

# Welcome Back, Potter

DIRECTOR SALLY POTTER HAS BEEN nearly forgotten in the 18 years since her sumptuous, androgynous *Orlando* vaulted her from the avant-garde to the mainstream, but no worries. "My films have long tails," Potter told a British television interviewer early this year when he prodded her about the minuscule audience for her latest film, *Rage*, a bare-bones production distributed

in segments online and for cell phones. Cranky interview questions aside, watching in snippets is the perfect way to see that starry murder mystery, in which fashion-world characters—Jude Law in drag as a Russian model named Minx, Judi Dench as a critic—take turns addressing a student filming them with his phone. Think of the film's segments as high-art Webisodes and you see how pertinent Potter is to the topsy-turvy world of filmmaking today, how smoothly she blends the cutting edge and the mainstream, how underappreciated she has been. *Orlando's* rerelease this summer and a Potter retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York beginning July 7 should help change that oversight.

Based on Virginia Woolf's novel, *Orlando* remains Potter's masterpiece, with Tilda Swinton as a man who lives from Elizabethan days to the present, waking up as a woman in the 18th century. Potter's kaleidoscopic style is all here, incorporating songs, dances, poems, extravagant colors, emotional heights. The visuals are still seductive: the frozen Thames crowded with 17th-century skaters. The film's wit and layered sense of history seem richer than ever. An angel slyly sings "Eliza is the fairest queen" as Queen Elizabeth, played by Quentin Crisp (inspired casting!), sails on a barge and falls madly for the young male Orlando. A 19th-century hero on horseback rides out of a mist and literally tumbles at the female Orlando's feet, as Potter both indulges and tweaks Romanticism.

The MoMA show exposes her experimental roots, with rarities like *The Gold*

*Diggers* (1983), in which Julie Christie roams the 19th-century gold rush and a contemporary London theater trying to define herself as a woman in society. Potter soon abandoned her early work's hermetic didacticism, though. And after *Orlando*, when many directors would have jettisoned art for a Hollywood paycheck, she went on fearlessly creating graceful but hard-to-sell new forms.

Her 2004 *Yes*, a love story fraught with politics, was inspired by 9/11 but may be even more resonant now, in a world still inflamed with ethnic hatred. Joan Allen plays an Irish-American doctor in London who falls in love with a Lebanese cook, once a surgeon in Beirut. But why make things easy? The characters speak entirely in iambic pentameter, although the cadences are so natural you may not notice (it was good enough for Shakespeare). The use of poetry suggests depth and history beyond the immediate moment, even when the characters, called only He and She, trade epithets as lovers in the midst of horrifying anger can.

SHE: Terrorist!  
HE: Imperialist!  
SHE: Bigot!  
HE: Bitch!

The beautifully choreographed romance *The Tango Lesson* (1996) has its own twist, a teasingly autobiographical hall of mirrors. Potter plays a filmmaker named Sally who has a tumultuous affair with a tango dancer named Pablo, played by dancer Pablo Verón. Tucked away in their story is a scene in which the fictional Sally takes a Hollywood meeting, and her script for a fashion-world murder mystery called *Rage* is laughed out of town.

All these years later, her Web-friendly, DVD-released *Rage* dares Hollywood to keep up with her. As you'd expect, the film is not essentially about the off-screen murder but about the lethal lust for fame shared by the designers, moguls, and publicists who face the camera. Potter herself is still wary of fame, even as it tries to catch her again. □

Some art-house directors make a splash and then sell out. Not this one.



FROM TOP: LIAM LONGMAN—COURTESY OF ADVENTURE PICTURES, NICOLA DOVE—EYEBOX—COURTESY OF ADVENTURE PICTURES, COURTESY OF ADVENTURE PICTURES