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naked cinema

sally potter seeks a more intimate medium

words rosanna durham, self-portraits

The strange idea, I say to Sally Potter, is that I know her through her films, which is perhaps a very intimate way of knowing a director. We're sitting in her East London studio, at the round table that featured in the *Tango Lesson*. Prop drawers, film posters and set pieces are everywhere, and the table is covered in her self-portraits.

I'm curious about the point when film became alive for her, and when she discovered it was a medium that she could play with.

"The first moment was when I was fourteen, after I'd been given the opportunity to play with a Super 8 camera. The feeling of looking through the lens and filming my uncle and his girlfriend as quasi actors was so intense and so complete in its own way that it felt like the beginning of something else. It was just a great feeling of certainty."

Potter has been playing with film ever since. After *Yes*, a political romance in iambic pentameter, she released *Rage* late last year.

The plot is familiar, even clichéd: a murder mystery on the catwalk of a Manhattan fashion show. But, in the words of one disgruntled YouTube commenter, there are "no scene changes, no set, no special effects, no character interaction." Its star cast—Judi Dench, Jude Law, Eddie Izzard—speak to camera, backed by nothing but a green screen.

She's wanted to make this film for years. The idea even featured in the *Tango Lesson*, her 1997 release. Sally herself plays a screenwriter suffering from writer's block, who shelves the script of her murder mystery set in the fashion world. But the script was waiting for a whole new medium: the Internet.

"I discovered I had written a film I didn't really want to make, but it didn't leave me alone entirely," she explains. "It was only with the Internet many years later: the intimacy of what you can do with a mobile phone and a website and having people from eighty different countries leave messages and do little poems... I thought okay, there's a completely different way of telling this story, much more intimate, as if through the eyes of a child."

This child is Michelangelo. He's an imaginary schoolchild blogging about the fashion show for a web project, and filming a series of interviews on his videophone. True to Michelangelo's format, *Rage* premiered onto mobiles and through the Internet. You can still watch it on Babelgum, with no need for Rapidshare.



"We put it out in the same way," Sally says, "to make the final form absolutely mirror the final form of the piece itself. And also refuse to show: absolutely don't show the fashion world; don't show a catwalk; don't show a murder; don't show anything, in fact, except faces."

What then happens to the experience of cinema? And the idea that we go into a dark room and sit back and the film comes out at us? "My preferred viewings of *Rage* have been the ones in cinemas, with these huge faces, like great big posters; like murals. But it feels very good to really push the technological possibilities as far as they can go. The more I went into that, the more people expressed their doubts about whether cinema was viable at postage-stamp size."

Piracy means, of course, that directors can no longer control how someone watches a film. Laptop screens and poor recording quality have already violated the cinematic experience. But to simply throw something out there certainly seems like an unusual answer. "It's exciting to tackle that head-on and not be protective and over-reverent about the big screen as a perfect experience, but to make it more rough and tough and ready and see what happens to it. To see if it can survive it."

It's a strange thought, though, that a film could not only survive online, but gain an intimacy it could not have through cinema alone. The Internet, I say, is a bit of a dumping ground. "It's garbage!" Garbage? "Well. A lot of it is! And I don't think it inherently has to be. It's like there's too much of everything; a multiplicity of everything, discrimination of nothing. It's a lot of hamburgers, isn't it?"

Despite the fast food analogies, Potter remains convinced of the Internet's power to throw up something valuable. "It's such early days," she says. "I think people will gradually get pissed off with the rapidness of imagery. You know, the Facebook-style of arm-length photography with your mouth open type of thing. It's just so boringly repetitive. People will start to seek out something that has a little more density to it."

With *Rage*, Potter has done more than just create a small dense spot in the Internet. It's a series of portraits.

How were the actors with the pure green screen? "They had no contact with each other. They never met each other at all. But it was so intimate. It was just me holding the camera and the sound person to one side in a screened-off area. That is a very rare, a very rarely focussed shooting environment."

"Usually there is so much going on with so many people, and so much potential for distraction and in a way the actor and the performance comes last on the list. I think it was quite frightening for the actors because they were so exposed. Frightening in a good way."

Potter should know. She has, of course, been in front of the camera herself. She's been a performer, a writer and a musician, as well as a director. I want to know what it means for her, whether it gives a different perspective on directing.

"Yes. A performer experiences certain things and if you haven't experienced them as a director then you're limited in what you can ask people to do; what you can understand of their experience of total exposure."

She also debunks the notion that the actor's job is creatively less of a challenge than directing. "Being fully present whilst being looked at is tough stuff and takes enormous discipline and puts one in a very vulnerable position. A lot of directors don't understand the performing process, even are afraid of actors and get into all kinds of posturing situations to compensate for that."

Sally's most famous performance is in the *Tango Lesson*. Potter plays the central character, a film-maker called Sally, although she denies the film is a straight self-portrait. The experience of filming herself has translated into an intense care when filming other actors.

She says, "I couldn't look at myself on set with the care that I would normally look at an actor. In fact, I couldn't look at myself at all except in the monitor afterwards and then in the cutting room. So in the end the person who appeared on the screen wasn't someone I really recognised that much, and throughout the cutting process I referred to this person as 'she' as opposed to 'me' in order to get a distance on it too."

She's become increasingly aware of the effect the director's gaze has on an actor. "Each time that I've made a film now, I think I get more careful and intense in the way that I look at somebody's face; I've become more respectful really of what I'm looking at and more and more careful about how I look at that person because it has an incredible effect, what an actor sees in your eyes."

Sally Potter's empathy with the performer extends to a profound analysis of her own gaze. "How are you looking at them?" she asks, "Are you looking at their flesh? Are you looking at their imperfections? Are you looking at their expressions? Or are you looking at what they want to be? Or even some lost part of the self that needs to come back? There are so many different ways that you can look."

Even the process of looking at the actors, let alone the finished film, is a form of portraiture, she says, as the director tries to "help to bring to the surface this elusive self."

What is it about that gaze with the viewer through the camera? "I think it's something about intimacy. I have always experienced film as a very intimate medium, as a very intimate experience. You watch it and you get lost into it or it loses itself into you."

