

Thong Girl Strikes Back

Bend over, Nashville: here comes the nation's most notorious superhero

Jim Ridley

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It all starts, as they say, with a thong.

Last August, a Nashville filmmaker named Glen Weiss asked if he could shoot some scenes for an indie feature in the office of Gallatin's mayor. It was a superhero movie, something about a villain who wants to change Nashville's honky-tonk heroes into rappers. The mayor said yes; the scenes were shot. Within two months' time, the resulting furor had made national headlines, attracted attention everywhere from *Today* to *The Tonight Show*, and helped to end at least one political career.

In retrospect, Weiss wonders if he should have mentioned that the movie was called *Thong Girl 3*, or that his superhero was a half-naked babe who shoots lasers out her ass.

"It's a movie, that's all it is," Glen Weiss says, in a dead-serious tone that his explanation does nothing to help: "It's a movie about a girl in a thong who fights crime."

After months of rumor and innuendo, Thong Girl, her sidekick BoxerBrief Boy and their creator will take their case directly to the people this Saturday and Sunday, when *Thong Girl 3: Revenge of the Dark Widow* makes its premiere at the Watkins College of Art & Design. The following week, it plays for the first time in Gallatin, where the controversy all began—and where, apparently, it refuses to die.

The saga that Weiss calls "ThongGate" was a perfect storm of elements that never fail to bewitch the national media on slow news days: small-town weirdness, a dash of quasi-prurience, and prudish overreaction—plus a former model in skimpy red scanties. It started back in 2002, when Weiss, a musician turned aspiring filmmaker, created a public-access sketch-comedy show called *Stubby's Place*.

The show, which still airs in reruns on Nashville's CATV Channel 19, featured local actor Perry Poston as a washed-up comic running a nightclub. Among the talents Weiss auditioned was Leah Adcock, a model/actress with a portfolio of newspaper ads. "I was looking for somebody hot and pretty," Weiss says, and Adcock, a long-legged 28-year-old blonde, seemed unfazed by the show's silly demands. Even when Weiss presented her with a new character so bizarre even he felt ridiculous explaining it.

"Would it be cool if you were a superhero in a thong?" Weiss remembers asking Adcock. The idea came to him in a giggly conversation with a former girlfriend—no, Weiss says, she wasn't wearing a thong. A lithe beauty who works at a Belle Meade boutique, Adcock wasn't put off by the request. But she did wonder why Weiss said, "Oh, by the way," then stammered something unintelligible. She asked him to repeat what he'd said.

"Um, by the way," Weiss remembers telling her sheepishly, "your super power is...you shoot lasers out of your ass."

"It just came from his crazy mind," Leah Adcock says, dressed not in Day-Glo butt floss but in a conservative yoga outfit. During an evening coffee with Weiss at Bongo Java, the civilian Thong Girl is as guarded in person as her caped-crusader alter ego is uninhibited. Pressed for comparisons between herself and Thong Girl—a Davidson County ADA named Lana Layonme who, like so many of her peers at the Ben West Building, turns into an ass-blasting super-hottie with the help of power undies—she demurs. "I don't take it too seriously," she says.

Flash forward to August 2006. By this time, Weiss had filmed two Thong Girl adventures for *Stubby's Place*: one a short sketch that introduced the character, the other a more ambitious 20-minute follow-up that involved a dangerous shoot in the railroad yard across from 100 Oaks. (A CSX railroad guard almost busted the crew, but a face-to-face with Thong Girl worked its magic.) He had also started building a Thong Girl micro-empire, including a line of T-shirts, merchandise and comic books with art by Nashville artist Desi Turner. Weiss decided it was time for Thong Girl's feature-film close up.

At the time, the city of Gallatin had a reputation for welcoming filmmakers with open arms. "We have a lot of people who are very qualified to work in movies," says Don Wright, then mayor of Gallatin. When Weiss asked if he could shoot at City Hall, Wright said yes, happy to boost the city as a film location.

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Wright, also a novelist whose historical epics have been eyed by moviemakers, says Weiss guaranteed him that the film had no nudity, sex or bad language. Weiss says he didn't tell Wright about Thong Girl's unusual powers—or her name—because it didn't occur to him, "any more than if I'd been making a movie about Catwoman or Elektra." Instead, he gave Wright the working title, *Revenge of the Dark Widow*. The small crew went in on a Sunday and filmed without incident. It all might have ended there—had Weiss not posted a thank-you to the mayor on his blog, thonggirlfilms.com.

In the weeks that followed, many people, including Weiss, thought that Mayor Wright's political enemies had tipped off the media in a heated election year. According to reporter Katrina Cornwell, though, who broke the story about *Thong Girl 3* shooting in the mayor's office in the *Gallatin News-Examiner*, a former Gallatin resident Googled Wright looking for his campaign site. Among the first hits that came up was the Thong Girl blog.

"We just knew the story was going to go national," says Cornwell, who's up for a press award for her coverage. Gannett papers across the state picked up the story, then the wires, then hundreds of bloggers. From there, for the next month, it snowballed. Adcock rolled out of bed one Saturday morning, flipped on *Today*—and there was Thong Girl staring back. In a lengthy bit, *Tonight Show* host Jay Leno ribbed his foil Kevin Eubanks, who claimed he'd already seen *Thong Girl 1* and *2*. A reporter for the *Beijing Youth Daily* interviewed Weiss for two hours. For free, Weiss and *Thong Girl 3* suddenly had the kind of promotion a major studio would envy.

Much less comfortable in the spotlight was the city of Gallatin. Enmeshed in a fierce campaign against challenger Jo Ann Graves, Wright, the incumbent since 1997, started to look increasingly vulnerable as Thong Girl became a national punchline. "I feel that if he used the city property to allow the filming of such a movie, that it's extremely degrading to the citizens of Gallatin, and I think it's totally unacceptable," Gallatin Council member Dale Bennett told the *News-Examiner*.

Other citizens, however, thought the matter was a tempest in a G-string. Fed up, as he says, with “all the negative publicity it got from the older generation,” Mark Wayman of Mark’s Appliance Service & Parts rounded up some friends and volunteered to stroll through Gallatin’s Oktoberfest wearing Thong Girl T-shirts—a deliberate act of provocation. “Lots of people loved it,” Wayman says, chuckling, “but the little old ladies looked like they were going to kill us.”

Could the controversy have been avoided? “Maybe,” Wayman says, “if the paper hadn’t put she was shooting laser beams out of her butt.” Just saying the words leaves him roaring with laughter.

Don Wright wasn’t laughing. With Thong Girl as the last straw, he lost his bid for reelection last November. Weiss says he still feels bad about the heat that Wright took, and he dedicated *Thong Girl 3* to the former mayor.

“I don’t hold it against Glen,” says Wright, who adds that he is enjoying life outside politics. Any ire he feels about the whole episode is directed at people who vilified him during *l’affaire* Thong. “They made it out to be a porn picture,” he says, “and if it’s not, somebody owes me a public apology.”

The proof will come June 17, when *Thong Girl 3* makes its feared Gallatin premiere. Gallatin’s historic Palace Theater politely declined to show the film, so instead it will play down the street at a watering hole called The Ranch. “We’ve had a lot of people call about it,” says Ranch staffer Debra Martin, whose brother owns the bar. “They want to buy tickets in advance and reserve tables and whatnot.”

Katrina Cornwell thinks that the matter has mostly died down. But Don Wright says he’s started getting feedback “from all the old people” about the screening, and it isn’t good. He hasn’t decided whether to see the film or not, although he’s leaning toward staying away. Someone told Wright he was sorry that the former mayor might not see the film. “Me too,” Wright says. “I wanted to see what the devil I got myself into!”

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Glen Weiss is delighted with the unexpected journey his creation has taken. “It’s so much bigger than I intended,” he says. He hopes to find modest distribution and get enough back on his paltry investment to make another film. As for his leading lady, he’s not sure how she feels about Thong Girl’s newfound notoriety.

“I think she always thought this would be under the radar,” he says. For a woman who spends her time in a thong, getting ogled at comics conventions by geeks who ask to check out her laser source, Weiss says Leah Adcock is “very demure.” That’s a quality he says she shares with Thong Girl, whose PG-13 outfit masks a family-friendly PG reticence. Says Weiss, “I think she’s a reluctant superhero.”