

BOMB CULTURE

The year of the Cuban Missile Crisis and CND protests here in the UK, 1962 was a pivotal time for the young Sally Potter, then just entering her teens. Fifty years on, the writer-director has revisited the era and the passions of adolescent friendship in her new feature *'Ginger & Rosa'*

By Sophie Mayer

Sally Potter's new film *Ginger & Rosa* focuses its gaze on the 17-year-old best friends of the title, born to mothers in adjoining beds on the day the US bombed Hiroshima. Facing the global threat of the Cuban Missile Crisis, Ginger (Elle Fanning) seeks to follow her father – a conscientious objector during World War II – by taking to the streets with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament; Rosa (Alice Englert), meanwhile, wants to find true love before the world ends. They meet the world and each other with the particular explosive intensity of adolescent feeling.

As Potter points out, teenagers and the missile crisis are a natural combination. "Adolescence is transitional," she points out. "There was a very popular song of the era by Helen Shapiro, 'Don't Treat Me Like a Child', which expresses the overriding desire of girls to be grown-up. And 1962 is really before our conception of the 60s, yet it's beyond the 50s. It's almost like an adolescence of the decade – a transitional point. The Cuban Missile Crisis was a moment when people felt that the world could – if somebody put their finger on a button – blow up tomorrow. And female adolescence: it's a dynamite time."

The film's intensity of sensation also comes from the filmmaker's own memories of growing up in London. "I went back and looked at that wonderful period of British writing around the early 60s," she recalls. "Features like *Saturday Night* and *Sunday Morning* and *The Pumpkin Eater*, but also documentaries from the Free Cinema movement." Making a virtue of economic necessity on a five-week shoot, Potter predominantly used East London locations near her production company Adventure Pictures. "It was a local film," she explains. "The tenement area [where Rosa lives] is in Arnold Circus. It's unchanged; all we did was hang up some washing. The bombsite [where Ginger and Rosa hang out] is a waste ground we found on a foot slog, influenced by my memories of playing on bombsites as a kid in London."

Ginger & Rosa doesn't so much revisit 1960s kitchen-sink realism as reinvent it. This marks a shift for Potter, who is known for the reflexivity of her films. But here, she insists, the emphasis was on one word: "Real. We wanted everything to look and to feel real. Of course it's a fiction, totally constructed, but the goal was to open a door that people could step through into a completely believable world without any self-conscious formalism." There's no non-diegetic music, with the focus instead on the presence of music in the characters' lives through record players, jukeboxes and live performance – in-

cluding a stunning scene in which Ginger catches her mother Natalie (Christina Hendricks) in the cold, empty living room, waiting up for her husband and singing the Gershwin song 'The Man I Love', accompanying herself on the accordion. As viewers of *Mad Men* may remember, Hendricks plays the instrument, and Potter says she "wanted to use the skills of the performers, and fill those musical moments with great significance". The director herself is a composer, singer and choreographer, whose films are known for their musical sensibility.

Potter praises DP Robbie Ryan's gift for "very free, hand-held work with idiosyncratic ways of looking at light", which freed her to bring the performances to the fore. Visually, the film foregrounds Ginger's point of view – Potter insists that during the shoot there was "one principle we stuck to: never to shoot anything Ginger couldn't see, or that couldn't be in her field of awareness". Yet at the same time, it's an ensemble film, with striking cameo performances from Annette Bening, Oliver Platt and Timothy Spall, who form a quasi-Greek chorus of family friends advising and listening to Ginger. This culminates in the film's climactic confrontation, the largest dialogue scene Potter has ever filmed. "It was technically demanding shooting nine-minute-long takes of the whole scene over and over again," she admits. "But I held in my head a memory – although I didn't actually look at it again – of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*: of people baring themselves. I wanted to make it in this very bare environment, so nothing could be hidden."

Creating space for the scene – and for the film's complex web of relationships – influenced Potter's choice of format. "It's the first time I've worked with CinemaScope," she says. "The frame's width is two squares, so you have duality built into it. It's a compositional format that allows, inherently, for relationship." Many of the scenes are duologues – as the title suggests: the film begins by emphasising Ginger and Rosa's inseparability as they share cigarettes, bathtubs and even an attempt at a kiss, before moving on to explore their differences.

Ginger also finds herself in debates with each of her parents as she tries to define herself. She sides with her father, left-wing academic Roland (Alessandro Nivola), who challenges her to autonomous thought and ethical responsibility, even as he asks her to lie about his relationship with Rosa. "There's nothing that Roland says that I disagree with," reflects Potter.

Of Hendricks's character Natalie, who gave up painting to become a mother, Potter says: "She is

DAWNING OF THE 60s Teenagers Ginger (Elle Fanning, right) and Rosa (Alice Englert, left) are at the centre of the new film by Sally Potter, below





part of a lost generation of women, trapped in the 50s. This alienation that's happened with Ginger's mother is a tragedy. Just at the very end you get a glimpse that something else might happen next" – as Thelonious Monk's version of 'The Man I Love' plays over the end credits, suggesting a rapprochement between Natalie's female-voiced blues and the instrumental jazz Roland and Ginger listen to.

The subtly reincorporated song extends from Ginger's final action, as she re-evaluates all her relationships in a poem. Potter has her own memories of being a young poet. "Poems are the perfect poor form," she says, "and teenage girls don't have much money as a rule – certainly not those from Ginger's background. All you need is a piece of paper and a pencil! I love watching very young people begin to find a voice. It's not very often that one sees very young people taken seriously as nascent artists, and given respect." (In her own case, Potter says, her filmmaking career was kickstarted by a family friend who loaned her a cine-camera as a teenager.)

Anti-war activism runs similarly deep in Potter's personal history. She reminisces about being taken as a child on 'Ban the Bomb' marches. One such march, recreated as a dramatic action sequence in the film, was

filmed at Greenham Common, where Potter herself was among the peace protesters in the early 1980s. This was not without its ironies, as Potter explains: "I was one of the people lining up around the base – and suddenly, 30 years later, I'm being given the key to the gates and being shown where the missiles were." With the police shown kettling CND marchers in the film, 1962 and 2012 come together, giving the film a startling immediacy.

Potter's recent experience at the nearby Occupy London camps, and her friendship with a new generation of climate-change activists, pays off in a scene that brings together the immediate threat of nuclear war and what she calls the "slow catastrophe" of climate change. Hearing Kennedy's radio address about the Cuban Missile Crisis, Ginger flees to the neglected playing field she once shared with Rosa. Alone and overwhelmed, she flings herself onto the ground, making a snow angel. Reaching her arm towards the lens, she grasps a handful of icy grass and mud. This small, austere yet vibrant sign is the perfect metaphor for the film itself, and for its plea that "everything matters, and nothing is innocent of our gaze".

i 'Ginger & Rosa' is released in the UK on 19 October, and is reviewed on page 88

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Ginger & Rosa

United Kingdom/Germany/

Canada/Denmark 2012

Director: Sally Potter, Certificate 12A 89m 58s

Reviewed by Lisa Mullen

Showing at
The BFI
London Film
Festival

The eponymous characters in Sally Potter's new feature are both named after reddish shades: one fiery and hot, one soft and sweet. And so the film shows them to be – two

17-year-old girls on the cusp of discovering themselves, with Ginger undergoing a political awakening and Rosa succumbing to a fantasy of romance. Such nominative determinism is typical of a film that makes no apologies for signposting its intentions; Potter has spoken of it as her most accessible work to date, and of wanting to remove as many obstacles to understanding as she can.

This is a radical step from a filmmaker who has previously revelled in the ludic possibilities of cinema. As a member of the experimental London Film-Makers' Co-op in the 1970s and a free-ranging multidisciplinary artist in the 1980s, she certainly never courted the mainstream. Her breakout film, 1992's *Orlando*, was a deft and visually lavish take on Virginia Woolf's modernist novel, and it rose brilliantly to the challenge of building a film around a fluidly gendered immortal being, making a star of Tilda Swinton in the process. *Yes* (2004), which tackled relations between East and West via a love story played out in rhyming couplets, divided critics; and *Rage* (2009) embraced the idea of 'naked cinema' to ponder DIY cameraphone filmmaking through a series of colourful monologues supposedly captured backstage at a fashion show. For her latest, though, she isn't interested in playing games with form, perhaps because this narrative is so strongly autobiographical. Potter, we surmise, is telling this one straight from the heart.

It's Ginger (Elle Fanning) who is Potter's proxy as we follow her coming of age in London in 1962. She and best friend Rosa (Alice Englert) were born on the same day in 1945 – the day the Hiroshima bomb gave birth to the nuclear age. Their mothers, Natalie (Christina Hendricks) and Anoushka (Jodhi May), are friends despite their different circumstances – Natalie is married to womanising university lecturer

Roland (Alessandro Nivola), who writes pacifist tracts in his spare time; Anoushka is abandoned by her husband early on, and has to struggle in an unspecified but implicitly dreary way. Meanwhile Ginger and Rosa are inseparable; all is well until Rosa catches Roland's eye and her loyalty begins to swing from Ginger to her father. The toxic emotional fallout rains down against the backdrop of the Cuban missile crisis as Ginger rejects both her family and her best friend and becomes involved in CND instead.

Potter – who also had a bohemian upbringing in post-war London and campaigned for nuclear disarmament – has pinned her film's milieu as firmly as possible to a time and place of which she has intimate personal experience, making it all the more curious that the finished product feels so temporally and geographically untethered. The casting – there are no British actors among the leads – looks on paper like a brilliant ploy to highlight the interaction between universality and specificity; unfortunately this doesn't quite come off, mainly because Fanning is unfairly overstretched in the lead. She tries hard and was obviously very serious and committed to the role, but her wavering accent, which is particularly ropey at moments of high emotion (a trait she shares with Hendricks), gives the film an unignorable air of tackiness. You feel sorry for her for all the wrong reasons in the end: she was just 13 during filming – and it's a tough gig playing a 17-year-old coping with the betrayal of a father who's having an affair with your best friend.

Englert is rather better, though her character as a feisty proto-flower-child fizzles out once the romance is established, leaving Nivola to steal the show as Roland the love rat. Nivola teases out the nuances of this rebellious coward's inner conflicts and manages to summon up a genuine whiff of England in his shabby self-righteousness and shuffling glamour. In the background are disposable turns from Timothy Spall as a kindly gay uncle who arbitrates the film's morality, and from Annette Bening as an unexplained American feminist parachuted in to spout set speeches about the oppression of women and the need for direct action. The problem with the pared-down script is that none of the characters is given quite enough to say, including – in fact especially – Ginger and Rosa, whose supposedly all-encompassing friendship never has the room to express itself



Growing pains: Sally Potter's 'Ginger & Rosa'

through conversation, but is lazily sketched in via the shorthand of showing them trying on clothes, learning to smoke, giggling.

From a lesser filmmaker you would write all these problems off as mere carelessness, but from Potter you wonder if the clunkiness was intended as a mannerism, a distancing conceit which invites us to consider the unreliability of Ginger as a witness, her memory of a distant time and place rendering them dreamily childish. Robbie Ryan's stunningly beautiful cinematography adds to the air of unreality, though you can't help missing the vice-like grip on detail that his usual collaborator, Andrea Arnold, excels at. Instead, *Ginger & Rosa* is set in an empty London composed of desolate spaces (the wasteland around an abandoned gasometer which stands in for a bomb site, a playground marooned between apparently unpopulated streets); an unspecified coastal setting where the characters can be captured against scoured beaches and big skies; and a few bare interiors, including the boat to which Roland retreats when he's on the run from stifling domesticity, which is the ultimate example of a location cut off from its context. This is a vision of a pinched and stranded post-war Britain, one in which the 1950s – a decade stuffed with things and new ideas – appears not to have happened.

Not that Potter ever claims that her naive, poetry-scribbling main character has anything like the full picture. Potter's previous films have often asked questions about looking and



In arms' way: Elle Fanning as Potter-proxy Ginger



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Credits and Synopsis

Produced by
Christopher Sheppard
Producer
Andrew Litvin
Written by
Sally Potter
Director of Photography
Robbie Ryan
Editor
Anders Refn
Production Designer
Carlos Conti
Production Sound Mixer
Jean-Paul Muegel
Costume Designer
Holly Waddington

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Production Companies
BFI and BBC Films present an Adventure Pictures production in association with The Match Factory, Media House, Ingenious,

MisoFilm, Danish Film Institute a film by Sally Potter
Developed with the support of the UK Film Council's Film Fund
Supported by the Danish Film Institute, minor co-productions for feature films
Made with the support of the National Lottery through The British Film Institute's Film Fund
Executive Producers
Reno Antoniadis
Aaron L. Gilbert
Goetz Grossman
Heidi Levitt
Joe Oppenheimer
Paula Alvarez Vaccaro

Cast
Elle Fanning
Ginger
Alessandro Nivola
Roland

Christina Hendricks
Natalie
Timothy Spall
Mark
Oliver Platt
Mark Two
Jodhi May
Anoushka
Annette Bening
Bella
Alice Englert
Rosa
Luke Cloud
Poppy Bloor
young Ginger
Magdalene Muntford
young Rosa

Dolby Digital
In Colour
[2.35:1]

Distributor
Artificial Eye Film Company

8,097 ft +0 frames

seeing, but for Ginger it's through listening and overhearing that the truth is mediated. A filtered radio voice conveys news of the nuclear threat to Ginger as she brushes her teeth in the bathroom; her mother's grief over her failed marriage is expressed by the strains of accordion-playing drifting upstairs through the floorboards; Rosa's affair with Roland is

London, 1962. Ginger and Rosa, both born at the end of World War II, at the time of the Hiroshima bombing, are firm friends despite their different circumstances. Rosa's father left her mother when she was small and she has been allowed to run wild; Ginger's father is left-leaning academic Roland, her mother Natalie a former artist who now devotes herself to domesticity.

As she grows up, Ginger realises that her parents' marriage is falling apart. Her womanising father eventually leaves home to live a bohemian bachelor existence. Ginger is terrified by the Cuban missile crisis; while Rosa is more interested in meeting boys, Ginger starts attending CND meetings. Rosa begins to idolise Roland and he is increasingly attracted to her. They begin an affair, which is consummated on Roland's boat, with Ginger listening in, horrified.

Confused and unhappy, Ginger moves out of her mother's house and goes to live with her father, but quickly discovers that Rosa is taking up all his attention, leaving her feeling bereft and betrayed. When Rosa reveals that she is pregnant, Ginger is devastated. She flees to the Aldermaston peace march, where she is arrested; in the aftermath of this crisis she tells her mother that Rosa is carrying Roland's baby. Natalie attempts suicide, finally shocking Roland into responsibility and remorse.

devastatingly confirmed by the sounds of groans and shushings percolating through the thin wooden walls of his boat's cabin.

But instead of being tightly focused, the film suffers from narrowing in too closely on Ginger's worldview – how much more interesting it would have been to have hinted at the political and cultural shifts that transformed the intellectualised activism of Roland's generation (he is presented vaguely as a jazz-loving has-been in a Kerouac jumper) into the direct action of the next wave, which eventually spawned the 1960s hippie movement. These subtleties pass Ginger by, of course, but the result is that even the Cuban missile crisis comes to seem, frustratingly, like a silly little thing cooked up by an angst-ridden teenager. Given that two of the main characters, Ginger and her mother Natalie, read so clearly as American thanks to the peculiar casting, it seems a shame the film doesn't tackle the shift in attitudes in Britain towards its increasingly dominant transatlantic ally, which after all originated the nuclear crisis that Ginger's so concerned about.

Of course none of these absences would matter if the emotional freight of the film were more effectively carried. By aiming for a light touch, Potter has made her framework so flimsy that it totters under the weight of the tragic upheavals it unfolds. It's odd to find such a bold filmmaker holding back so stiffly, and you come away wondering if the material was just too personal for her to close in on. **B**