

BRUISES AND BLISTERS

In 'The Tango Lesson', the director Sally Potter plays herself as a character, a film director who is trying to come up with a script for Hollywood backers. When her work space in Britain is disrupted by building repairs, she visits Paris to scout for locations. Seeking some recreation, she is enchanted by a tango performance by the dancer Pablo Veron. As the impossibility of communicating her ideas to the US studio becomes obvious, she makes a deal with the dancer: if he will teach her to tango, she will make him a movie star. We watch Potter, a former dance student, as she learns the complexities of the tango, while the film makes comparisons between dancing and film-making, and takes on elements of a full-blown musical. Here, Potter gives her commentary on images from this self-reflexive film.



1 I know this moment well. It's the most precious, delicate, terrifying moment in film-making. The void beckons, seductively. But at any moment, the pencil will touch the blank page and the first, irrevocable step will have been taken. Every such step can feel like an act of treachery

against abstract and infinite perfection. Of course, in reality, there are many such leaps from the possible to the actual taken on a daily basis during a shoot. This scene was my attempt to show the hovering moment before beginning; and to suggest the way in which images seem to arrive like

fragments of a finished film, as if of their own volition. Films are not created, it seems to me, but found.



2 This scene was snatched as the sun went down at the end of a shooting day, in St Cloud, a park on the outskirts of Paris. We had more or less an hour to do about six set-ups, so we ran from location to location as the shadows got longer. My job as a performer was to look – really look – at the locations in the strange (but to me, natural) way that a director looks at a place: seeing it as it is, and, simultaneously, superimposed, seeing it as it could be onscreen. When I saw the rushes I realised, with a shock, that one rarely sees a woman looking out like that on screen. Normally

she is dragging the look towards her, as an invitation. The "eyes of a director" became the only aspect of directing portrayed in the film. While some of the dancer's work is shown, the physical process and craft of film-making remains hidden. But the first and most important act of directing is to look (and to listen). All that follows is built on what the inner eye can see.



3 A sense of place. How to show, feel, smell a city (in this case, Paris) without falling back on clichés? For me it's the unmistakable architectural details. And of course my character here is stepping into the spider's web of the tango; and is looking up (rather than out). It's one of the few repetitive motifs in the film.



4 This scene (left) was filmed in the historic dance hall, Chez Gégène, on the River Seine just outside Paris. It was a relatively long sequence to sustain on screen (the piece of music, 'Zumi', by Astor Piazzolla and played by Osvaldo Pugliese's orchestra, lasts just over three minutes). And it was filmed, as so often, through a long and weary night. Pablo and I were both tired and bickered in a perfectionist way about details of the dance. He felt I was paying too much attention to camera angles and moves. My French became more and more rudimentary towards dawn as I tried, yet again, to explain that how the

dance was filmed would determine its power on screen. But then the camera would roll, and the discipline was to enter the private world of the dance with total commitment for each take, whatever my directorial preoccupations. The scene was about a growing connection between two individuals, finding each other for the first time. Falling in love. But the dance steps themselves were not descriptive of this. The mise en scène had to communicate the inner process of the characters while the dance spoke for itself. By the end of the night I was convinced we would have to re-shoot. But we didn't.

5 This (above) was the most glorious night during the first week of the shoot; one of those scenes that look and sound good even when you're filming. It was a bitingly cold winter's night; the film lights blazing out into the velvety darkness – reflections from the lampposts and lightbulbs so cunningly placed by Carlos Conti glittering on the water – and the bateaux mouches throwing their violent light over the banks of the Seine. All the machinery of film-making gleamed in the darkness. Pablo and I just had to withstand the cold sufficiently in order

to move with the necessary fluidity. At one moment, just before a take, I turned to him and said, "What a privilege to be able to experience it truly as it was happening, and not in its intended form on the screen. I have always felt that having a good time on set is a bonus. Going beyond one's limitations is not always a comfortable experience, and a shoot can therefore be a tense time for everyone. To expect anything else may even signal that something isn't happening as it should. But this was a happy evening, and I gloried in it."



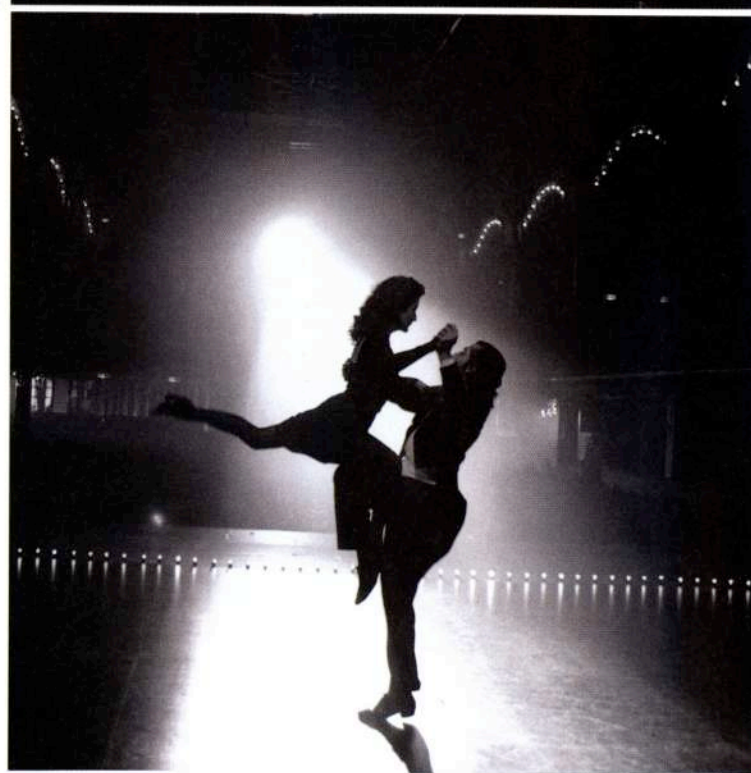
6 The café where we shot this scene was so small that the monitor was too far away for me to check the setups and correct my performance. I had no trust. As usual, I found that most of my attention was on Pablo, in any case, even when the camera was pointing at me. Later, when I watched the scene, I wished I had been able to correct my slightly droopy eyelid. I was so surprised to see how what I was giving

— a loving look, genuinely felt — had some of the appearance of suffering. Producing tears, as the script demanded, was surprisingly easy for me, though not for Pablo. Meanwhile, the stills photographer and Robby Müller were having a bust-up off camera, in the cramped space, which was slightly distracting. I just focused my eye beam on Pablo, willing him and myself to stay centred on the scene.

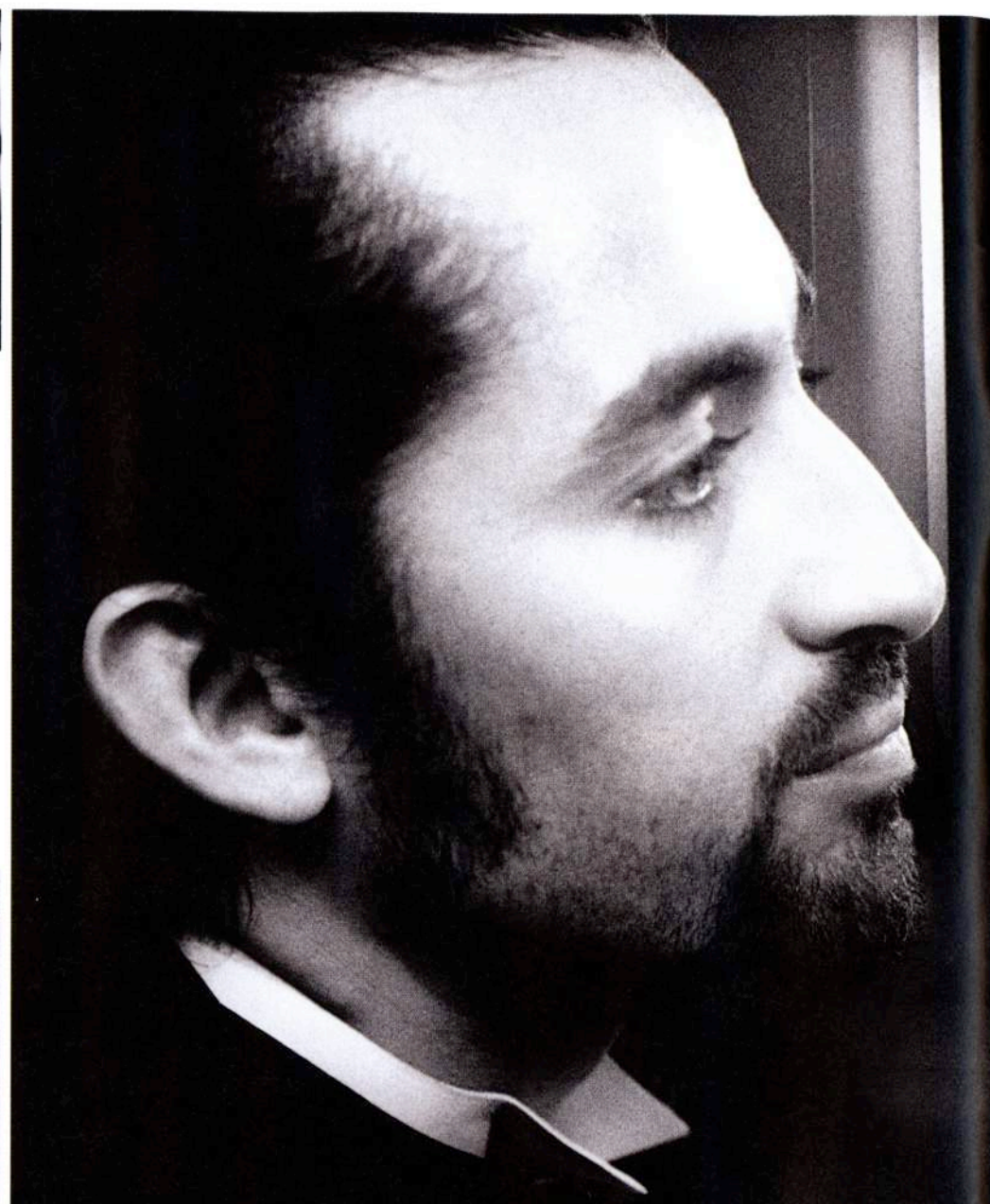


7 Pablo hurt his ankle minutes before this scene was about to be filmed so we had to delay it until the end of the shoot, after our return from Argentina. Ever since I had done a performance piece in the 70s called 'Berlin' (in collaboration with Rose English), which featured six men standing on a mantelpiece above a blazing fire, I had wanted to set a scene using a room in that way. The mantelpiece as miniature stage. Also I wanted to find a way to express Pablo's love affair with himself. Every dancer uses a mirror as an instrument but Pablo seemed to take such an innocent pleasure in his image.

8 'La Yumba' — probably Pugliese's greatest composition — was played over and over in fragments as we pieced together this dance like a jigsaw. I had to calculate overlaps and cutting points with mathematical precision. I had already decided to shoot the whole scene, bar one or two shots, from behind the dancers, looking out into the auditorium into the blaze of the follow spot. I wanted to show something of the visceral sensation of being onstage with the lights in your eyes. And getting the level of my dancing correct for the psychology of the scene was dauntingly subtle.



9 Finally (above), a location where it was possible to use a split-focus lens and achieve the depth of field I always dreamed of. Far and near, near and far. The characters split from each other, Pablo dominating the frame, dominating the argument. Rewrote the scene lots of times, rehearsed Pablo a lot, tried to imbue the scene with unspoken regrets, disappointments, broken dreams bigger than itself. Robby was on top form — the scene was immaculately framed and lit.



10 My friend David Mitchell had introduced me to the Delacroix of 'Jacob and the Angel' in the church at St Sulpice, after a conversation in a café in Paris where I tried to describe what the struggle of learning to dance again in my forties meant to me and what I was experiencing as a divine principle inherent in the tango. Come and see this painting, he said to me. And there I found the key to the story and the film.



12 I had aimed to shoot this scene in one long tracking shot, changing the frame size while passing pillars in the foreground. It required precision camera work and faultless technical execution of the extremely difficult dance. After two long days of camera

rehearsal I had bruises and blisters beyond belief; the result of three pairs of dagger-like male feet in hard, shiny shoes darting between my legs. It took two hours to be eased out of my shoes at the end of the day — a doctor in attendance to lance the blisters. Finally, I accepted the

inevitable and broke the scene down into three segments. The choreography was the result of three weeks' daily rehearsal, a collaboration between the four of us. They were riotous, joyful, competitive, difficult times.

11 Dancing in the rain in Buenos Aires. Huge technical problems as the day was cloudless and sunny. Decided (anyway, I had no choice) to go with the flow of sunbeams piercing the rain pouring from the impressively torrential rain machines. Technical

problems also with footwear — tricky to swivel in boots in puddles; impossible (and stupid looking) in high heels. In rehearsal it was a mess — everyone had tempered. But when it came to do a take — stepping out under the cascading water as 'Milonga de mis Amores' boomed out

through the playback speakers — the experience was breath-taking. Limited number of takes possible due to limited number of dry jeans. Tricky scene to control technically but more than compensated for by the sheer joy of the mechanics of achieving it.

