

Movie madams

Before Helen Mirren in 'Love Ranch,' there was Barbara Stanwyck in 'Walk on the Wild Side,' Julie Christie in 'McCabe & Mrs. Miller' and more.





Amanda Blake and James Arness in TV's "Gunsmoke." TV censors kept the real purpose of the saloon run by Blake's Miss Kitty from viewers. (File photo)

By Susan King, Los Angeles Times

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The "world's oldest profession" has long been a favorite subject in novels, plays, films and television. Real-life madams such as Sydney Biddle Barrows, a.k.a. the Mayflower Madam, and Heidi Fleiss, the Hollywood Madam, have captured the attention of the media and filmmakers for decades.

And let's face it, Miss Kitty (Amanda Blake) on the long-running western series "Gunsmoke" wasn't just serving drinks to Marshal Dillon (James Arness) and the boys at the Long Branch saloon — and the second floor of her establishment was more than just a boarding house (even if censors of the time wouldn't allow anyone to say that).

Now Oscar winner Helen Mirren teams up with her director husband Taylor Hackford for the melodrama "Love Ranch," which opened Wednesday. Set in the early days of legalized prostitution in Nevada in the 1970s, the film revolves around a squabbling married couple, Grace (Mirren) and Charlie (Joe Pesci), who own Nevada's first legally licensed brothel. They were inspired by Sally and Joe Conforte, who ran the Mustang Ranch brothel in the 1970s.

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Madam Susan Austin, who was a fortysomething divorced mother of four boys when she became a "working girl," is the co-owner and operator of the Mustang Ranch and the nearby Wild Horse Resort and Spa outside of Reno. She was the technical advisor on "Love Ranch." She believes that prostitution is an eternally fascinating subject because "it's a little bit naughty. Everybody is afraid to be a little bit naughty. They wanted to live vicariously. A good working girl can make a lot of money; they can gross \$50,000 a month."

Austin says that Mirren captures her spirit and personality in

"If you watch the movie — that's me," she says. "She is tough, she is firm." But she's also a den mother to her girls. "I don't allow smoking and I don't allow drugs," says Austin.

She also gives high marks to Dolly Parton, who played the good-time-gal madam Miss Mona in the 1982 movie musical "The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas," based on the infamous Chicken Ranch brothel near La Grange, Texas. "Dolly Parton hit it right on the head," says Austin. "She got it. She wouldn't allow the girls to swear and chew gum. She ran her house a lot like me."

Here's a look at several other films featuring madams and their working girls.

"Belle de Jour": Luis Bunuel directed this provocative 1967 French drama about a French woman (Catherine Deneuve) married to a doctor who has masochistic sexual fantasies. Unable to be intimate with her husband, she learns about a high-class brothel run by the svelte, elegant Madame Anais (Genevieve Page).

"Walk on the Wild Side": The always watchable Barbara Stanwyck sinks her teeth into the role of the brittle Jo, the madam of a 1930s New Orleans bordello based on the novel by Nelson Algren. This 1962 camp fest is best remembered today for Elmer Bernstein's pulsating jazz score.

"McCabe & Mrs. Miller": Julie Christie got an Oscar nomination for her memorable turn as a feisty, cigarette-smoking madam running a bordello in the dirty, mud-filled mining town of Presbyterian Church in Robert Altman's brilliant 1971 western.

"Unforgiven": Frances Fisher plays the steely, take-no-prisoners Strawberry Alice in Clint Eastwood's Oscar-winning 1992 western. Alice runs the brothel in the rough-and-tumble western town of Big Whiskey. In fact, it is the slashing of the face of one of her girls that leads former outlaw (Eastwood) to head to Big Whiskey after Strawberry Alice decides to take justice into her own hands by offering a \$1,000 bounty on the culprits.

"Pretty Baby": Louis Malle directed this controversial 1978 film set in an elegant brothel of Madame Nell (Frances Faye) in the red-light district in New Orleans in 1917 just before prostitution there was declared illegal. Working at the brothel is Hattie (Susan Sarandon), who has a beautiful 12-year-old daughter, Violet (Brooke Shields, who appears nude in several scenes). Madame Nell may keep a stylish house, but she's also an astute businesswoman who is not above auctioning off Violet's virginity.

"The Happy Hooker": Perhaps the most famous madam of the 1970s was Xaviera Hollander, who began working in the trade when her engagement went bust. After she paid \$10,000 to purchase a client list from a retiring New York madam, Hollander took the Big Apple by storm. She opened her own bordello, the Vertical Whorehouse, and became the leading madam in New York. Her autobiography, "The Happy Hooker," was published in 1971 and sold more than 16 million copies. The late Lynn Redgrave played Xaviera in the funny 1975 film version, which chronicled her rise from secretarial pool to the bordello. There were two lesser sequels with other actresses, 1977's "The Happy Hooker Goes to Washington" and 1980's "The Happy Hooker Goes Hollywood."

susan.king@latimes.com