

Strictly comic relief

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The subject of a festival documentary, a friendly dominatrix, inspired by 1940s womanhood, denies her work is dirty and clandestine, reports [Lawrie Zion](#).



At one stage, she had her heart set on being a comedian. And though Mistress Ursula has been in a very different vocation for the past decade, the idea of her doing stand-up isn't as odd as it might seem. She is, after all, both quick witted and very much a performer. She's also somewhat disarmingly friendly.

Mistress Ursula is a dominatrix and I've come to her dungeon to talk to her and filmmaker Megan Spencer about their documentary called *Strange Hungers*.

Spencer says she initiated the project because she was "sick of the mainstream media representations of BDSM (bondage discipline sado-masochism) as always being dirty and clandestine". Having met Ursula, she decided to find out more about her as person, and what she did for a living. Ursula turned out a willing subject.

"I had been approached by a number of people over the years, but they were more interested in objectifying me as a dangerous creature and seeing how I reacted. I went with Megan because she wanted to know 'why'."

The experience, it turns out, was "very refreshing", in part because Spencer spent a lot of time getting to know her before beginning the shoot.

"I opened up and trusted her. It's like when a slave comes to see me - there has to be a huge trust factor in that because I need to make sure they are treated in a respectful way, and it's the same with me."

But while Mistress Ursula says that she is very comfortable with who she is, she also insists that she is in no way a spokeswoman for the industry, and is the first to admit that BDSM "is not for everybody".

But she insists that the point of her work is to "create a forum for self-expression and to express a different part of my nature".

Surprisingly, she also confesses that she draws much of her inspiration from 1940s English films such as *Mrs Miniver* and uses a lot of the language from them: "I was brought up on Enid Blyton and I'm a big ham who loves Benny Hill", she says. (She fervently denies, however, using music from the *Benny Hill Show* during sessions with her clients.)

"I went to a Catholic boarding school and, the way I see it, it was either become a nun or a dominatrix."

For Spencer, one of the challenges of making the film was establishing an appropriate relationship with her subject.

"There's a certain power dynamic in the dungeon. I mean, it is a dominatrix's space. But, at the same time, I was a filmmaker so I made sure as in any documentary environment that I wasn't going to contravene anything that I shouldn't, and I got to know the lay of the land. I didn't want to just blunder my way through it," she says.

So has the process of making the film changed Mistress Ursula?

"Not really," is the response. "I'm still the same frustrated comedian. The only thing that occurred to me when I watched the film was what was I thinking with that hair?"

But she is grateful that her sense of humour comes through.

"If people were expecting to see this misanthropic woman with horns coming out of her head, they're going to be disappointed. What they see is me and the way I am."

Strange Hungers: Mistress Ursula screens at ACMI at 7pm on Thursday.