

Daughter. Sister. Wife. Hermaphrodite.

# Orchids

my intersex adventure.

*A Film By  
Phoebe Hart*



hartflicker  
MOVING PICTURES



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E: [info@hartflicker.com](mailto:info@hartflicker.com) M: +61 405143086 W: [www.hartflicker.com](http://www.hartflicker.com)  
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*My Intersex Adventure*

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## **One Sentence Synopsis**

Documentary filmmaker, Phoebe Hart, comes clean on a journey of self-discovery around her hidden intersex\* condition.

(118 characters)

\***Intersex** - a biological state whereby a person's reproductive organs, genitalia and/or chromosomes transcend the binary male-female divide. Intersex people can identify as female or male, and sometimes refer to themselves as "third gender" or simply "intersex". The Australian Medical Association definition states: A person with an intersex condition is born with sex chromosomes, external genitalia or an internal reproductive system that is not exclusively either male or female. This word replaces "hermaphrodite".

NB: Please refer to the glossary for full descriptions and definitions of these complex and often misunderstood terms.

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2010 Winner, ATOM Award (Best Documentary General)  
2010 Brisbane International Film Festival (Winner, Showtime Top Ten)  
2011 Nominee, IF Awards (Best Documentary)  
2011 Mardi Gras Film Festival  
2011 Adelaide Film Festival  
2011 Melbourne Queer Film Festival (Runner Up, Best Documentary)  
2011 Documentary Edge New Zealand (Official Selection)  
2011 Hamburg International Queer Film Festival (Runner Up, Best Documentary)  
2011 Dungog Film Festival  
2011 Raindance Film Festival (Official Selection)  
2011 Vancouver Queer Film Festival  
2011 Frameline35 LGBT International Film Festival (Official Selection)  
2011 Outfest (Official Selection)  
2011 Newfest (Official Selection)  
2011 Mix Copenhagen (Winner, Best Documentary)  
2011 PFF Berlin  
2011 Citizen Jane Film Festival  
2011 Austin Gay and Lesbian International Film Festival (Official Selection)  
2011 Seattle Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (Official Selection)  
2011 Spokane LGBT Film Festival (John Deen Memorial Award)  
2011 Tampa International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (Official Selection)  
2011 Milwaukee LGBT Film / Video Festival  
2011 Queer Fruits Film Festival  
2011 Los Angeles Transgender Film Festival (Closing Night Film)  
2011 Vox Feminae Film Festival (Official Selection)  
2011 Image + Nation Canada  
2011 13th Norrkoping Film Festival Flimmer Sweden  
2011 Leszibikus Identitasok Fesztivalja Hungary  
2012 FIFO Documentary Film Festival

## **One Page Synopsis**

Documentary filmmaker, Phoebe Hart, comes clean on her journey of self-discovery to embrace her future and reconcile the past shame and family secrecy surrounding her intersex condition. Despite her mother's outright refusal to be in the film, Phoebe decides she must push on with her quest to resolve her life story and connect with other intersex people on camera. With the help of her sister Bonnie and support from her husband James, she hits the open road and reflects on her youth.

Phoebe's happy and carefree childhood came to an abrupt end at puberty when she was told she would never menstruate nor have children. But the reasons why were never discussed and the topic was taboo. At the age of 17, Phoebe's mother felt she was old enough to understand the true nature of her body and the family secret was finally revealed. Phoebe then faced an orchidectomy, invasive surgery to remove her undescended testes, the emotional scars of which are still raw today. Phoebe's road trip around Australia exposes her to the stories of other intersex people and holds a mirror to her own experience. She learns valuable lessons in resilience and healing but also sees the pervasive impact her condition has on all her relationships.

At home, Phoebe and James want to start a family but dealing with infertility and the stress of the adoption process puts pressure on their marriage. Phoebe also starts to understand the difficult decisions her parents faced and is excited but apprehensive when they eventually agree to be interviewed. Will talking openly with her mother give Phoebe the answers she has been looking for?

(272 words)

## **Background production and “making of” notes**

The making of *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* was an intimate process, which required a great deal of patience and sensitivity. It took six years to complete the film and during that time, there were numerous, intense negotiations with the subjects of the film, regarding their continued involvement.

Director, Phoebe Hart, used digital cameras and a small crew, whom, wherever feasible, consisted of insiders to the intersex community.

*“I felt that by having a small, ‘insider’ crew, the ‘talent’ would be more inclined to openly express issues that may have been long shrouded in secrecy and stigma,”* Phoebe said.

As principal documenters, sisters Phoebe and Bonnie Hart used a variety of cameras, ranging from semi-professional to domestic VHS camcorders and Super 8. The documentary’s guerrilla look was achieved by blending rich archival family home movies and photographs with contemporary video footage, recorded specifically for the film.

The film’s road trip presented a number of challenges. Two sisters, with a camera, in a 1982 WB Kingswood ute (pickup), criss-crossing the country, thousands of kilometres... it was always going to be a bumpy ride. During the trip, the girls battled through everything from intense hailstorms to plagues of locusts. Phoebe and Bonnie filmed and interviewed many people from the intersex community, but also turned the camera on themselves. As the unrelenting pace led to conflict in their relationship, they made the creative decision to document their rising tensions, incorporating many of the actual “making of” and “behind the scenes’ moments” into the film’s storyline.

## **Director's statement**

This is my story. It's a story of how my body became a site of pain, confusion and secrecy for me and for my family. Not because it is diseased or dysfunctional but because society deemed it to be abnormal. I have Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS). I am a woman with 46XY (male) chromosomes. In my life, I have struggled with unwarranted categorisation and medical interference. Now, I actively seek to disrupt this cataloging and meddling with as much honesty and humour as I can muster. It's the reason why I wanted to make this film.

I chose the title, *Orchids*, as these ornamental flowers are an especially potent symbol for intersex people. The etymology of the word "orchid" derives from the Greek *orkhis*, meaning "testicle". So, I have appropriated these flowers as a resonant visual signifier throughout my documentary.

On a professional and personal level, *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* has presented me with many challenges. At an early stage of research and development, I made a conscious decision the film should be largely autobiographical. This was important for me on a number of levels and represented a huge step in terms of self-confidence and courage. In my early life, my condition was kept a secret from me. I was confused and told to keep quiet about who and what I was. I was subjected to medical scrutiny, surgery and pathology. *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* has allowed me to reflect on the shame and trauma of my coming-of-age experience, often with humour, and examine why "coming out" continues to be extremely challenging.

I hope my narrative will engage and move audiences.

## **Crew biographies**

### **Phoebe Hart – Director, Producer and Camera**

Phoebe Hart is principal of *hartflicker*, an energetic Australian-based video and film production company. Since completing her film studies at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in 1995, Phoebe Hart has worked extensively as a writer, producer and director of factual television and media, including children's program *Totally Wild*, Network Ten's documentary unit, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's (ABC) *Race Around the World* and *Fly TV*. She co-directed a documentary series on the state of Australian higher education for the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) called *Downunder Grads*, which screened in March 2008. Phoebe also directed and co-wrote the ABC documentary *Roller Derby Dolls* on a group of women who play the rough-and-tumble sport of roller derby, which screened in a primetime slot in September 2008. In 2009 Phoebe was awarded her doctorate from QUT of which *Orchids* was a central element of her studies.

### **Bonnie Hart – Camera, Super 8 Cinematographer and Co-conspirator**

Bonnie applies her skills and creativity in the areas of film production and visual direction across a variety of media platforms. She holds a degree in Film and Television Production from QUT. Her work has been screened Australia-wide on free-to-air and cable television and at arthouse film festivals. Internationally, she has contributed to films screened at Exploding Cinema/Collision Festival (UK), Xpace2000 (Singapore), Hamilton Underground Film Festival (NZ), Lambtree Grove Project (UK), Odense Ser Rodst (Denmark). Bonnie has also toured extensively nationally and internationally as a high-energy avant-garde musician and performance artist, as a part of various noise music bands such as *Unaustralians*, *Sun of the Seventh Sister* and *Knicker Onasis*.



## **Background information for the program**

For the first time, *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* gives a personal and complete autobiographical account of what it is like to be 'intersexed'. *Orchids: My Intersex Adventure* is a 'world first' of its genre and its authorship, as it is the first professionally produced long-form documentary film made about the subject of intersex by a filmmaker who is a member of that same community. Very little is seen or heard about people with intersex conditions, and it could be said the hermaphroditic body has been rendered absent by medical erasure.

Currently, medical case management of patients with intersex conditions dictates gender-assigning surgery be performed as early as possible, often in the days and weeks following the birth of an intersexed infant, ultimately placing the choice in the hands of parents and physicians. Sometimes, surgery is used in order to remedy a life-threatening illness, improve functionality or ease physical discomfort and pain. For example, women with the condition AIS, often have a gonadectomy or 'orchidectomy' because there is a small risk of the undescended testes becoming cancerous. However, surgery is also performed for purely cosmetic purposes, often in order to assuage the parents' distress and to fit societal perceptions of 'normal'.

Once surgery has been approved, a myriad of further problems emerge that challenge the medical community and raise questions about the social ethics around intersex and disability. For example, doctors sometimes do not give full disclosure to parents about the model and methods the surgical team are using, which may be based on contested theories of gender assignment rather than proven fact. Furthermore, for a multitude of reasons, some doctors advise parents to keep all knowledge of the intersex condition from their children. Up

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until very recently, it was very much common practice for medicos not to disclose any pertinent information to patients and family members at all.

The current medical paradigm of early surgical intervention of children with intersex conditions is the legacy of psychologist and sexologist Dr John Money (1921-2006), who pioneered gender-assigning surgery in the 1960s at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, USA. Decades earlier, embryologists had discovered all human foetuses in utero start out with the same tissue that becomes either an ovary or teste, depending on the presence or absence of certain hormones and genes; the “what happens next” in terms of psychological development and socialisation was of interest to Dr Money. Money’s methodology was clear – to control the path human gender development takes from infancy through to adolescence and adulthood.

Dr Money’s most controversial case was of “John/Joan”. When parents of identical twin brothers presented with one child (dubbed “John”) suffering a mismanaged circumcision, Dr Money convinced the family to try a radical new procedure whereby the doctor surgically feminised the patient rather than rebuild the ruined phallus. The parents agreed, and after initial surgery, Dr Money tracked his patient’s development from early childhood through to adolescence, intervening regularly with further surgery, psychotherapy and hormonal treatment. By the time his patient (dubbed “Joan”) was a teenager, Dr Money had declared the fixing of the subject’s assigned gender identity as a unanimous success. Widely reported as a landmark medical breakthrough, Dr Money’s technique of assigning gender to newborn children presenting with ambiguous genitalia soon became standard procedure in hospitals throughout the world. However, the truth behind this “success” was to remain suppressed for two more decades.

In reality, the young child who was the subject of Dr Money’s experiment had from the beginning resisted his allocated gender, and, in his teenage years, after

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learning of his concealed medical history, “Joan” began to live as a male – “John”. Sexologist Professor Milton Diamond was for many years unconvinced by Dr Money’s “nurture over nature” claims, and influenced Reimer’s decision to “come out”. Dr Diamond’s contact with “John” (whose real name was David Reimer) led David to reveal his story to the world, and criticise his former doctor, Dr John Money. It also led to a number of significant publications (including a best-selling work of non-fiction by *Rolling Stone* journalist John Colapinto). Sadly, and despite his courage confronting his surgeon and the medical fraternity and society at large, David Reimer suicided in 2004. Despite the failure of Money’s pet project, his ideas have become institutionalised, and contemporary studies account for more than a quarter of all surgically assigned children as unhappy in adulthood with the gender they were assigned.

Since the early 1990s, groups such as the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA), AIS Support Group (UK) and the AIS Support Group (Australia) have begun lobbying for change. Advancing further still, countries such as Colombia have recognised the right of the child to decide his or her own gender at an appropriate age, and have placed a moratorium on all non-life-threatening infant genital surgeries. In April of 2010, the parents of a 13-year-old girl with the 46XY genotype and inguinal testes were required to petition the Family Court in Queensland, Australia for permission for their daughter to have surgery to remove her gonads. Societal attitudes are beginning to adjust; yet stigma and trauma are still perceived by the intersex community as critical issues.

In 2009, the focus shifted to sport and intersex. Then, South African 800 metres champion runner, Caster Semenya, was publicly outed in the world media as having both male and female sex characteristics. Debates about whether people with intersex conditions can compete in the elite sporting arenas have again ignited conjecture about the male-female gender divide but may lead to greater awareness of intersex globally.

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### **Websites**

- AIS Support Group (Australia) <http://www.vicnet.net.au/~aissg>
- AIS Support Group (UK) <http://www.medhelp.org/www/ais/>
- AIS-DSD (USA) <http://www.aisdsd.org/>
- Intersex Initiative <http://www.ipdx.org/>

### **Film**

- Puenzo, L. 2007. *XXY*. Argentina: Film Movement

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**Credits**

Producer & Director	Phoebe Hart
Camera	Bonnie Hart and Phoebe Hart
Super 8 Cinematographer	Bonnie Hart
Editor	Vanessa Milton
Animation	Simon Rippingale
Theme music	Biddy Connor
Composer	Davin Patterson
Sound designers	Tfer Newsome and John Willstead
Producer consultant	Faramarz K-Rahber
Production coordinator	Bronwyn Roy
Featuring	Phoebe Hart Bonnie Hart James Davidson Dennis Hart Marie Hart Aleyshia Manakahae Tony Briffa Andie Hider Sophie Hart Chris Somers Fay Davidson
Additional camera	James Davidson Naomi Kumé Craig Lucas Dan Macarthur Faramarz K-Rahber
Publicity stills	Bronwyn Roy
Production assistants	Kayla Howard Naomi Kumé Sarah Vertegaal
Animation designers	Simon Rippingale Nina Gibbs
Transcription	Angela Hibbard Melissa McLeary
Sound mixer	David White at LCR Film Sound
Online	Matt Bennett
Colourist	Warren Eagles
Production accountant	Vickie Gest
Insurance	HW Wood Australia Pty. Ltd.
Legals	Verge Whitford & Co.

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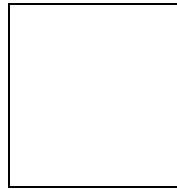
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ABC Commissioning Editor  
Amanda Duthie



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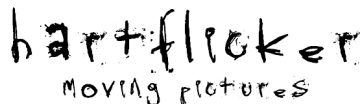
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## **Glossary**

**Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS)** - is a congenital intersex condition. People with AIS have 46XY chromosomes (i.e. the typical male pattern) but develop atypical reproductive organs as a result of their bodies being insensitive to androgens (male hormones which include testosterone). The insensitivity to androgen can vary from 'complete' insensitivity (CAIS) to 'partial' insensitivity (PAIS). Consequently, physical appearance at birth can vary across the spectrum of female to male, and people with AIS can identify as being male, female or intersex.

**Hermaphrodite** - in classical literature, a hermaphrodite is a mythical creature that possesses both male and female anatomy – created by the fusion of Hermes the God of Intelligence and Wisdom, and Aphrodite the Goddess of Beauty and Love. Today it is often used to refer to a *person with an intersex condition*. Commonly, people think a hermaphrodite has “both bits”, but the reality is a person cannot simultaneously possess a complete vagina and penis. A person who has both testicular and ovarian tissue is said in old medical terminology, to be a “true hermaphrodite”. While Phoebe recognises the word “hermaphrodite” may cause offence to many intersex people, she has reclaimed this word as her own. Media are encouraged to use the term “intersex”.

**Intersex** - a biological state whereby a person's reproductive organs, genitalia and or chromosomes transcend the binary male-female divide. The Australian Medical Association definition states: “A person with an intersex condition is born with sex chromosomes, external genitalia or an internal reproductive system that is not exclusively either male or female. This word replaces hermaphrodite.” Nowadays, many intersex peer support groups and health care specialists also term an 'intersex' condition as a Disorder of Sex Development or DSD.