



THE TALE OF LAURA MÉRITT AND STEFANIE DÖRR

The pioneering female spirit

The fact that society allows us these days to openly discuss erotic lifestyles, vibrators and dildos is the down to the merits of many courageous and enterprising women who have set benchmarks with their pioneering ideas for the evolution of what was once a taboo market. Laura Méritt and Stefanie Dörr are two such women.

Their stories portray how a small movement got under way and changed the attitudes of consumers, retailers and manufacturers alike and as a result high end erotic toys are not only sold at specialist stockists but in retail outlets beyond the typical markets.

There are certain things in life you never forget. And something that Stefanie Dörr experienced triggered her interest in love toys. In the early 1990s she discovered her flatmate's vibrator and her curiosity was awoken. However, it took weeks before she plucked up the courage to seek out a sex shop and when she did she was confronted with yet another unforgettable experience. "The shop confirmed every single cliché possible," she recalls. "There was an elderly lady behind the counter, men in every corner and I was the only woman in the shop. I thought I was in a bad film, wandering between rows and rows of porn films, surrounded by penises in unrealistic proportions." Laura Méritt, on the other hand, has been involved with love toys for over 25 years but like Stefanie, she found there was a very limited supply of toys that would appeal to women. Reason enough, Laura believed, to set out and do things properly. Both Stefanie and Laura are pioneers, or sex-perts as some call them, of a trend that is rooted in the USA. The women's health movement had begun in the 1970s to manufacture sex toys for women's needs and sex shops for women were being opened. "The most well-known shop that focused on women was Good Vibrations in San Francisco. This shop was a symbol

for this movement and liberating trend," Stefanie Dörr relates. This female sexual movement crossed the Atlantic and wasn't long before there was a supply of suitable products in appropriate outlets for women in Europe. The first toys appeared on the German market in the early nineties. And even the conventional adult industry has had to take a step aside and make room for quality products that work after the traditional suppliers at first denied that

there would ever be a market for toys for women. "When I approached a famous company 20 years ago to talk to them about the changes ahead, I was laughed at and told that there was no demand for such products. Well, we've proved them all wrong!" says Laura with an air of triumph. Today we witness how the majority of the players in the adult industry have jumped on the band wagon, even if the concepts are all different. "We focus on sexual health and

well-being for everyone through access to sexual material and information in a playful and passionate way," Laura emphasizes. Women like Dörr and Méritt have changed the market. Laura Méritt picked up her case of toys, imported from the US and went to women in their own homes with her 'Fuckerware Toyshows'. Product information on use and raw materials was always first and foremost. Laura's retail



Stefanie Dörr will be organizing the 5th Expert Event for women in the adult industry on 18th October

ÖKO-TEST
RICHTIG GUT LEBEN
Lipstick Unikat
flieder-pink
sehr gut
Ausgabe:
Kompakt „Sexualität“ 2007

Stefanie Dörr has been making quality toys at Playstixx since 1995

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shops Sexclusivitäten in Berlin, Ladies First in Munich, Ladys Toys in Cologne and mail & female in Amsterdam were the first adult shops in Europe for women. Many other shops followed suit, inspired by these stores selling high quality and safe toys for women. Stefanie Dörr was one of those inspired. "Looking back, in the early stages it was almost like working underground. My company was founded in the early stages of a new era." Between 1992 and 1995 she had observed and researched the market and noticed that although women were not happy with what the market had to offer there was nothing suitable for them to buy amongst the

cheap imports and penis imitations from the Far East and sold in male orientated shops. She decided to change this and in her capacity as a

modern sculptor set about designing and making aesthetic and healthy toys for women that were to be sold in the right environment. "I founded my manufacturing company Playstixx in 1995 in avant garde and innovative Berlin Kreuzberg." "These are vibrators and dildos that a woman would be happy to own and are not something she has to hide." Both entrepreneurs are convinced that there is no such thing as the perfect sex toy and that marketing strategies such as describing a product as being unique and top of the best-seller list are doomed to failure.

"Every person develops sexually and this is a life long process and requires different toys to cater to changing needs. Sexual moods can change within a day." But this doesn't alter Laura's basic demands on a toy. It has to be made of safe material and have an attractive design. When buying she follows three criteria: touch, smell and taste. "If something looks good, then that's fine. If it's nice to touch, then even better. But if it smells funny, then no way. And if it tastes bitter I put it back. And the final question is whether the toy was made under humanitarian conditions." Today sexual well-being, sexual health and erotic lifestyles are discussed in the media and in public, toys are featured in US television series and are sold in chemists and drugstores. Time are changing – slowly – and all thanks to a few brave women.

"Women have been in the driving seat and both genders profit from these efforts." Stefanie also agrees that it was time that women took things in their own hands if they wanted a fulfilling relationship.

"Although it sounds old fashioned this whole market evolution was triggered off by emancipation," says the toy manufacturer from Berlin. And the demand for these new type of toys grew and evolution

continues. And whereas pleasure wands were health issues in the 19th century, sexual well-being and erotic lifestyles are modern day trends. Laura does however criticize the peer pressure on the sexuality portrayed in glossy magazines. Stefanie believes that not many people actually have a positive attitude towards sex toys. The associated stigmas are too well established and will need time to be broken down. "Obviously, the modern erotic boutiques help in breaking down barriers," she says referring to her own shop where women serve women. Of course she sees the growing trend of e-commerce but this cannot replace personal service. "My experience has shown that although people

can buy high quality products at low prices, they are interested in company philosophies and appreciate customer service in a pleasant atmosphere.

People can touch both me and my products! And despite the transparency and media information, the best information is still the personal contact." Neither worry that this trend and the hype on market potential is just a bubble that could soon burst. Stefanie Dörr welcomes the media hype on toys as it gives the vibrator a mainstream reputation.

There's no doubt that Internet shops are on the increase but time will tell how well rooted these are. They have no objections to toys being sold in department stores but they do believe that the best customer advice is only available at specialist stockists. But the more suppliers, the merrier, they believe. "It's good not to have to be a single fighter anymore. I hope that sexuality will be soon lived as an expression of creative energy." Laura agrees and believes that the education of our children in sexual matters is crucial and because this depends on parents and society there is still a very long way to go.

"Women have been in the driving seat."
Laura Méritt