

“If I know exactly what an image or a scene means, I throw it away. I’m terrified of manipulations and sales pitches and preaching and teaching and judging. I only understand filmmaking as a search; trying to tell the truth about what one still doesn’t understand. Later things become obvious, but if they are clear while they are being made they are already dead. To keep myself and my work alive, I must wander around intensely perplexed.” *Patricia Rozema*

Through an ever-changing landscape of talent, government policy and industry booms and busts, Patricia Rozema remains one of Canada’s most internationally recognized filmmakers. Faced with the challenges of local and national arts funding policies, she has navigated through decades of a male-dominated industry, resisted the lure of Hollywood (though not of Europe) and reached the enviable status of auteur filmmaker. Praised and revered, criticized and censured, her filmmaking has provoked strong reactions on both sides of the spectrum.

Born in 1958 in Kingston, Ontario, Rozema was raised in southern Ontario by Dutch Calvinist parents and educated in Canada and the U.S. at Christian schools. While completing her B.A. in Philosophy and English Literature at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, Rozema decided that she would become a journalist. She worked at television news stations in the U.S., and as an associate producer at CBC’s *The Journal* in Toronto, but she soon realized her powerful attraction to the world of fiction and, in 1985, enrolled in a filmmaking course at Ryerson Polytechnical Institute. While gaining industry experience as Don Owen’s assistant on *Unfinished Business*, third assistant director on David Cronenberg’s *The Fly*, as well as on a number of television shows, Rozema began submitting her own proposals to art councils. Though she had little success initially—proposal after proposal was rejected—Rozema persisted and that persistence paid off brilliantly.

Right from the start of her narrative filmmaking career, Rozema quickly began to establish the thematic and stylistic terrain that would later come to define her entire oeuvre. Her films are elegant fairy-tale like stories inhabited by idiosyncratic outsider protagonists, typically struggling artists, set on paths toward enlightenment. Throughout her body of work she maintains a graceful feminist consciousness and has established herself as a remarkably sensual visual stylist. But there is also a vibrant, formal adventurousness in Rozema’s

work, marked by self-referential narration and a rich intertextuality, which has also come to define her signature style.

Rozema’s vision is an inquisitive, active vision that pushes boundaries, searches for context, reinvents and engages other cultural works in meaningful ways. Her search for knowledge, some sort of truth, is revealed in both her method of making films and the journeys of the characters she creates. This auteur’s thematic concerns are that of authorship itself: the struggle and processes of creativity and self-expression, the immeasurable value of artistic creation, the questioning of traditional aesthetic standards and the relationship between artists and their audience. What does emerge is a singular truth: artistic expression is truly one of the noblest endeavours.

Patricia Rozema’s first break came when she finally received an arts council grant to rewrite a script that would become her first short film. *Passion: A Letter in 16 mm* (1985) is an intriguing and intimate 28-minute filmic love letter to an unidentified lover. The composer of said letter is a documentary filmmaker, Anne Vogel, played by Linda Griffiths. The film explores Anne’s struggle to come to terms with a failed romantic relationship, as she recounts her attempts to balance her work life and personal life. It is during the break up, however, that Anne creates her most passionate and successful work—a film she deeply cares about and one that goes on to win much acclaim. But in the process, she loses a relationship. Establishing her keen interest in the subject of the artist figure, a subject that Rozema would revisit often, *Passion* also reveals Rozema’s desire to experiment with the medium. Anne directly addresses the camera and audience in an intimate, confessional manner, as Rozema stretches the boundaries of filmmaking as letter writing. Funded by arts councils and the NFB, *Passion* went on to win the Silver Plaque at the Chicago Film Festival and also screened at the then Toronto Festival of Festivals (now the Toronto International Film Festival).



*The Polyphonic Nature of
Patricia Rozema*

BY AGATA SMOLUCH DEL SORBO



*I've Heard
the Mermaids
Singing*

Sheila McCarthy

It would be Rozema's first feature-length film, however, that would propel her into cinema's international limelight. *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987) is undoubtedly one of Canada's most celebrated and circulated success stories. A serious comedy about a socially inept temporary secretary, the film stars Sheila McCarthy in a standout performance as Polly Vandersma. Told as a confession via video camera, Polly narrates the tale of getting a new job at the sophisticated Church Gallery, falling in

love with the gallery's worldly curator, Gabrielle St. Peres (Paule Baillargeon), and the other amazing and troubling things she has witnessed.

While Polly struggles to fit into her new intimidating environment, she nurtures her pastime of photography and escapes into her safe and brilliant inner fantasy world where, for once, she is the star. Gabrielle, her girlfriend Mary Joseph (Ann Marie MacDonald), and Polly are all artists of varying abilities struggling to create by whatever means possible. With this film, Rozema questions traditional approaches of judging art and even what we value as art. From glowing paintings we cannot see, to Polly's utterly charming self-expressions—honest photographs and the most amazing dreams—Rozema succeeds in making her point of tossing aside objective standards. In *Mermaids*, Rozema also explores the demands of being an artist and the necessity of a split subject—a public/private split. Mary is the artist, the creator, but cannot cope with the public demands, so Gabrielle takes on the public persona of the artist. This is a theme that Rozema would draw on again in her later work.

Most notably, however, *Mermaids* demonstrates Rozema's formal experimentation with traditional modes of representation, subverting them at every turn through the use of video sequences, intimate direct address, grainy black-and-white fantasy sequences and freeze frames. Yet she engages with tradition and genre, combining elements of comedy, romance, fairy tale and documentary, reshaping

them to suit her needs. Rozema also draws on some lofty sources, namely Christianity, with the Church Gallery, Gabrielle St. Peres (Holy Father), Mary (&) Joseph and the confession-like structure of the film itself. Drawing parallels between art and religion, she questions where we place our faith. Another strategic intertext is T. S. Eliot's poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," from which the film's title is taken: *I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each/I do not think that they will sing to me.*

*I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each/
I do not think that they will sing to me.*

— Excerpt from T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

But Rozema champions the outsider, and this film's Prufrock does hear the mermaids singing. Rozema skillfully orchestrates all of these elements together, and the result is a richly textured, entertaining and impressive debut.

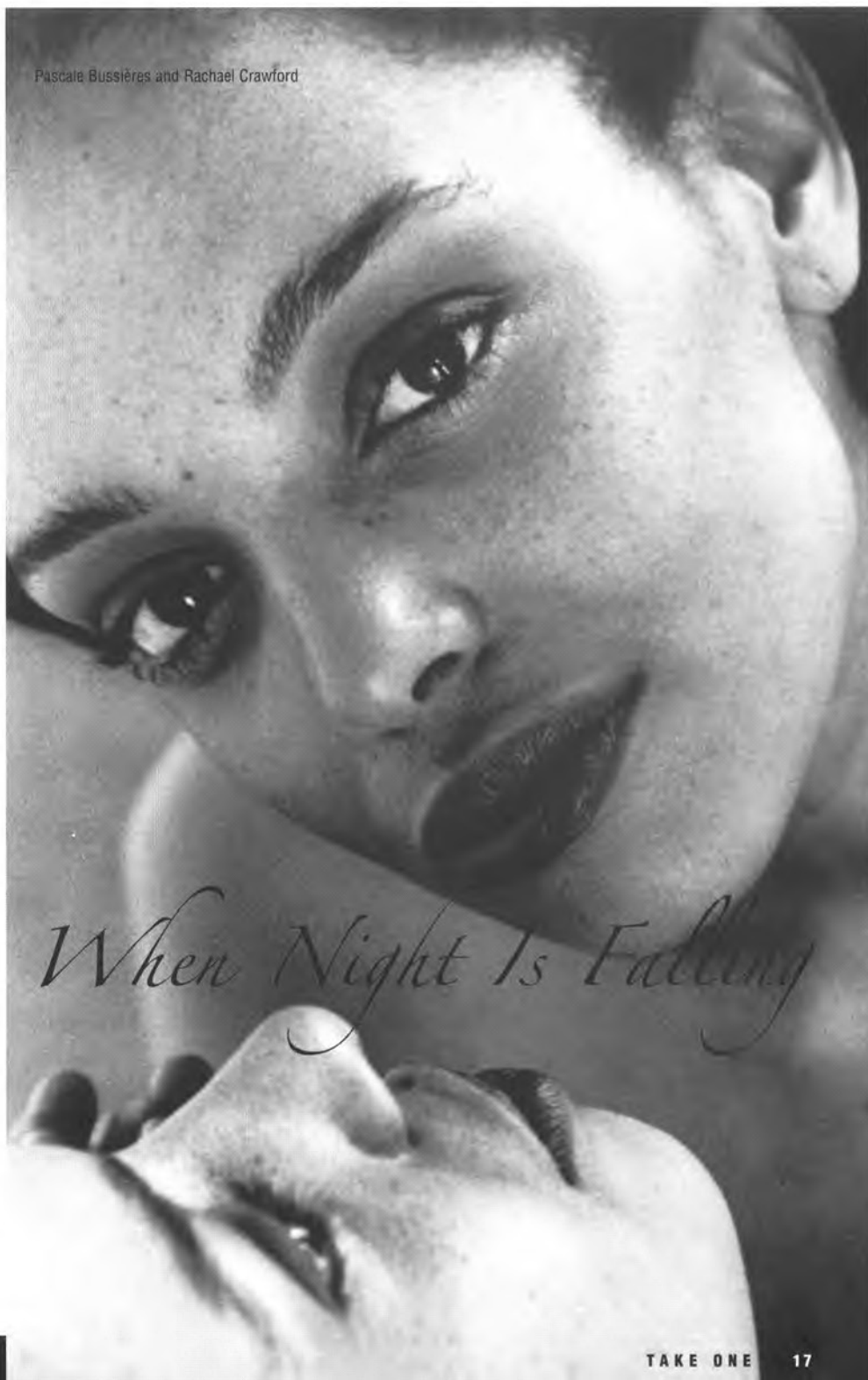
Rozema and producer Alex Raffé originally struggled to secure funding for the project. Initially, Rozema received some money to write *Mermaids* as a one-hour film for television but the script she wrote was too long. Given the newly created Ontario Film Development Corporation and the availability of funding for features, however, she decided to make the script longer and turn it into a feature. Eventually, and after much negotiating, Telefilm Canada also agreed to contribute financing. The film was made for just over \$350,000 and, at the time, was a massive success, both critically and commercially.

The film would go on to win the coveted Prix de la Jeunesse at Cannes in 1987, where it received a now legendary six-minute standing ovation. This small unassuming, offbeat film received an enormous amount of attention, the majority of which was positive. It is worth noting that the film was criticized by some for its problematic lesbian portrayal and lack of feminist principles, while at the same time being lauded by others for its positive depiction of lesbianism and its strong feminist stance.

Perhaps most significantly, *Mermaids* shifted government-funding priorities towards more culturally relevant, low-budget, artist-driven films, as opposed to the glossy, risk adverse, high-budget films it had been funding. It was a harbinger of things to come south of the border. In 1989, Steven

Soderbergh's *sex, lies and videotape* broke through and changed the American filmmaking scene. Two years earlier, however, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, our own film about sex, lies and

Pascale Bussières and Rachael Crawford



When Night Is Falling

video, had already pointed toward the future and the power and possibilities of independent-style filmmaking two years earlier—not just changing, but essentially kick-starting a waning national film industry.

Rozema's ambitious followup film, *White Room* (1990), carried the pressures of the second-film syndrome that many other Canadian filmmakers have had to weather. Unfortunately, Canada's track record has not been good with many filmmakers falling victim to a complicated matrix of forces that make it impossibly difficult to create a successful second film. However, *White Room's* reception at the time of its release was particularly harsh and the film remains underrated. A dark, contemporary tale of fame, the film stars Maurice Godin as an ineffectual voyeur, Norman Gentle, who witnesses the brutal rape and murder of the famous singer Madeline X (Margot Kidder). A struggling writer searching for self-expression, Norman encounters two other artists: Jane (Kate Nelligan) a mysterious woman who

is revealed to be the voice behind Madeline X and Zelda (Sheila McCarthy), an attention-hungry environmental artist.

Similar to *Mermaids*, the film explores the complex relationship between the star and audience that necessitates a split subject: the private creator and the public face, although, in this case, with much more tragic consequences. With respect to the film's style, Rozema combines a number of elements. Energetically drawing on the psychological thriller, romance and fairy tales, *White Room* seems equally inspired by Emily Dickinson's poetry as by Hitchcock's *Psycho* and *Rear Window*. With this film, Rozema opens up questions about the demands of fiction and storytelling in general, and not only our cultural obsession with happy endings, but also the expectations on filmmakers to provide audiences with neat closure. Rozema skillfully subverts these expectations culminating the film with a double ending, one distressing and the other magical.

[*White Room*] explores the complex relationship between the star and audience that necessitates a split subject: the private creator and the public face.



Linda Griffiths

Passion: A Letter in 16 mm

White Room



Sheila McCarthy and Maurice Godin

Next, Patricia Rozema participated in the collective film project *Montréal vu par...* (1991), for which she made a clever and stylistically playful short exploring our divisive bilingualism, *Desperanto*. Anne Stewart, played by Sheila McCarthy in a role very similar to Polly, is a Toronto housewife who travels to Montreal for a weekend of excitement. When her expectations are sadly disappointed, she crashes a chic Montreal party and desperately tries to fit in. Unable to conquer the cultural divide, she escapes into a fantasy world where anything is possible, including stepping outside of the film to read the subtitles and being rescued by characters from Denys Arcand's *Le Déclin de l'empire américain*.

Rozema's next film, though by no means mainstream, did have decidedly more mainstream ambitions. The rhapsodic lesbian love story, *When Night Is Falling* (1995) was strategically created as a crossover film that would appeal to a broader audience. Placing a contemporary spin on the Cupid and Psyche myth, Rozema casts a lesbian couple within the cozy and familiar generic conventions of the classic romance to mitigate any threat to the audience that the subject matter might present. *When Night Is Falling* is about the gradual coming out of a Christian college professor, Camille (Pascale Bussières) when she meets Petra (Rachael Crawford), a lesbian performance artist with an

avant-garde circus. The film capitalized on the phenomenon of lesbian chic at the time, which saw a spate of lesbian-themed movies released, such as Rose Troche's *Go Fish* (1994), Maria Maggenti's *The Incredibly True Adventures of 2 Girls in Love* (1995) and Josiane Balasko's *French Twist* (1995). The social climate was not as affable as one hoped however, and the film was slapped with a harsh NC17 rating in the U.S., forcing Rozema to release the film unrated there.

Though Rozema incorporates the Cupid and Psyche myth and the classic romance, her usual critical questioning and reshaping of texts is absent for the most part. Some critics, while thoroughly seduced by Rozema's sophisticated and sensual vision, felt that the plot was encased in too sweet a package. Nonetheless, the film was well received at festivals, winning audience awards at the Berlin Film Festival, Women's Film Festival and the Melbourne International Film Festival, and offers a significant cultural contribution to lesbian filmmaking.

Six Gestures (1997), part of the *Yo-Yo Ma: Inspired by Bach* television series, continues Rozema's exploration of artistry and self-expression. An interpretation of Bach's music as performed by Yo-Yo Ma, Rozema's voracious quest for context and knowledge results in an essayistic film that elucidates Bach as an artist.

Using direct address with Bach, played by Tom McCamus, speaking to the audience, she constructs a filmic essay, footnotes and all. Combining dramatic enactments, with documentary style interviews, intimate direct address, Yo-Yo Ma's cello performance, the figure skating of Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean, and graffiti messages, Rozema creates a truly polyphonic structure. *Six Gestures* was awarded a Prime Time Emmy and is among Rozema's finest work, a true expression of her style and vision.

Rozema's following two films would mark an exit from Canadian production. It is no surprise that when approached to take on Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*, a novel many considered impossible to transfer to the screen, Rozema chose to incorporate Austen's letters and early journals, and turn Fanny Price into Jane Austen herself, a clever and irreverent writer. Rozema takes her exploration even further, drawing on critical interpretations of Austen's novel, as well as her own intuitions, bringing to the forefront that which are mere subtleties in the novel: the issue of slavery and hints of lesbian desire. The result is a sophisticated revisionist adaptation of Austen's novel, and Rozema's most confident film to date. In *Mansfield Park* (1999), poor relation Fanny

Price (Frances O'Connor) is benevolently taken in to live and work at the wealthy estate of the Bertram family and gradually becomes their moral compass. Fanny's true emotions and fantastic inner world of writing adventures are relayed in intimate direct address to the audience, culminating in a cunning ending in which Fanny summarizes the just deserts of the cast of characters that inhabit Mansfield Park.

Although the adaptation was censured by some for infidelity, Rozema's approach merely underscores that adaptation is not about fidelity. There is no one, correct interpretation of a text. Rather, there are always multiple meanings, and Rozema is an expert at coaxing out the meanings that intrigue her. *Mansfield Park* only further reveals Rozema's persistent questioning and reshaping of texts. Staying true to her signature formal strategies, she has created a splendidly intertextual film that incorporates a wealth of depth and context and only opens up further questions about the novel.

In 2000, Rozema directed *Happy Days*, Samuel Beckett's bleak and absurd play filmed for the Irish-produced Beckett Film Project, which disallowed any interference with the original play.

Frances O'Connor and Harold Pinter



Mansfield Park



strong, complex, successful female artist characters. In the process, she has carved out a space for herself as a success story to be admired. Creating compelling stories that question modes of storytelling themselves, Rozema continually explores her craft and her terrain. Though, of late, her films have not been Canadian productions, she remains an important voice in Canadian cinema.

Agata Smoluch Del Sorbo currently works for TIFF. She wrote the entry on Rozema for Take One's Essential Guide to Canadian Film (2001), edited by Wyndham Wise.

[Rozema] has reinvented the iconic paralyzed artist figure that has preoccupied the Canadian cultural imagination and constructed strong complex, successful female artist characters.

In *Happy Days*, a couple live out their days in the middle of the desert, the wife Winnie (Rosaleen Linehan) partially buried in a mound. (Other directors who participated in the award-winning Beckett Film Project include David Mamet, Anthony Minghella and Atom Egoyan.) Also in 2000, in honour of the 25th anniversary of the Toronto International Film Festival, 10 preeminent Canadian filmmakers were asked to create short films. Staying true to her thematic preoccupation with artists, audiences and their relationship, Rozema's contribution was *This Might Be Good*, a six-minute wordless, experimental piece about hope—the hope of audiences, actors and filmmakers who gather around films at festivals. In addition to writing and directing all of her projects, Patricia Rozema has produced and edited several of them, as well as executive produced John L'Ecuyer's *Curtis's Charm* (1996) and a television adaptation of Madeleine L'Engle's novel *A Wrinkle in Time* (2003).

After 20 years of filmmaking, Patricia Rozema has produced an impressive collection of considered, intelligent feasts for the senses. She has reinvented the iconic paralyzed artist figure that has preoccupied the Canadian cultural imagination and constructed



Above and below, filmmaker Patricia Rozema