijing. And he said, “Yeah, what I do is not really as sexy as what they do.” And I said, “What do you do?” And he told me he was a scientist, a chemical engineer. And then we talked for a few more minutes, and then he told me that he just came back from Israel, because one of his best friends was married in Israel. And I was in Israel at the same time that he was, I was there for my cousin’s wedding. Even though he’s not Jewish or anything, he just happened to be there. I think we knew we were in love after talking for about half an hour.

For me, it’s not so much about if somebody is Chinese or where they’re from. I think one of the things that really brings us together is that we’re children of the world, that he really knows what it’s like to live outside his own country. For our generation, life is just becoming more of a global experience. It’s funny because, even if you look at our backgrounds on paper, it seems that we wouldn’t have a lot in common. And he never even lived in America, although he lived for a while in the UK. But I think this whole global experience, and the experience of being comfortable outside your own culture, is really what kind of binds us together. In a way, that’s more important. After all of the places I’ve lived in and everything I’ve been through — even though I really love China and I’m really interested in China — it’s more about being with somebody who can really understand the big picture.

AJL: What does your fiancee think of Jewish culture and Judaism?

ASL: It’s actually a big topic of discussion in our household. [Laughs]

As I’ve gotten older, I definitely see the value in my own traditions, and I do care about that. So it’s been a big topic for us from the beginning when we started dating. I remember it was so funny, we had only been on three or four dates, and he was like, “So what do I have to do to convert?” So I think that he already had this interest in Judaism, even though it was something he had very little exposure to, because he had these Jewish friends in Israel. That was a really formative experience for him.

So, yeah, it’s become a big deal now, I feel like we’re in the middle of some kind of a romantic comedy where we’re trying to figure out how to have a wedding and he’s not converted yet. My uncle is a rabbi, would the rabbi do it? How long would it take, what sort of things are involved? Or will the Chabad rabbi here do it? I think when you’re trying to prepare a wedding, all of that becomes a lot more real. You get your mothers involved, it’s kind of a big issue. The important thing to me is there are many different traditions in Judaism, and I definitely come from an Ashkenazi kind of German Jewish, very moderate background, you know. It’s much more important to me that somebody’s open-minded, that they’re willing to learn and all of that, rather than specific rituals, actually. That’s kind of where I’m coming from. But he has to figure out what it means to him. And if he’s going to convert, he needs to figure that out for himself. I need to give him space to do that.

AJL: Once you’re done with your current documentary, what’s next?

ASL: I started working with a group of university students from the People’s University on a series about the changing landscape of Beijing, actually looking at some of the monuments in the different neighborhoods — like, say, the neighborhood around the Drum Tower. What they were like 100 years ago, how they’ve changed, and how they’re changing right now. We’re actually looking for funding for that project. That’s something I hope to launch this summer.

AJL: There aren’t many women out there doing first-person documentaries, and certainly not Jewish women, so your success is truly inspiring. What advice would you have for women out there who are interested in doing first-person documentaries about Asia?

ASL: It was actually kind of a tough decision for me in the beginning — how much should I put myself into the work? That was a very ballsy decision for me because, like everyone else, I have my own ego and I don’t particularly like to hear my own voice on a recording, much less see my face. It wasn’t my dream to be on the Internet. I just tried to think about what would be the most meaningful for the work, and what would kind of set it apart. So I think if you’re doing something like Sexy Beijing where you put yourself in it, it’s really helpful to be able to laugh at yourself and just not take yourself too seriously, I’ve found that to be invaluable. If you can laugh, then other people will laugh. Also, consider what’s going to be the best thing for the work, especially if you’re going to put yourself in it, ahead of how you want to appear. You really have to feel what works in some ways. Sometimes there’s no way to have a prescription ahead of time.

I think sometimes with creative projects, looking back, I’ve learned that sometimes you take risks and it’s an unknown. And I think that with creative stuff, that’s a really good thing, when you don’t have a lot to lose and you’re just trying to have fun with something and take a risk and be creative. ✨