

Sally Potter by Shari Frilot



In Sally Potter's cinematic adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel, *Orlando*, the writer and director offers a picturesque tour through time and sexuality. *Orlando* invites audiences to hitch a ride on the life of a young male aristocrat who, throughout the course of the film, transforms from man to woman and lives 400 years of history (memory). After decades of making experimental films, Potter herself is transforming as an artist: *Orlando* is Potter's first foray into narrative feature filmmaking since she started making films with an 8mm camera at the age of 14. The jump is enormous—the breadth and sweep of *Orlando* is sensuous and grand. Yet Potter's journeyman approach to filmmaking allows *Orlando* the depth and idiosyncracies of the independent. We spoke about whizzing through spacetime over an early morning cappuccino.

Shari Frilot I've seen your past work— *Goldiggers*, *Thriller*, *London Story* —and of all those, *Orlando* is the least experimental. What led you to choose a more traditional narrative form?

Sally Potter It's really the lessons learned from traveling widely with the earlier films. I always hoped my films were accessible. What I

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weren't, in the way they set out to be. A narrative thread gives people permission to think about other things whilst being carried by its flow. It does not mean that one has to compromise one's vision, or question formal concerns. It's just being more subtle and clever by having one accessible thread.

SF Then you are moving into the narrative form?

SP Well, interestingly, at the script stage of *Orlando*, financiers said, "So, it's about someone who lives 400 years and changes sex. That's fine but what's the story?" I am not polemically attached to narrative. I was part of a movement that wanted to take everything to do with filmmaking apart, including the narrative. I'm now at the stage where I want to put it back together again. It's not about stepping back from concerns, it's about moving on.

SCENE 58: EXT/DAY: THE GREAT HOUSE

ORLANDO is walking up the path towards the entrance to the house. The ARCHDUKE HARRY is trotting by her side, and has clearly been talking for some time.

ARCHDUKE HARRY: *None of us knew what had happened. It's extraordinary! And to think we could have been so charmingly misled.*

ORLANDO sighs in exasperation, lifts her petticoats and walks once more with her familiar "male" stride between the topiary pyramids.

The BUTLER hurries anxiously after ORLANDO, with two OFFICIAL-LOOKING MEN following close behind.

FIRST OFFICIAL: *The Lady Orlando?*

ORLANDO: *(turning around)* The same.

The SECOND OFFICIAL steps forward, hovering slightly behind the first.

FIRST OFFICIAL: We wish to inform you, er, madam, that you are a party to several major law suits that have been preferred against you concerning the property.

SECOND OFFICIAL: (*smirking*) The family seat.

ORLANDO: Pray continue.

The FIRST OFFICIAL coughs and unfurls a document.

FIRST OFFICIAL: (*sotto voce*) One. You are legally dead and therefore cannot hold any property whatsoever.

ORLANDO: Ah. Fine.

FIRST OFFICIAL: Two. You are now a female

SECOND OFFICIAL: (*gleefully*). . . which amounts to much the same thing.

FIRST OFFICIAL: (*restraining the second official*) Pending the legal judgment, however, you have the law's permission to reside in the property in a state of incognito.

SECOND OFFICIAL: Or incognita, as the case may be

The ARCHDUKE HARRY suddenly lunges for ORLANDO's hand.

ORLANDO: Harry!

ARCHDUKE HARRY: There is only one solution in your current predicament.

ORLANDO: Indeed?

ARCHDUKE HARRY: I can offer you a house to rival your own!

ORLANDO: I . . . I don't quite understand.

The OFFICIALS bow and leave, coughing and embarrassed.

ARCHDUKE HARRY: (*laughing nervously*) I confess! Orlando—to me—you were, and always will be,—whether male *or* female—the pink, the pearl and the perfection of your sex.

The ARCHDUKE goes down on one knee in front of Orlando.

ARCHDUKE HARRY: I'm offering you my hand.

ORLANDO: Oh Archduke! That's very kind of you—yes—but—I cannot accept.

ARCHDUKE HARRY: But I . . . I am England. And you are mine.

ORLANDO: I see—On what grounds?

ORLANDO and the ARCHDUKE stare at each other. The ARCHDUKE'S eyes fill with tears.

ARCHDUKE HARRY: (*despairingly*) That I adore you.

ORLANDO: And so I *belong* to you?

ARCHDUKE HARRY: You are refusing me?

ORLANDO: I am. I'm sorry.

They stare at each other. The ARCHDUKE looking incredulous and hurt.

ARCHDUKE HARRY: But Orlando, with your history—quite frankly—who else would have you?

ORLANDO pulls herself up to her full height.

ARCHDUKE HARRY: (*bitterly*) With your . . . ambiguous sexuality—which I am prepared to tolerate—this is your last chance of respectability—

ORLANDO: (*panting*)—I can't breathe—

ARCHDUKE HARRY: —You will die a spinster. Dispossessed and alone.

ORLANDO turns on her heel, lifts her skirts and strides off.



Tilda Swinton in Sally Potter's *Orlando*. All photographs courtesy Sony Classics.

SF What kind of feedback have you gotten?

SP The film seems to have been a kind of relief. I've had both men and women come up in tears, or write me letters that they had to go and cry somewhere. Partly, it's because the story shows that it is hard to be a man and it's hard to be a woman, how society shapes and drives these things called masculinity and femininity. But what is infinitely more important is our common humanity. Which isn't to say that we don't have very different experiences and are treated very differently because of gender. Another relief is that the film recognizes the complexity of sexuality and identity and most of us have felt pushed into a reductionist corner. Every individual is much more complicated than that.

SF What was your motivation for taking up the story *Orlando*?

SP The most sustaining part of the story, for me, was the notion of immortality. Why are we alive for only such a short time? How do we relate to our forefathers? Is there a soul? The really big questions that the religions have tried to tackle. So that became a more abstract realm, in addition to the visual potential and sheer scope of the novel and the gender themes. When you work on a film for so long, you need deep, tasty, underlying ideas to explore. It was also very satisfying to create a huge part for an actress, as there are so few meaty parts for women.

SF When Orlando made love for the first time as a woman, what was going through your mind? Was Orlando making love to Shelmerdine (Billy Zane) as a man or as a woman? What sexuality was Orlando at that time? How did you direct that scene?

SP First of all, Orlando's story is the story of an individual, but it's also the story of a country. The story of England or really any other colonial-based country. So, all the events in Orlando's life as an individual have national as well as personal significance. In the nineteenth century, England was a colonial power that was eventually to lose its empire. America was in the process of becoming one. So, they meet at the point of exchange. For Orlando, it is like looking in a mirror into a possible future. The real question is not only whether she is a woman meeting a man or a man meeting a man, it is also about the meeting of ideologies:

England's feeling of destiny arising out of its past—America's of free will through the dream of its future. And in their embrace is the bittersweet theme of possession. But behind these layers of implication is the simple question, "What is love?" It is two members of the human race meeting each other. That is how the scene was directed. Through the eyes.

Excerpt: SCENE 61: EXT/DAY: MOORLAND

The landscape is wild, devastated and windswept.

ORLANDO lifts up her skirts and starts to run. The camera swoops, bird-like, around her as she runs, to the sound of thundering, romantic piano music.

ORLANDO suddenly trips and falls and then lies stunned, prostrate, face down with arms outstretched, like a nun offering herself as a bride to Christ.

ORLANDO: Nature! Nature! I am your bride! Take me! *The sound of her racing heartbeat is gradually overtaken by the sound of a horse's hooves pounding onto the turf.*

INTERTITLE: 1850 SEX

ORLANDO looks up as the horse and rider (SHELMERDINE) gallop into her line of vision, silhouetted against the bright sky. The horse rears up, startled by the prostrate figure.

SHELMERDINE is flung to the ground, and lies spreadeagled in front of ORLANDO.

ORLANDO lifts her head and looks questioningly into the camera.

SHELMERDINE slowly raises his head. He is darkhaired, wild looking and extremely handsome.

SHELMERDINE: You're hurt Ma'am.

ORLANDO: I'm dead, Sir!

*SHELMERDINE pauses, carefully scrutinizing
ORLANDO'S expression.*

SHELMERDINE: (*lightly*) Dead. That's serious. Can I help?

ORLANDO: Will you marry me?

SHELMERDINE: Ma'am, I'd gladly—but—

*SHELMERDINE winces in pain as he tries to move.
ORLANDO looks startled.*

SHELMERDINE: I fear my ankle is twisted.



Quentin Crisp in Sally Potter's *Orlando*.

SF Did you intend any sort of comment on bisexuality in that moment or?

SP *Orlando* is not a film about confirming sexual identities. It's more about exploding them. I know there is a huge desire to affirm these things, but that's not what the film is doing. It's really about shifting human identity throughout history. Exploding the myths of sexual identity with a gentle touch.

SF In the past, the strategy of your films was about stripping a story to the bone. *Orlando* is just the opposite, so much piled on to what began as a relatively simple story. Am I reading this right? Why the opposite?

SP Bones and flesh, bones and flesh. I love your description because, to me, that's what I've been up to. But the way I worked in *Orlando* was from the bone up. The book was taken down to the bone over several years. I'm talking about making charts of the skeletal forms. I was trying to find out what it was really about. That took the most time. Having found what I thought was a viable skeleton, there was a rush of pleasure of fleshing it out. Just excitement and passion and giving way to my own pleasure. To me there is an intimate relationship between austerity and more lush aesthetics. They're two faces of the same coin.

SF Near the end, Orlando strips everything down.

SP To pure beingness. That was the intention. That last look into the camera. It was supposed to be without anything, no acting, just pure communication

SF How long did *Orlando* take to get into production? How long was the shoot?

SP The shoot was short—ten weeks and a ten week edit. But that was on the back of four years of preparation: 20 or 30 trips to the Soviet Union to find locations, story boarding, picture research, meetings with cinematographers, and so on. And raising the money, which is what determined the time frame. The official pre-production period was ten weeks, a very hectic time. In retrospect I can see that I really needed the slow build beforehand.

SF Your film, *Thriller*, was a short film. But it was large in the sense that it was a story within a story, within a story. It was like traveling along a fractal. Just tell me if this is wrong, but were you ever interested in math and science?

SP Why do you ask that?

SF I don't know, some of the things that you say.

SP The next film is connected to that. I've tried to teach myself mathematics and physics to try to come to terms with some of these things. But what do you see in my work that made you think I would be interested in math?

SF Right now, one of my passions is fractal geometry. Fractals are profoundly beautiful. And the way you jump around scales of being in your films and in your conversation seems like you have a cosmic vision. You're able to traverse ground very well, non-linearly. You're hopping around points and all the while covering the whole.

SP As the director, you have to hold in your head the widest possible vision. Not just the idea and the story, but the conceptual content. But at the same time, you have to consider the tiniest, tiniest detail. I think that gives one a visceral sense of the interaction between the tiniest and the largest, that mathematics also has a language for.

SF Mathematics is a formal language, very elegant. But it's amazing to see this pattern that you create, that is created by mathematics. It's not there in nature. But it's very natural. Fractal geometry is shaking things up, things aren't so linear. Do you know about deterministic chaos?

SP I'm reading about that, particularly for the next film, but also in relation to *Orlando*. It connects with the central abstract questions about time. The story drives through 400 years, and the last frame is supposed to be the present. Which brings us to all these questions: What is the present? Is time reversible? Is it a completely solid, concrete thing? Or fluid and changeable?

SF Are you going to continue this investigation of time in your next project?

SP I look at cinema as intimately linked to time. It's bound by time—an hour and a half or whatever. In *Orlando*, everything moves forward in time. It never goes back, even though there are repeated dramatic moments, such as the rain falling, a symmetrical echo. I was working on the advice of Michael Powell: "You only have to say things once." It's a risky feeling, but I found it exciting. You have to find the one clear way to say something and then let it go forever.

SF It is a different relationship to continuity. David Balm's theory is that the universe is basically a hologram, all wave forms and interference forms.

SP I wonder if science has always had this theological allure

SF Science always has a spiritual implication. Mathematics and the physics of the day play a huge role in how we identify ourselves.

SP I've often felt that an individual could sit in a room somewhere and if he or she thought long, hard, and deep enough, could come up with new frontier ideas in these forms. In other words, that all these ideas are pre-existent, there to be found. I know that when I'm working I sense that I am bringing something pre-existent into focus. But perhaps it's just a trick of the mind, to ease the process of invention.

SF I am really itching to see your next film. Do you think you will continue to work on feminist themes?

SP I have come to the conclusion that I can't use that term in my work. Not because of a disavowal of the underlying principles that gave birth to that word—the commitment to liberation, dignity, equality. But it has become a trigger word that stops people's thinking. You literally see people's eyes glaze over with exhaustion when the word flashes into the conversation. So I never use the term, except amongst very intimate friends for whom it has a different meaning. There is some way in which the jargon of the radical liberal arena, has become an alienated disservice to its own causes. I also think that the word feminism doesn't imply enough in terms of solidarity with other liberation struggles. I am firmly committed to the notion that no one group can be freed until all groups are freed. The female struggle implies the black struggle, it implies the struggle with anti-Semitism, it implies all of the other struggles. That is the only possible way to think about human liberation. However, I could never forget what it has been to me to understand the historical oppression of women—and my own. But I really see women's struggle as one of the great interlocking struggles. If you are describing any of them, you are describing all of them. So that consciousness will always be around in my work. But I am not interested in making didactic polemical statements. That is not the way I want to make films. There is a place for polemics, but I don't think that it is in fictional cinema. Fictional cinema works subtly and deeply.

SF I wanted to ask you about that angel in *Orlando*. Where did the angel come from?

SP First of all, I think that Jimmy Somerville is an angel. He has the voice of an angel, the grace of an angel. Secondly, I wanted to end the film with a literal looking up. And perhaps it is Orlando's guardian angel. There are voices running through the whole film, subliminal voices. The voices become flesh. What he is singing is important: "I'm coming, I'm coming, I'm coming through. I'm coming across the divide to you." He is manifesting all of the contradictions and paradoxes of the film. All coming into focus at that one moment. That seemed to me a very angelic moment.

Coming Orlando's song*

I am coming! I am coming!

I am coming through!

Coming across the divide to you.

In this moment of unity

Feeling an ecstasy

To be here, to be now

At last I am free.

Yes at last, at last

To be free of the past

And of a future that beckons me.

Yes at last, at last

To be free of the past

And of a future that beckons me.

I am coming! I am coming!

Here I am!

Neither a woman, nor a man.

We are joined, we are one

With a human face.

We are joined, we are one

with a human face.

I am on earth

And I am in outer space

I'm being born and I am dying.

I am on earth

and I am in outer space

I'm being born and I am dying.



Tilda Swinton in Sally Potter's *Orlando*.

SF For me, the whole idea of heaven and hell is an attempt to unify the present moment by splitting it up into pieces. In the end it is more of a disservice than a service because it breaks up time and space. There is no continuity between living here on the planet and what is happening in heaven and hell, or being in heaven, for that matter. When I saw the angel it was challenging on that level. There is really no religion in the film at all. It is so very much about Orlando and his evolution. It was the first time that I had seen an angel do exactly what angels are supposed to do, which is to expand upon the present moment. What's next? What is scratching inside of you that you want to treat with thoroughness?

SP I need time to absorb and digest what it is I want to do before I take my next step, but I want to make films that generate hope and ecstasy. *Orlando* was the most incredible learning experience for me. When I was making it I felt like I was seven, when every day I was learning something new. I had to keep reaching beyond my own limits. I would like to make another film in that way because I feel that is how to live—with the feeling of learning and learning and learning. A perilous existence. Being prepared to fail.

—Shari Frilot is an independent producer and co-director of *MIX: The Annual New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film/Video Festival*.

The excerpts in this interview are from Sally Potter's screenplay *Orlando*. ©1992

*Lyrics ©1988 Sally Potter.

Tags: Super 8, Feminism, Excerpt, Gender identity, Gender, Sexuality, Science, Production and direction

Film : Interview

Yang Fudong

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