Sally Potter: 'There was no such thing as an easy ride'

More familiar with life on the fringes of British cinema, director Sally Potter finds herself the subject of a BFI retrospective. But she has no interest in looking back

'When it's time to let go of my films, I really let go' ... Sally Potter. Photograph: Felix Clay Felix Clay/Guardian

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In the late 1980s, Sally Potter was scratching around for funding to make Orlando, the Virginia Woolf adaptation widely considered her finest film, as well as a formative moment in the career of its star, Tilda Swinton. Potter's friend, the visionary director Michael Powell, had secured her a 10-minute meeting with Martin Scorsese, in which she hoped to convince him to extend a helping hand to a fellow maverick.

"Tilda and I went with our producer to meet Scorsese in New York," says the 60-year-old Potter, seated at a table in her east London office. "We walked into his place and nearly fainted with admiration. He then proceeded to spend the entire 10 minutes talking about how incredibly difficult life was for him as an independent film-maker because the critics had just 'killed' him over The Last Temptation of Christ." The slender, softly spoken Potter grimaces at the memory before whooping loudly, throwing her head back in a gesture that disturbs her long, red mane.

Although she didn't come away from chez Scorsese with a fat cheque in her fist, she did leave with something of greater long-term value. "It was fascinating to observe that somebody who was the very definition of a loved and respected film-maker should himself be carrying real wounds from criticism he'd received, and could still be struggling. It was bizarrely reassuring. I realised I was part of a spectrum. There was no such thing as an easy ride – just different kinds of difficulties."

What has occasioned these reflections is a season of Potter's work at BFI Southbank, ranging from avant-garde shorts that were in the can before she was out of her teens, to Rage, the 2009 murder-mystery set in the fashion industry and comprised entirely of talking heads, including Jude Law, Judi Dench and Steve Buscemi. Potter is indisputably an arthouse film-maker, but if there's one thing she can do, it's reel in the stars: Johnny Depp, Christina Ricci, Joan Allen and Julie Christie are among past collaborators.

She is, she says, largely averse to revisiting the past. "I'm completely absorbed in my films until the moment of letting go. Then I really do let go. I barely even remember them." What's most striking about the retrospective is the continuity between films made over a 40-year-span. The split-screen short Play, filmed in 1971 from the window of Potter's bedsit using two cameras running at different speeds, is a perfect example, foreshadowing some of the same ideas about the untrust-worthy image that are explored in Rage.

Potter is essentially a product of late-60s London, when the capital was a hive of underground creativity: you could scarcely throw a dissertation on Derrida without hitting a leftist collective or an arts laboratory. Potter had already whiled away many long days at the Drury Lane Arts Lab, where audiences would lounge around on mattresses for screenings of, say, Andy Warhol's eight-hour Empire. Having harboured dreams of film-making since before she left school, and high on Eisenstein and Vertov, Potter pitched up at the London Film-Makers' Co-Op. "The deal was that you just walked in and lurked about," she explains, "and if you were lucky you got to use something. My memory is of standing in the background, blushing and feeling terribly shy, trying to get a foothold. When I did get to use

the editing equipment, I remember unwinding the film all over the floor, and just crying."

Play brought the young director the recognition from her LFMC colleagues that she wanted, but she still felt like an outsider. "There simply weren't a lot of women making films. It was just on the cusp of the women's movement. I went on marches, but I always wondered if the real movement was somewhere else. When people ask me if I was part of the women's movement, I tend to think, 'I dunno.'"

Potter then enrolled at the London School of Contemporary Dance, and devoted much of the 1970s to choreographing and performing. Her return to film-making proper came in 1979 with Thriller, a playful short in which Mimi, the seamstress who expires at the end of Puccini's La Bohème, unpicks the manner of her own demise. "I was on my own with Thriller, not really having any reference points to guide me. But also in the physical sense of editing the film alone at night, with the lights off and a thermos of coffee, using borrowed equipment out of hours while the rest of the city slept." Told largely through still images in the manner of La Jetée, but bristling with erudite wit, the film was a labour of love that became a calling-card. It can only have raised expectations for her 1983 feature debut, The Gold Diggers.

Watching the picture now, it's extra–ordinary to think that this cheerfully adventurous piece analysing the role of women in cinema and society – starring Julie Christie – could have attracted the opprobrium it did. "It was supposed to be a comedy," she shrugs. "I couldn't understand why no one was laughing." Maybe Britain simply wasn't ready for a socio-political screwball-feminist discourse on gender, with added tap-dancing. Potter had employed an all-female crew, the better to reflect the film's feminist thrust – a clear instance of positive discrimination before that term was coined. "Many of the women weren't very experienced. And there were all the tensions and mutinies that come with that kind of idealistic project. But the idea was that the behind-the-scenes situation needed to reflect some of what was going on in the story itself. You couldn't believe what an issue it was then. The flak we got! We were called anti-male. We were derided and ridiculed."

With The Gold Diggers savaged by all but a handful of critics, Potter was back to being an outsider again. I had always pictured her, rather sentimentally, as an established part of that British arthouse scene funded by the BFI in the 1970s and early 1980s – Jarman, Peter Greenaway, Terence Davies, Bill Douglas. But she sets me straight on that. "I was on the margins," she says brightly, in the manner of someone putting a jolly spin on bad news. "The idea of us as any kind of group is a product of hindsight." So you weren't hanging out in Soho pubs, arm-wrestling Terence Davies? "Hugging Terence Davies, certainly," she says. "Though not very often. I love Terence, and Derek was a good friend too. But film-makers work very much in isolation. We only ever see each other every three or four years when we come out of the dark to attend festivals."

Being an outsider meant there was no kind of support network to cushion the blow of The Gold Diggers' commercial failure. "It was dreadful. I felt really cast out. I thought there was a very real chance that I'd blown my one opportunity. It was a long haul back." But while Orlando took Potter the best part of eight years to realise, it feels like the film she was born to make. The storytelling is breezy and dextrous, spanning 400 years in the life of a time-travelling nobleman (Swinton) who jumps genders. The casting alone is manna from gay heaven: Ned Sherrin, Jimmy Somerville, even Quentin Crisp as Queen Elizabeth I. It was also one of the first films to straddle the divide, rigid in those days, between arthouse and mainstream, looking back to the muscular conundrums of Greenaway's The Draughtsman's Contract or Rivette's Céline and Julie Go Boating, but also forward to the period-piece irreverence of Shakespeare in Love.

Potter isn't short of explanations for Orlando's popularity. It's snappy (she hired the editor of Delicatessen to give it some punch) and, she says, better made all-round than The Gold Diggers. But her precarious prospects at the time must have forced her to be all the more driven. "I can assure you I was very determined with The Gold Diggers," she points out. "But with Orlando it felt like life or death. If I didn't make a film that worked in the eyes of the world, rather than just a few diehard supporters, I knew I wasn't going to be able to do what I perceived as my life's work."

Did she ever feel like giving up? "Sure. I got close many times. Especially financially – you have to learn to live in debt constantly. But once you discover that you don't actually starve, every obstacle becomes an opportunity to redefine what you're doing, a vehicle for transformation. That's perfect for taking the fear out of things. It's like Gertrude Stein said: 'Considering how dangerous everything is, nothing is really very frightening.'"