

Patricia Rozema's **Mansfield Park**

By Barbara Goslawski



Jonny Lee Miller and Frances O'Connor

*Patricia Rozema is not the easiest filmmaker to profile. It's not that she, herself, is a difficult person; far from it. A consummate professional, she fought obvious exhaustion after travelling with her latest film, *Mansfield Park*, to sit down to an extensive interview with me. The challenge with Rozema is to distill both a rich array of life experiences and a convention-busting cinematic style into a single coherent vision.*

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Cinema may not have been Rozema's first career of choice, but it has certainly proven quite the showcase for her talents. The way she tells it, a career in filmmaking was practically a foregone conclusion. "I sometimes look back and I think 'My God, it's almost as if I knew I was going to become a filmmaker, so I organized this whole array of experiences that would help me.'"

One of a trio of children born to Dutch immigrants who eventually settled in Sarnia, Ont., Rozema was raised a strict Calvinist who, before the age of 16, had seen only one movie, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Her parents, successful real-estate entrepreneurs, instilled a work ethic and business sense that proved invaluable to her eventual career of choice. "I grew up [learning] how to convince other people that your enterprise is valid and making sure you don't go in the hole doing it; how to save some money and how to plan ahead, basic contracts and even negotiations," she explains.

Acting in plays from the first grade until she finished her B.A., Rozema was busy with a variety of activities in both high

od [in] both...so I could be saying 'okay, these are the ideas of the 18th century and this is how they worked themselves out in fiction.'" It was also while studying at this Christian college that she discovered her sexuality, one that increasingly involved an attraction to women, and one that inevitably caused a loss of religious faith.

After graduating in 1981, Rozema switched gears and pursued a career in journalism. She had decided to be a novelist but knew that she needed a day job to pay the rent. This new endeavour took her to Chicago (WMAQ-TV) and New York (WNBC-TV) before she finally came back to Canada to work first at Global and then as an associate producer on CBC's *The Journal*. Here, Rozema learned about constructing stories in a moving-image medium, through writing and editing, and eventually she decided to take a five-week course in 16mm film production.

Before long, she was writing and producing her first film, *Passion: A Letter in 16mm* (1985), which went on to win the sec-



Patricia Rozema directing O'Connor

school and university. At Lambton Christian High School, Rozema discovered public speaking, and was elected president of her class, an experience that certainly came with an important lesson, and one that reeks of irony. "I remember saying," she recalls, "'never, ever, will I go into politics, ever.' It just drove me mad to be in a situation where I was expected to want to please everyone. I couldn't do it." Instead, she continued on in a different kind of political arena, the arts. Writing stories in her spare time since she was about eight years old, she coupled this with directing theatre at Calvin College, a small liberal arts university in Grand Rapids, Mich. There, Rozema won awards for her writing and directing in theatre, acted in productions and edited the campus newspaper. On top of that, her approach to her studies, English and Philosophy, proved remarkably astute: "I always tried to arrange my courses so that I would be studying the same peri-

od prize at the Chicago International Film Festival. Coproduced with Alexandra Raffé, shot by Peter Mettler and starring Linda Griffiths, this short is, in retrospect, a veritable who's who of Canadian filmmaking. Essentially a cinematic love letter, *Passion* introduced audiences to a device that would be a signature of Rozema's style: that of the protagonist breaking the flow of the narrative to address the audience directly. It's usually in these moments that the thoughts, dreams and aspirations of the character are revealed, creating a sense that, structurally speaking, anything can happen.

Rozema will be forever remembered as the novice filmmaker who, at the age of 29 took the world by storm with her first feature, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987), winning the Prix de la Jeunesse at the 1987 Cannes Film Festival. The film charmed critics and audiences alike with its playful style and

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Photo by Barbara Goslawski

Patricia Rozema

endearing protagonist. Polly, played to perfection by Sheila McCarthy, is an awkward and surprisingly inept office temp who, despite herself, lands a job working for a successful gallery owner, Gabrielle (Paule Baillargeon). She comes to idolize this woman both personally and professionally, and tries desperately to gain her acceptance on both of these levels. Polly's only refuge comes from her photography and her vivid fantasy life. These elements, together with her videotaped confession interweave within the basic story line, shaping the film and expanding its form beyond simple storytelling. Instead, *Mermaids'* form gently actualizes Polly's growing self-awareness to produce a statement that celebrates personal validation over the more tempting public accolades. The stuff that legends are made of, this low-budget film (made for \$350,000) has made millions. Besides collecting two Genie Awards for acting (Best Actress, McCarthy, and Best Supporting Actress, Baillargeon), it garnered critical praise

internationally and continues to appear on Top Ten lists of the Best Canadian Films of all time.

The bubble burst, however, with the release of Rozema's second feature *White Room* (1990), sending her career on a roller-coaster ride from which she is finally recovering. *White Room* was generally panned by critics and ignored by audiences. Despite its reception, the film is ultimately her most powerful statement on the fragility of private space and the dangers of disturbing it. Rozema's third feature, *When Night is Falling* (1995), often touted as her most autobiographical film, refashions the Cupid and Psyche myth into a sumptuous and celebratory lesbian romance. There's something fable-like in this tale of self-awareness as well, as Rozema transforms a simple love story into a classic tale of self-discovery and the true nature of love. Camille (Pascale Bussi eres), gives every appearance of a stable and conservative existence: she teaches mythology at a Christian college, is engaged to a theology professor (Henry Czerny), and together they are about to be promoted. However, along comes Petra (Rachel Crawford), a performer in the Sirkus of Sorts, to awaken her sexuality and whisk her away from a life to which she ultimately does not belong. *When Night Is Falling* was better received than *White Room*, especially by the public who continually chose the film as audience favourite at a remarkable number of festivals worldwide.

In between features, Rozema was involved in a couple of omnibus film projects. As part of the *Montr al vu par...* (1991), she made "Desperanto" (or "Let Sleeping Girls Lie") starring Sheila McCarthy as a mild-mannered Anglo housewife who finds adventure in Montreal. Rozema also directed "Six Gestures," the sixth part of Rhombus Media's *Yo-Yo Ma, Inspired by Bach* (1997). "Six Gestures," which won the Golden Rose Award at the annual Montreux Television Festival and a 1998 Emmy, is, as Rozema describes, "an annotated, illustrated essay," featuring a continuous monologue by Bach (acted by Tom McCamus) interwoven with Yo-Yo Ma's performance and an ice dance by skaters Jayne Torvill and Christopher Dean.

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Frances O'Connor with Harold Pinter

Rozema ventured outside the world of Canadian filmmaking to make her latest film, *Mansfield Park*, a big-budget adaptation of Jane Austen's third novel of the same name, produced in the United Kingdom by Miramax. Asked what it was like working with a big budget finally, she joked that it was "like driving an ocean liner—no quick turns; a sense of stability." Rozema admits that she did feel a greater "sense of artistic freedom" which manifested itself in a different working style that was more spontaneous. She is proud of the fact that *Mansfield Park* came in on budget and is quick to credit her experiences as an independent filmmaker and producer in Canada. "Canada is an unbelievably excellent training ground for working within a budget," she explains, "because you get your \$2 million from Telefilm, and if you make it for \$2.2, you're going to have to come up with \$200,000 somewhere—it's just not an option."

Mansfield Park as written and directed by Patricia Rozema, however, almost did not happen. Miramax's Harvey Weinstein approached her with an already completed script, which he asked her to direct. "I refused it. The script was boring," she says. "It was a very earnest, literal adaptation." After explaining why she didn't like the script and what she thought would work instead, she was invited to write her own. "I very sincerely thought that it was going to just be an interesting, challenging writing exercise," she admits. Nevertheless, she wrote in isolation for seven months, without any contact or interference from Miramax, and when she submitted her script, they accepted it immediately. Several months later, she had moved with her partner, composer Leslie Barber, and their daughter Jacoba, to England and she was shooting *Mansfield Park*. Rozema recalls, with great enthusiasm, the experience of making this film, even joking that "shooting period pieces is such a joy in England. They relish their history so. It's preserved and pickled all around them."

Rozema does not come across as an obvious choice to write and direct an Austen adaptation, and her version of *Mansfield Park* is certainly not your typical period piece. What is obvious, though, is that the process of getting *Mansfield Park* to the screen was pure Rozema. In her adaptation, Rozema added biographical details from the writer's life plus excerpts from Austen's own early journals, transforming the novel's protagonist into a writer. These changes serve to expand the scope of

the film into more than just an adaptation and, in fact, enliven the original. More importantly, they place the director's own distinct stamp on the film. Stylistically, the film recalls the lush look and tone of *When Night Is Falling*, while the device of a character speaking in direct address recalls both *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* and *Yo-Yo Ma Inspired By Bach: "Six Gestures."* Rozema was careful to be accurate with the historical details in the film, "but the overall impression, I hope, is one of modernity, in that it's humane and urgent and the emotions could very easily transpire today. The social situations could very easily happen in certain circles today."

Thematically, *Mansfield Park* also bears a striking resemblance to Rozema's previous films. The main character, Fanny (Frances O'Connor), is a familiar one: awkward innocent trapped in a world in which she obviously does not belong. Living in abject poverty in her family home, she is adopted by her wealthy uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram (Harold Pinter), and transplanted to his estate. There, she lives as a second-class citizen, mistreated by everyone except her cousin Edmund (Jonny Lee Miller), her confidante and eventual love interest. When her uncle tries to force her to marry Henry Crawford (Alessandro Nivola), a man she does not respect, she refuses and is returned to her impoverished origins. It all works out in the end, as every good romance should, something that Rozema underscores with one of her characteristic nods to the audience. "I acknowledge the audience's knowledge about what kind of form we have entered in here... I'm including their knowledge of the conventions of romance."

In an article in *Maclean's* (May 8, 1995), Rozema made what I think is probably the most useful statement for understanding the artist and her work: "I hate being labelled." At various times and by various people, she has been called a lesbian filmmaker, a feminist, a filmmaker who refuses to bend to the rules of conventional cinematic storytelling and an artist who creates characters that are "distinctly Canadian." In the end, it's probably a combination of all of the above, but what underlines any and all applicable categories is something much simpler and more fundamental. As Rozema explains, "My own style is, I hope it's a searching, I hope there's always a sensation of some kind of experiment in it. That's important to me." ●