

*The British director explains why 'Ginger and Rosa' is her most mainstream film yet*



Daring and provocative, British director Sally Potter has always been an outsider. She once made a film with an all-female crew ('Gold Diggers') and once told a story entirely in verse ('Yes'). Her most successful was 1992's 'Orlando', Tilda Swinton's breakout film. But the 63-year-old filmmaker's new film, 'Ginger and Rosa', might be her most accessible yet.

It's set during the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. Elle Fanning is Ginger, a flame-haired 16-year-old marching on the streets of London to protest against nuclear weapons – just as Potter (also a redhead) did as a teenager. Ginger's friend, Rosa (Alice Englert), is too busy snogging boys for politics, and she's got Ginger's anarchist writer dad in her sights.

But how autobiographical is 'Ginger and Rosa'? Sally Potter talks to **Cath Clarke**.

**'Ginger and Rosa' is your most accessible film yet. Did you deliberately make it to be seen by lots of people?'**

'Yes, I wanted to strip away some of my aesthetic habits that I've accumulated over the years. Not exactly reinvent myself, but go down to something very primal and essential about storytelling: character and image.'

**The film is about 16-year-old best friends. They're so passionate about each other that it feels more like first love.**

'It's first everything really. This kind of friendship is often trivialised. But my memory of having best friends at that age is that it's major. They're serious, profound relationships.'

**'Ginger and Rosa' is set during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and Ginger is a protester. I think it's hard for anyone not alive then to understand how terrifying that moment in history was. The world was on the brink of nuclear war.**

'Anyone connected to the realities of climate change might.'

**But that's still 30, 50 years down the line...**

'Yes, the Cuban missile crisis felt like it could be the end of the world tomorrow morning.'

**How vivid are your memories of that time?**

'Very vivid. I was younger, 12 or 13, but I'd already been on the Aldermaston marches [anti-nuclear demos]. I remember as a child learning what the atom bomb did in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the feeling of horror, the absolute horror.'

**So how autobiographical is the film?**

'I can't put a percentage on it. I've drawn on some aspects of my own observations but it's a lot of imagination.'

**Ginger is arrested protesting. Were you?**

'I have been arrested, but later, as part of the squatting movement, in the '70s.'

**You cast non-Brits to play Ginger and Rosa. How many actresses did you audition?**

'We did about 2,000 Facebook auditions. Then the American casting director sent in an audition of Elle. She was amazing. I went immediately to LA to meet her. I was nervous, because she was 12. How on earth could she play 16? But she had such depth, such maturity and had already done so many films, starting aged two. And yet she's completely unspoilt in every way. I absolutely loved working with her. I love her.'

**And Alice Englert?**

'I love her too. As it happens she is Jane Campion's daughter and she's done a bit of acting. But this will be her first big role.'

**Were you anxious that the film rested on the shoulders of teenagers?**

'No. I take the casting process incredibly seriously. I'm really careful and really slow. I won't cast somebody until I'm absolutely sure they're right, because once I've cast them, I commit myself. I give them everything. At that point I'm confident.'

**So it's not a case of: Elle Fanning, she's got a recognisable name, let's have her?**

'No, I'm not strategic in that way.'

**Your films are low-budget and experimental but always attract big-name actors like Johnny Depp ('The Man Who Cried', 2000) and Jude Law ('Rage', 2009). How is auditioning them different?**

'Meeting with a really well known actor is a kind of mutual audition. You're looking at them thinking: can I work with you? They're looking at you thinking: will you make sure I don't make big mistakes?'

**In 'Ginger and Rosa', you've cast Christina Hendricks against type as Ginger's mum, a dowdy housewife whose husband is a serial cheater. Why?**

'That idea came from the casting director in LA. It was a surprising thought, and then Christina did a beautiful, sensitive audition. I do think it's difficult for an actor when they start getting noticed, or stereotyped for one facet of their being. I love "Mad Men". I adore the way she looks, and her body. But in this we were working on a different part of her qualities.'

**It's a film of terrific performances. Alessandro Nivola steals it as Ginger's dad, Roland, who was a pacifist in the war. He's a man of principles but deeply flawed.**

'I hope you're going to write that. I think he's an underrated actor. He's superb.'

**You left school at 16. What were you like as teenager?**

'I'd made my first 8mm film at 14 and I absolutely, passionately wanted to be a film director. So I left school and struck out. I got jobs in restaurants, washing carrots, and joined the London Filmmaker's Co-op, making tiny, tiny films that just got bigger. Looking back, I think Jesus, living alone, wanting to be a film director... When I meet 16-year-olds, they're so young, the little darlings.'

**In your career you've stayed outside the mainstream. Ever been tempted in?**

'I've never had a career plan. I just want to be passionate about whatever I'm doing next. Every now and then I think: Gosh, have I made the right choice. Should I have turned down those scripts? You know, financially.'

'Ginger and Rosa' opens on Oct 19 2012.