



# Sally Potter

## Kicks Up Her Heels

story and photography by **michele warshay**

**S**ally Potter's *The Tango Lesson* is a joyous, passionate, and personal celebration of life, love, and dance. Written, directed, and starred in by Potter, *The Tango Lesson* is based on her obsession with the tango and her relationship with the renowned tango star, Pablo Veron. The two strike a deal: Potter will make Pablo a movie star if he makes her into a tango dancer. "What started out as a tango lesson, became a love affair with the glorious music, the intimacy of the dance, and a film about the complexity of love."

Filmed almost entirely in black and white, Potter dazzles us with hauntingly beautiful images that sear across the screen and brand the audience's senses with desire and longing for love, music, and passion.

### **What drew you to the tango?**

I first saw a show called "Tango Argentino" in London and it was a eureka moment, like 'Wow, this is something incredible, I want to know more about it.'

### **Tell us about your first tango lesson.**

I immediately felt this ecstasy of movement. My heart started to beat faster and I got this lovely trembly feeling all over. It was visceral, physical, sensual, and meditative. The music was so rich, so melancholic, so passionate.

### **How much of *The Tango Lesson* is fact, and how much is fiction?**

Impossible to quantify. It's all fact and it's all fiction. All of it is based on things that I

really experienced. To turn that into a dance film that is not in any way pretending to be a documentary, I had to transform it, write it, distill it, change things around, which I did with total freedom, poetic license, and ruthless adaptation.

### **While learning the tango, were you ever uncomfortable dancing so intimately with complete strangers at dance halls?**

Never. On the contrary, I found it very lovely. You're listening so closely to the other person's body. The signals you give each other are so soft, so delicate, that if you lose your concentration for a second, you'll fall over and break the flow. So you listen carefully, and with a complete awareness of the other person's center of gravity. Normally, only people who make love pay attention to each other this way.

### **Were you and Pablo intimately involved?**

That's something we're never going to talk about. I think the actual facts that went on in our private lives can remain private, and should remain mysterious.

### **Why did you put yourself in the film?**

I couldn't find anyone else who was better for the role. (laughs)

### **Did you audition other actresses?**

No. I thought about it. I did screen-test myself. I needed someone British, about my age, to be believable as the director and already dancing the tango to a semi-professional level, which I had been doing

with Pablo on stage before I made this film.

### **What was the biggest challenge of directing yourself?**

No sleep. The hardest thing about film making is you're working on tortuous sleep deprivation. To dance and act on top of that is really very tough.

### **How has meeting Pablo changed your life?**

I think he's gorgeous and incredibly talented. As a director, this was about discovering Pablo. It was a great opportunity to direct somebody who has never been on the screen before and train him in a role. It was also a role reversal. You know it's usually the male director who discovers the female and makes her into a star.

### **Has the movie inspired people to go out and take tango lessons?**

Dozens of people told me they came out of the film and went looking straight away for the nearest tango teacher. It seems to have inspired tango fever everywhere. People are going tango crazy.

### **Will there be a *Tango Lesson II*?**

Who knows. When you're a director and work on a particular film, you completely inhabit the world and the obsessions of that film and then afterwards, you move on. It's strangely fickle, it's like a passionate love affair. Who knows what the future will hold. But I still love to tango. ■