

# “Sharing something closer to paradise”: An Interview with Sally Potter

December 3, 2014



By: Tim Hayes

Sally Potter arrived at filmmaking after a full decade spent working as a dancer, musician, and choreographer; a background that can be detected—hidden in plain sight—in almost all of her films. The change in career path was motivated by a feeling that cinema was the best instrument available for questioning some of the prevalent social conventions of 1970s Britain and her best chance at taking aim at a few choice items of political dogma. This political impulse to comment and critique has been harder to miss.

Both facets of Potter’s career were apparent in her first feature, *The Gold Diggers* (1983), a thematically ambitious attempt to meld the world’s treatment of women, its understanding of celebrity, and the principles of commerce into one intellectual framework. On release it received a critical reception chilly enough to leave her career becalmed immediately, and even today stands as an uncommercial statement of political intent. But its central place in the director’s work as a holding pen for several of her ideas is now unmistakable.

One of these central concepts is movement and the attention Potter pays to the way her characters move; how they dance, party, and comport themselves. The film’s stark black and white images stand in for constraints of class and gender; but when the pressure builds too far, the safety valve is physical movement. Formal dinner parties are stifling episodes from which a character is rescued on an actual white horse, while dancing is a universal solvent. In the midst of the film’s restraint, a character suddenly uses drumsticks to play a set of bookshelves, and for a minute these sober black and white characters gyrate with happiness.

Other Potter characters move to a similar tune. *Orlando* (1992) turned Elizabethan music and dinner parties into instruments of power and class, with an added element of magic. In *The Tango Lesson* (1997) a barely camouflaged version of the director herself tackles writer’s block by learning at the dancing feet of Pablo Verón, sensualist mover extraordinaire.

*Naked Cinema* (2014), Potter’s book about the art of directing actors, finds easy parallels between teasing these physical performances from her actors and the collaborative act of choreography, and makes clear that her rigorous

filmmaking style is no barrier to a lively set. It also reveals that her core faith is ultimately in the value of shared experience as an artistic process in itself.

This interview was conducted during the 2014 Bradford International Film Festival.

**cléo: Dance is inherently bound up in the fabric of your early films and has cropped up repeatedly in them ever since. Why do cinema, dance parties, ballets, and tangos all go together so well?**

**Sally Potter:** Didn't André Bazin describe how movement is the essence of cinema? But it is incredibly difficult to film dance well. As a director you learn that every decision is, in a certain way, a choreographic one. Is the camera going to move, or be still? Is a person moving from left to right, or right to left, and is that body language consistent with their character? Is the scene better if the characters are static and we move, or vice versa? All these decisions in every shot! You have to approach the job choreographically, and think about how film works through time.

**Did your dance training come before you transitioned to filmmaking?**

I had no film school education, but studied at the London School of Contemporary Dance. When you dance and choreograph, you learn a huge amount about working with people and collaborating. I was choreographing groups of 30 or 40 dancers, and in that role you acquire the skill of working with large numbers of people, and learning how to bring the best out of them. I also started a dance company myself which gradually expanded, and I was propelled more and more into a director role. And then I spent a decade working not only in dance and performance art, but also in music, which taught me about playing to really big audiences. Performing for groups of ten or 100 people can be great, but to suddenly be on the road in a band and arrive at a festival with 3,000 people in front of you, that's a very different scale of energy. You are absolutely there to entertain, which was a brilliant education. Once that decade was up I was 30 years old, and made my first short film, *Thriller* (1979). But that path is so different from filmmakers who come straight out of film school and into a feature without any experience of working with people beyond what they learnt on a course, or of having to stand up and be counted in front of people buying their tickets.

**Did cinema or dance play the larger part in your upbringing?**

My mother was quite protective about not allowing me to see violent films, but I did see the Marx Brothers and revisit those wild, anarchist, inventive rule breakers many times. I saw many of the big American musicals, like *Singin' In The Rain* (1952), and *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), which I still watch regularly to appreciate how its playfulness and lightness of touch covers up other themes bubbling away underneath. I was most affected by the things that were funny, witty, and ironic; and all these films have tenderness. The Marx Brothers are very tender, very loving with each other in an unsentimental way. Once I moved into my teens I started seeing Godard, Resnais, Bergman, Eisenstein, and then Andy Warhol's long minimalist epics. That led to underground filmmakers like Stan Brakhage and Michael Snow. And of course the great Hollywood figures like Orson Welles, along with early Indian movies and a lot of world cinema. I consumed the lot. It was total immersion.

After watching those films as a child, I came to realize that this is the big medium. I loved books and writing and music too, but with a film you are bringing all those things together: the visual and the audio world, together with language and draughtsmanship, and with the feeling of a live experience even though it's all recorded. Everything comes together in a medium which, certainly when I was growing up, seemed to have no preciousness attached to it. At one end it is totally enmeshed with business and money-making and the big Hollywood machine; and at the other end it can be deeply personal diaries, or films that get seen by a handful of people if at all. Both ends of the spectrum are different facets of the same medium, one with many faces to it and certainly very different means of production, but all with a similar power. I had always known how attractive it could be. As soon as I first got hold of a film camera when I was 14 and made short visual poems, I felt sure that it was a magical medium that I would be happy to enter into in some way or another. Now of course I know that there is no magical door you walk through, and that the film industry is chock-a-block with outsiders who feel that they don't belong.

**Your films are labelled as political and feminist works, but you yourself have described your goals in broad humanist terms, and said you believe that film can deliver “release, relief, and hope” to an audience.**

Every filmmaker is political, whether they care to say so or not. Even if a film involves two people talking in a room, it is still dealing with the human condition in social situations, and that is politics. But whatever comes to be considered normal in a situation is then also considered to be somehow outside politics, and once you stand in opposition to that and question it, you are called a political artist. Whilst I can align myself with the principles that attract labels such as feminist or socialist, I don't think it works to conceive of a film or a poem or a book as serving one apparent political purpose. If that happens, it becomes a form of propaganda for an idea, rather than an exploration of that idea's complexity. My film *Yes* (2004) has a central female character, played by Joan Allen, and it was said that the film saw the world from a female perspective. In fact, *Yes* also has a central male character, a Middle Eastern character, who has more lines and equal screen space. I spent equal time as a writer imagining myself into the life and struggle of this Middle Eastern man, and considered that my equal responsibility.

**So would you consider yourself a feminist filmmaker?**

That word has a chequered history. I was part of the very first wave of feminism as a young woman, and was thrilled and excited by its language and by how it was a global historical phenomenon. It was incredible to think of being part of a movement that might begin to turn a historical situation around and dignify the female condition, and I always thought of it as one of many parallel ideas, addressing similar issues around race and disability or other forms of oppression. The feminism label got taken up by others and belittled. It was associated with trivial and derisive things that made it appear to be a very limited thing to do with the cause of women, rather than part of this glorious forward movement for the benefit of all. But today, I'm very interested to see third-wave or fourth-wave feminism, young women who are facing all manner of new pressures from things like internet pornography. They are coming at it freshly, and for them feminism is a really exciting word that they feel they have discovered.

**Your films have only sometimes featured organized party political struggles, such as the nuclear disarmament campaign that surrounds the characters in *Ginger and Rosa* (2012). Do people still look to mainstream films to tackle these social and political issues?**

A film about slavery won this year's Academy Award for Best Picture; that's a pretty significant subject to tackle. Even a film as apparently gentle as *Inside Llewyn Davis* (2013) is looking at the small mishaps in the life of an artist who just misses the boat of success. That might not trumpet a political agenda, but it still has the feeling of a gentle awakening to another reality through the film. I think that sometimes that is what film does best. It seeps into your consciousness and helps you see the world in a different way, and doesn't need to have a loud political agenda in order to have a function. But I'm not even sure that the word "mainstream" has a meaningful definition in this context. Should you measure a film's effect in dollars, like *Variety* does? Does that give it greater value? It means that more people have seen it, but perhaps those films are seen and forgotten. Films that don't get seen by so many people can still have great social influence.

**When you dealt with significant social issues in your first feature-length film, *The Gold Diggers*, and tackled them with an all-female crew, you drew some criticism for it.**

The film was slaughtered. It was met with outright derision from some powerful film critics. But it has since had more PhDs written about it than any of my other films, and was taken up by some academics, women, and avant-gardists. For a long time I felt that *The Gold Diggers* had failed to do what I set out to achieve, but when I look at it now I can see plenty of things that are interesting, even ambitious. It tries to ally structuralist principles with Marxist ideas about the economy in a non-linear structure, and resists the prevailing editing conventions. If you know where the intentions were coming from at the time, it stands as the work of a small group of women working together in very ambitious way, who already had a decade or so of live work under their belts. But we were also naively throwing the film out into a culture that was entirely hostile to nearly every idea in it.

**Was the change of direction with *Orlando* a conscious decision?**

The effect of *The Gold Diggers* was to throw me into the wilderness. It became absolutely impossible to raise money. I made a short film called *London Story* (1986) as a test, to make something small and light and entertaining—and I couldn't even raise money for that without using my own credit card. After all that, I think it was actually because of the inherent difficulty that I decided to take on something as ambitious as adapting Virginia Woolf's book, a process that took seven years of writing and rewriting. But the great lesson of *The Gold Diggers* was that if you want to work with ideas that are part metaphysical and part political, then you can do it in code. The intention with *Orlando* was to attract people through the surface narrative and the images, so that they would want to follow where you led, rather than feel pushed away. *Orlando*'s themes are about immortality, and why we have such a short life span; about our link with the past, how history is written and who writes it; about what it means to be a man or a woman, and whether it is a form of performance that we enter into. These are not dissimilar to some of the topics in *The Gold Diggers*, but *Orlando* approached them in a much lighter way, and in a very sensuous fashion. I hold no bitterness about the failure of *The Gold Diggers*, because in the end it became the sweetest triumph. *Orlando*, a film that some said could not or should not be made, turned out to work even from a commercial point of view, and was briefly number one at the box office. Nobody was expecting that.

**How do you feel about the way modern digital technology provides film makers with the power to do so much on their own, without collaboration at all?**

There is a lot of romanticism around filmmaking now that it can be a digital cottage industry, but it is a very complex issue. I started out in film in a very independent way, doing everything myself; and that's fine, since learning how to do everything is very much part of finding out how to direct. But the history of the industry shows that cinema is ultimately a collaboration of many people's gifts, talents, and skills, and the smaller the process becomes, the less work there is for people in those trades. New technology gives, but it also takes away. People look at film credits and wonder what all these people have been doing, but what you feel in this singular result when the process works well are the invisible hands of all those people coming together; of tens or hundreds of minds and brains and hands all working for one purpose. That ultimately enriches the work, and gives it much greater complexity.

**Are you still keen to make films? Do you still have optimistic things to say about society and politics, and is film still the best way to say them?**

I feel I have barely begun. Hardly scratched the surface. I still feel as crazed with longing to make films as I ever did, so appetite is not a problem. Raising the money to make them can always be a hurdle; but that's part and parcel of the work. And almost every time there is a harbinger of doom about the fate of cinema, it turns out to actually offer an opportunity, whether through the internet, mobile phones, cheaper resources, or an extraordinary level of participation and communication. As for optimism about the world in general: the simple fact that it could be a fairer world if everyone was rational and fair and just, that we can conceive of sharing something closer to paradise where people are full of love and less materialist, is itself something incredible. That's a big reason to be optimistic. That's a note of hope.

*Tim Hayes is a UK-based freelance writer about film and technology. A contributor to Sight & Sound, Little White Lies, and SoFilm, his festival reports have included dispatches from Cannes, Edinburgh, and New York.*

*Image Credit: GreeneStreet Films*