A black and white close-up portrait of actress Pascale Bussi res. She is looking slightly to the left of the frame with a soft, contemplative expression. Her hair is dark and styled in a short, layered cut. She is wearing a dark, possibly black, top and a necklace with small, dark, round beads and a larger, teardrop-shaped pendant. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the contours of her face and neck against a dark background.

Jeremy Podeswa's The Five Senses

By Barbara Goslawski

With *The Five Senses*, writer/director Jeremy Podeswa ensures his place among Canada's finest filmmakers. Thought provoking and emotionally rich, this film will be a sure-fire hit at this year's Toronto International Film Festival. It has been chosen as the prestigious opening night gala of the Perspective Canada program.



Above: Mary-Louise Parker.
At right: Pascale Bussi eres and Philippe Volter

Podeswa fulfills the promise of his debut feature, *Eclipse* (1994), developing his thematic and stylistic concerns with a maturity notable for a second feature film. *The Five Senses* is a deeply moving and intensely clever portrait of a group of people struggling to make emotional connections in a world so prone to disconnection. Those familiar with Podeswa's previous work will recognize his overriding concern with this longing for love, and will be pleasantly surprised at how perfectly the metaphor of the human senses works in this film to expand and enrich his themes. The resulting film is chilling in its emotional resonance.

There's already a positive buzz around *The Five Senses*, due in large part to its premiere at Cannes in the Director's Fortnight section of the festival where the film received a five-minute standing ovation. Podeswa is no stranger to success. From the beginning, his films have been warmly received. His first film, the short *David Roche Talks To You About Love* (1983), an adaptation of Roche's one-man show, won the Norman Jewison Award for Best Overall Film in 1984 (Canadian National Exhibition) and a blue ribbon at the American Film Festival 1984 in New York. Gerald Hannon in *Body Politic* (11/9/85) astutely quipped that "if [Roche's] tone is sometimes dry enough to be astringent, Podeswa's direction is so lip-smackingly sensuous you never have to deal with fallen archness." Shown at the Carlton preceding Nik Sheehan's feature, *No Sad Songs*, Hannon asserted that "The evening would be worth it for Podeswa's film alone." Podeswa's second short, *Nion In the Kabaret De La Vita* (1986), another



adaptation, was nominated for a Genie for Best Live Action Short and prompted *Now's* film critic John Harkness, normally reticent about Canadian films, to declare it "not to be missed."


Podeswa travelled extensively to festivals around the world with *Eclipse*, screening at such prestigious locales as the Sundance Film Festival, the Berlin International Film Festival and New Directors/New Films at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In a review of *Eclipse*, Brendan Kelly announced in *Variety* that Podeswa was a "visual stylist to keep an eye on." B. Ruby Rich, writing in *Sight and Sound*, called the film, "Gorgeously shot and elegantly conceived.... Convincingly seductive yet somehow, in the end, astonishingly innocent." *Eclipse* was released in 16 countries and nominated for two Genie Awards.

Although Podeswa has spent his career tackling a subject that he himself admits is "the oldest thing in the book," his approach has always been refreshingly unsentimental, presenting a sharp, clear-eyed analysis of his quest in all its messy complexity. Eschewing the ubiquitous Hollywood view of romance, particularly its insistence on the happy ending, Podeswa's handling of the subject reveals the tension at the core of our desires, of romanticism versus cynicism, the battle between the way we want things to be and the way they are. "I always find with Hollywood movies there's almost a tyranny of happiness," Podeswa says. "Tom Hanks ends up with Meg Ryan every single time and people are sitting in the audience thinking, 'Why can't I find Meg Ryan? What's going on? What's wrong with my pathetic life?' I think that audiences really respond to the honesty and genuineness of true human experience and that's really what I try to do and not make people feel like their lives are

miserable because they don't turn out the way Hollywood movies do."

Always with a healthy dose of irony, Podeswa grapples with this tension directly in the earlier films, juxtaposing his characters' experiences with clips from Hollywood films. By the time he came to make his features, this tension is sublimated, though no less influential. This refusal to submit to the tyranny has admittedly led some to view Podeswa's films as overtly cynical, but the director is careful to point out the difference between the characters depicted and the point of view in which they're presented. "The characters might be jaded and the characters might be cynical, or unable to connect, but I think the point of view of the filmmaker, being me," he told me with a telling smile, "is that it's a tragedy these characters don't connect." His characters "haven't locked themselves in rooms, they are still engaging with other people. I think as long as you're engaging on one level or another, there's still hope."

Podeswa has spent his career thus far tackling the thorny subject of love from a number of different angles. Viewed together, his films advance from one extreme to another, finally settling in that fertile ground in between. With *David Roche Talks To You About Love*, Podeswa presents his most cynical and, ultimately, one of his most vulnerable characters. In a monologue laced with deliciously acerbic wit and poignant insights, Roche expounds on and deconstructs all the travails involved in the deceptively simple act of falling in love. Hindsight turns this talk into an ironic catalogue of Podeswa's own thematic concerns. Roche's pseudo lecture is a valiant attempt to be as philosophical and logical on this



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most emotional of subjects. The distance that this approach affords is not lost on the viewer; however, it inevitably betrays the sadness and vulnerability bubbling beneath the surface. In *Nion*, Podeswa goes to the other extreme, presenting a character so innocent and inexperienced in love that he can exist only in fantasy. *Nion* is a creature from outer space, literally an alien searching for acceptance among strangers. He stumbles upon a Felliniesque game-show cabaret, where the attainment of love, fame and fortune are a mere spin of the wheel away. Naive as he is, he falls victim to every pitfall and stereotype inherent in these lofty ideals, which crumble pathetically, taking our hero with them.

With *Eclipse*, Podeswa set his sights on a more inclusive view of human experience, focusing on 10 different sexual encounters occurring in the days leading up to a solar eclipse. This film combines the gritty modern sensibility of *David Roche* with the otherworldly quality of *Nion*. A decidedly urban tale, the impending celestial event is inextricably linked to a flurry of promiscuity. *Eclipse* was a bold

and hard. In a way, *The Five Senses* was pretty much a direct progression for me in terms of dealing with the idea of love. Taking it to the next step, which is, 'Okay, we've been through that moment, and now what's the next moment?'"

As much as *Eclipse* explored the extent of the disconnection in our lives, *The Five Senses* asks the necessary question, "why?" In answering this question, the film uncovers the myriad distancing strategies that people often unwittingly employ in their relations with others. It does so by extending its focus to include a wider range of human relations, everything from sexual and romantic encounters to friendships and family dynamics. Everyone in the film is involved in more than one of these relations and with all of these dynamics necessarily echoing off each other, the film becomes an intricate tapestry of emotional experience. The result is a film that more completely allows for the possibility for genuine connection, a film that explores the deeper bonds of love while at the same time arguing that even the slightest connection, even for the briefest moment, can have a significant impact.



Daniel MacIvor

experiment in narrative form, featuring a tight schematic structure and a vivid visual strategy. Shot in gorgeous high-contrast black and white with a different coloured tint for every scene, its overriding roundelay structure drives the film. As a result, the film's form insists on economy of detail and minimal character exposition, which enables the film to deliver its message with startling clarity.

In the end, *Eclipse*'s structural logic underlines the universality of that very human need to make contact with somebody, anybody. It ultimately becomes a portrait of a group of people stuck in that frustrating state of disconnection. "To tell you the truth," Podeswa admits, "what I really wanted to do with that film is also take a certain moment. I think everybody in their life goes through a moment where they feel, 'Oh, relationships are all doomed, I'm never going to meet anybody.' For me, it was interesting with *Eclipse* to explore that moment...and do a movie about what it feels like to be in that moment where you think that it is really difficult

The Five Senses, subtler in style than *Eclipse*, eases the rigors of a schematic structure to permit these bittersweet moments to break through. The movement of the film actually pauses on these moments, allowing them to linger. "I wanted people to literally get that sense of release and that sense of payoff and emotional opening," Podeswa explains. He returns to an urban setting in this film, a fitting context for these considerations, but adds an inspired fatalistic touch by placing it in the realm of the senses. This fatalistic element is appropriately muted, allowing for a more delicate interplay with the naturalistic elements of the film. In *The Five Senses*, Podeswa interweaves parallel narrative lines, and as events unfold over the course of a weekend, these stories become infused with the urgency of the all too familiar contemporary tale of a child who goes missing. Within this framework, Podeswa develops the heart of the film, chronicling the lives of five people, each with a particular link to one of the senses, each one struggling with their respective emotional impediments. In the end, all the stories merge into a single expression, a complex view of love. Podeswa calls it "a polyphonic expression" and Daniel MacIvor, who acts in the film and also served as story editor, aptly captures the effect when he states: "The film is about a tone. It's about a feeling or tone that exists inside human relationships." Ultimately, it is the story of the missing child that binds the film's narrative lines. "There is something about this lost innocence, this lost child, that really does resonate with the lost innocence of all these characters," the director explains.

Not surprisingly, watching *The Five Senses* is rather a sensuous experience in itself. Podeswa kept this aim in mind when he constructed the film: "I had this idea that I wanted something that was really lyrical, romantic and beautiful and you can't make a film about the senses without it being a sensual film." Cinematographer Gregory Middleton (Genie-nominated cinematographer on *Kissed* and *Rupert's Land*) lends the film a luscious look, mixing warm tones with smartly balanced splashes of blue. All the elements of the film's design, particularly lighting and production design, come together to form a cohesive whole.

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Musically the film is a joy, with the haunting strains of Caccini's "Amarilli Mia Bella" reverberating through practically every frame. It is this attention to detail that contributes to the expansive emotional scope of the film. "I wanted to make a movie that I guess had more notes in it," Podeswa says, "and that's what this movie was for me. It was a real challenge because I was balancing a lot of different things tonally."

The idea for the film came after Podeswa read Diane Ackerman's book, *A Natural History of the Senses* (1991). "I read it and it was just very inspiring," he says. "It got me thinking that it might be interesting to do something around the senses." He was fascinated by the way she mixed together historical, anthropological and cultural information about the senses but was particularly struck by her call to focus on each sense as a means to re-examine and re-engage with the world around us. Finding common ground in Ackerman's views on the disconnection inherent in contemporary society, it is easy to understand the source of the inspiration. "For me, I guess, what it comes down to in the end," Podeswa explains, "is the idea that, in the same way Diane Ackerman posits, we are all disconnected from the natural world in a certain way and from the world of our senses. I think, also, the modern world conditions us to be removed a little bit from how we experience love. A lot of the characters in this film need to find their way back to a more natural and maybe less jaded or hurtful place in thinking about love."

The logical starting point for these considerations was to create five characters, each one related to a specific sense. What is interesting about these relations is their often ironic, always complex, nature. The characters are connected in both obvious and subtle ways and the interlacing narrative structure creates emotional echoes which resonate throughout the film. Stellar performances from a solid ensemble cement these relations. Ruth (Gabrielle Rose) is a massage therapist curiously dissociated from the sensation of touch. As much as she engages in it, she can only superficially give but never receive. Her daughter, Rachel (Nadia Litz), appears to be a typical teenage girl, self-absorbed and concerned about her looks, spending much of the film pondering her image in the mirror. She is also a voyeur. Richard (Philippe Volter), upon learning that he is going deaf, responds by spending most of his time eavesdropping and seeking out sounds to store in his memory. Worried that this loss will make him dependent, he responds by physically isolating himself. Rona (Mary-Louise Parker) is a cake decorator, unconcerned with the taste of her cakes, convinced that it's more important how they look. She is also deeply cynical about love and is even encouraged in this by her best friend Robert (Daniel MacIvor). In one of the funnier scenes in the film, the two develop a biting sarcastic

list of things to avoid when falling in love (i.e., never fall in love with someone who lives more than a bus ride away and certainly not anyone better looking than you). Her cynicism is put to the test with the arrival of Roberto (Marco Leonardi) from Italy with whom she had a fling and with whom she literally cannot communicate (he speaks no English). Roberto ironically becomes the romantic of the bunch, embarking on an idealized quest to find his soul mate, driven by a conviction that he will be able to smell love. The supporting actors, namely Pascale Bussières, Molly Parker and Brendan Fletcher, round out the cast. The strength of all of these performances allow for the script's rich nuances to flourish.

What all of these characters and their respective relationships reveal is a profound inability or unwillingness to communicate that lies at the core of human relations. Inevitably all of the characters in *The Five Senses* are forced to confront their limitations and to its credit, the film presents responses as varied as the characters themselves. While the film offers hope, it is never saccharine and certainly does not offer everyone a happy ending. The film clearly connects each of these sensual relations to the very thing that each character lacks in his/her emotional makeup. Each character's experience, however, is universal. "I created these characters who all have a similar need," the director says, "which is to go back to a more innocent place in their lives, an innocent place in their own experience, and approach connecting to people in a more naive way so that it's not so confused. What the movie became, in a way, is really about emotion over intellect or instinct over rationalization."



Molly Parker

In the end, *The Five Senses* is a powerful statement about the dangers of making assumptions. It is this trap that all the characters fall into, one that ultimately prevents them from truly connecting. Podeswa cleverly employs a familiar

narrative device, the reversal of expectations, to make this point. More importantly, he uses it to upset the audience's assumptions as well. "It's really important to me, and always has been," he explains, "that the reversal of expectation is really about making people rethink something they think they've already thought through—it's like, 'you think you know this person? you think you can make a judgment on this person?' Well, wait a second, there's another clue, another key to this person that you haven't discovered yet and when you know that, it's going to make you look at this person in a completely different way." This device is precisely what opens the film up to the audience, defying our expectations at every twist and turn. Not only are the characters challenged to confront their biases and mistaken impressions but so are we. What makes *The Five Senses* a great film as opposed to a good film is this very strategy, where we the audience are asked to acknowledge our own complicity in this age-old, self-defeating pattern. ●