



From nice girl to ‘Dirty Girl’

By [Ben Harris](#) · November 30, 1999



The ‘Dirty Girl’ cast, from left, Corrie Beula, Michael Littner, Bridget Harvey, Jesse Teeters and Ronnie Koenig. Koenig is also the show's playwright. (David Anthony Wayne Anderson)

NEW YORK, Jan. 19 (JTA) — At a bookstore in Brooklyn, Ronnie Koenig and I are searching the stacks for the latest edition of Playgirl magazine. Koenig, the magazine’s former editor in chief, points to the women’s interest section and implores me to search toward the back, but all we can find is a lonely copy of Well Hung Hunks, a special issue published by Playgirl, not the real thing. With Koenig, 32, holding this weak substitution, I approach the information desk. The latest issue of Playgirl arrived Jan. 2, an employee tells us with a barely perceptible smirk. All four copies apparently have sold out. By

this time Koenig has unobtrusively slipped the magazine from its plastic wrapping and is leading me to a discreet corner, or at least as discreet a corner as we can find in the busy store. As we sit on the floor thumbing through pages of glossy photos of well-built, naked men arrayed against various backdrops — the beach, a construction site, an office after hours — I glance nervously over my shoulder, certain some innocent child or bookstore employee is about to intrude and turn my already flushed cheeks a darker shade of crimson. But Koenig is unfazed. Her eyes scan the magazine with the confidence and shamelessness of one who once was charged with selecting the fine specimens who grace its pages. Though she spent only three years at Playgirl — rising from assistant editor to managing editor to editor in chief before getting fired for reasons she says she never learned — Koenig still “reads” the magazine with an editor’s discerning eye, critiquing the layout and even cringing at some of the less flattering camera angles. She bemoans the absence of “boy copy,” the text accompanying pictorials that sets the scene or describes a scenario the photos are meant to illustrate. “I think I know that guy,” she says of one of the models. This wasn’t the intended career path for Koenig, who hails from a nice Jewish family on Long Island, but she’s milking the experience for all it’s worth. Her time at the magazine already is the subject of a play, “Dirty Girl,” which finishes an initial run in New York City on Jan. 27. Koenig says a book and a movie are in the works. With her petite build, wavy brown hair and childlike giggle, Koenig hardly fits the imagined profile of a sex magazine editor. By her own account, the stint at Playgirl is the most interesting thing to have happened to this Barnard College graduate from Levittown, N.Y., a planned subdivision of identical tract houses that has become

synonymous with suburban drudgery. What began with a response to a cryptic want ad in The New York Times in 2000 launched a three-year stint that became the defining element of Koenig's career so far. "Dirty Girl," which Koenig wrote and stars in, is a mostly accurate depiction of her rise from assistant on a soap opera set — in the play, she's a law student — to editor in chief of the country's best-known pornographic magazine for women. The fast-paced comedy shows her balancing the disapproval of her parents, her rabbi and her scrawny Jewish boyfriend with the lurid temptations of her life as a porn diva. It also shows her struggle to settle the central dilemma of her editorial tenure: figuring out if there are any women who actually find the magazine arousing. While Playgirl bills itself as entertainment for women, up to half its readership is believed to be gay men. "I hate the whole stereotype that women get turned on by Hugh Grant movies," she says, though she concedes that the beefy, body-waxed types that Playgirl features aren't her preference either. "Maybe somebody finds this attractive, but not me." Koenig says she actually prefers nebbishy Jewish guys, though she describes her current boyfriend as "a really tall, artistic Jewish guy." Her romantic tastes notwithstanding, Playgirl has garnered Koenig a reputation as a sex expert and led to other gigs writing about things carnal. She regularly proffers bedroom advice for Cosmopolitan, and she just returned from Las Vegas, where she covered a sex-industry convention for a yet-to-be-launched Web site. In the play, Koenig worries that her racy past will limit her future prospects — though with New York rent to pay, she's not being too choosy. "It's not my aspiration," she says. "If the sex writer thing gets me paying jobs, that's great." As a kid, Koenig says, she was something of a rebel, hiding out in her synagogue's bridal suite to avoid attending a youth group meeting. She was a huge David Bowie fan, and her bat mitzvah featured a rock 'n' roll theme with a food station called Ronnie's Hard Rock Café. Her "liberal" parents were open about most things, Koenig says — except sex. Though they were "ultimately accepting" of her job, she did have to make a censored version of the magazine for them so they could kvell over her work. "I would literally take a scissors and tape and then make my own issues of Playgirl using only things I thought were appropriate for their eyes to see," Koenig says. "It could be a pictorial, but a penis wouldn't be shown in it. Maybe a tush could be." Despite her occupation and her evident willingness to peruse graphic nudity in public, Koenig says she's not entirely comfortable with her reputation as a sex queen. "I'm the girl who goes home for seder," she says. "I'm clearly a dork." Koenig may not be the hippest, but she is remarkably resistant to embarrassment. With the blood pooling in my face and having deflected more than enough sidelong glances from strangers, I suggest purchasing the offending magazine, if only to soothe my conscience. But Koenig won't hear of it, refusing to allow me to squander precious pennies on tripe. "I never really liked the special issues because there's no editorial in there — there's not even boy copy in them," she says. "That's what gives the magazine a sort of humor to it. If it's just the pictures, I think it's slightly disgusting."