

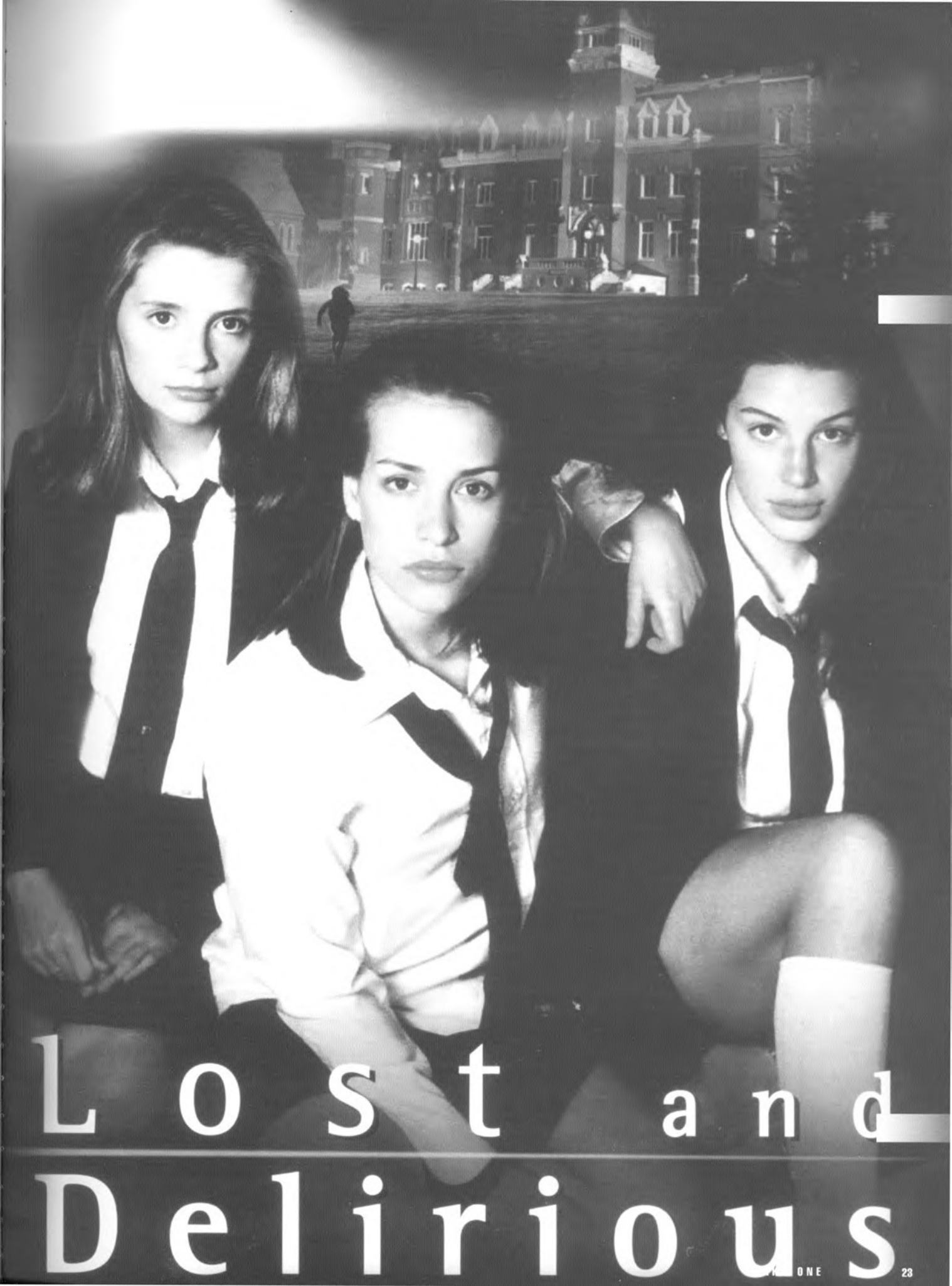
# Forging NEW PATHS

LÉA POOL'S LATEST FILM LEAVES HER *LOST AND DELIRIOUS*

BY ISA TOUSIGNANT

It feels unwise, perhaps even treacherous, to speak of a feminine cinema when exploring the work of Quebec filmmaker Léa Pool. Pool has made an art of dismantling boundaries, exploring prejudice and turning societal expectations on their head throughout her career, which makes pigeonholing her into a gendered cliché particularly precarious. But it's a term I can't seem to avoid. The questions her cinema poses regarding social mores are rooted in an empathy still rare on screen, an empathy that remains, I believe, ultimately female. Just as our mothers are our greatest comforters, our sisters our greatest sympathizers, or the Virgin Mary, to whom we attribute divine capacities of sympathy and understanding, so, too, is Léa Pool the caregiver in Quebec film, unparalleled is her capacity to gaze into the human soul.

Sitting across from her in a downtown Montreal hotel earlier this summer to discuss *Lost and Delirious*, her latest film and first English project, was a distinct treat. She is an auteur of impressive stature. Since *Strass Café* in 1979, she has infused Quebec's cinema with a unique, subtle voice, making the terrain of affairs of the heart all her own, thriving on the complex chemistry of attraction, identity and the play between mind and body, loneliness and longing. Her camera is kind and careful, benevolent even. In films like *La Femme de l'hôtel* (1984), *À corps perdu* (1988), *Mouvements du désir* (1994) and *Emporte-moi* (1999) her characters are ennobled by its presence, examined at close, intimate distance, but explored only with their seeming accord, at their pace, and with respect. Pool's rhythm, unctuous and enveloping, also, feels viscerally real and plunges viewers into her characters' psychology with abandon. Her characterization is indeed her strength, often the focal point of her plot development; the narrative journey she leads us on is one of inspection and discovery in which her characters' growth toward self-revelation – the discovery of love and greater wisdom – are put in the forefront. It is the lushness and languid nature of her aesthetic that has allowed Pool to explore such taboo themes as homosexuality, bisexual ménage à trois and incest without alienating viewers, critics or peers.



Lost and  
Delirious

# Interview Léa Pool

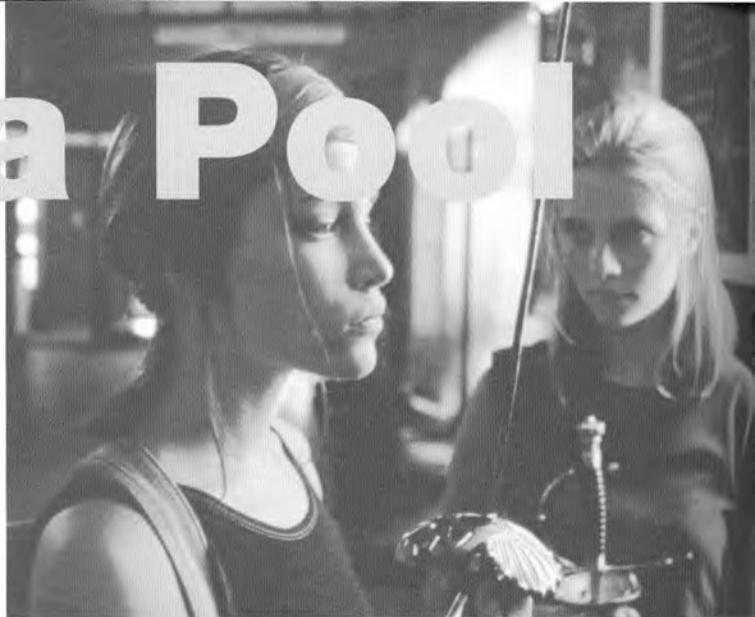
With *Lost and Delirious*, the theme of social taboos and femininity are particularly relevant. The story is one of passion, in this case between two adolescent schoolgirls, roommates at an all-girl boarding school. The tale is told through the sensitive, innocent eyes of Mouse, played by a subtle Mischa Barton (*Notting Hill*, *The Sixth Sense*), who is a newly arrived boarder. The love affair between Paulie (Piper Perabo, *Coyote Ugly* and *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*) and Tory (Jessica Paré, *Stardom*) is found by the slightly shell-shocked Mouse to be tender and natural, but one that, once discovered by Tory's sister, is doomed to dramatic, disastrous destruction.

Pool's characters' tribulations have always previously been more internally than externally motivated. Seldom are her characters victimized or in any way swayed by what strangers may think; seldom either are viewers called to question the validity or reason for her character's emotions, compelled instead to accept them for the simple reason that they are. But for Tory and Paulie, society is a cruel force that cannot easily be overcome. Upon exposure, Tory capitulates to social prejudice and breaks it off with the explosive Paulie, who spins out of control. Heartbroken, and with Shakespearean tendencies toward grand declarations, an affinity for fencing, and a peculiar relationship with a falcon she nurses back to health, Paulie attempts through increasingly desperate means to regain Tory's love, but to no avail. Her downward spiral is unstoppable.

Though, at first glance, this sort of narrative would seem custom-made for Pool's caring sensibilities, something along the way in the making of *Lost and Delirious* went awry. The film, though solid in so many ways – the performances are, on occasion, viscerally moving, the aesthetic is rich, the plot compelling – the end result is striking and at times captivating, but ultimately unfocused. Hardly lacking in terms of talent – it was adapted by acclaimed Toronto playwright Judith Thompson from the award-winning novel, *The Wives of Bath*, by Susan Swan – the film suffers rather from a case of too many cooks, pulling in too many directions, resulting in a disjointed work. The rhythm, one of Pool's usual fortes, is off, stopping and starting, repeating itself, never achieving the poise of her earlier films. The duelling scenes and recurring theme of the falcon give ace cinematographer Pierre Gill the opportunity to shine, but pull the director out of the psychological territory she masters.

*Lost and Delirious* is a disappointment, but one that may sting long-time Pool fans more sharply than newcomers to her oeuvre. It has received numerous good reviews in the United States and was very well received at Sundance (influential critic Roger Ebert called it "one of the best crafted, most professional films at the festival"). To write it off would be cowardly and unjust because the very nature of the project destined it to be complicated and an ambitious coup to pull off. And no one could better explain it than Pool herself.

From top to bottom: Piper Perabo with Mischa Barton; Perabo with Jessica Paré; the three girls together; and with Léa Pool, left.



**Why did you adapt *The Wives of Bath*?**

This is a project that was suggested to me a few years ago. I was given the screenplay to read – an adaptation by Judith Thompson of Susan Swan’s novel – but I was busy with another film at the time. Then a year or two ago, just around the time *Emporte-moi* was released, through a series of coincidences, the project found its way back to me after six years of wandering, homeless. A couple of other directors had begun work on it, but had quit. Greg Dummett, who is now associated with *Cité-Amérique*, was in charge of its production and he suggested it to Lorraine Richard, who read it and said to herself, “Oh, this is for Léa.” She made me read it. I found the subject very interesting. I thought it was touching and original, and I liked the way it was adapted.

**By the time the project reached you, the adaptation was already complete?**

Nearly. Six years of work had been put into the screenplay by then. It had gone through all sorts of phases. I think Judith was quite perturbed at a certain point because each new phase brought with it a slew of changes. It really was a project that took a long time to roost for her, whereas for me, it was relatively easy. I started on it maybe six months before shooting. There were certain things that did disturb me about the screenplay, particularly at the beginning of the story, which was already different from the book but still not what I believed it should be. It was during the shooting stage that I simplified certain things. My job was to streamline and illustrate rather than reinvent. I never returned to the original version. The project was already so advanced, and for Judith, to keep going backwards on a project she’d already invested six years in would be hell.

**The novel is written in a first-person narrative by Mouse, is that right?**

Yes, it’s Mouse who speaks and it starts with a trial. In fact, it begins chronologically later than the action we see in the film, when the whole ordeal at the boarding school is dragged through court. The book involves more dramatic events than we included in the film, which we left aside for various reasons. Mostly because when you’re dealing with a subject like homosexuality, you have to be very careful. It’s a theme that isn’t easy to swallow for the general public, and to include scenes of violence and drama that would alienate people...we wouldn’t be serving the gay community, we wouldn’t be serving anyone. I wanted, rather, to push the story as a love story, and in love we are taken to extremes. I thought it was important to create empathy for the characters. When Susan saw the film at Sundance, she saw that it didn’t betray the sense of her book. The project was really built in three stages – Swan, Thompson and me, three very, very different people each bringing her vision.

**So it wasn’t, in fact, a classical collaboration.**

Not at all. I had hardly even spoken to Susan before Sundance. I was rather nervous, in fact, about talking to her because I knew the film was moving further and further away from the original and I thought she might object to certain cuts. This kind of process is always hard for the author. Whereas I, as

long as I accepted the project, accepted it pretty much as is. This was interesting, because I’d never worked this way before.

**Did you enjoy it?**

Yes. I found it very... at the start very funny, because usually I know my material extremely well, I know my dialogue by heart, I know what I want and when I want it. But here I was very respectful, at the start, of the text, of the dialogue, and I didn’t dare change anything. Then I’d hear the girls speak among themselves between takes, and they’d brandish “cools” here and “cools” there, so I tried to include the occasional turn of phrase, a language that was more real. There is a highly theatrical aspect to this film and its dialogue, because the original is very theatrical, and I liked it and found it interesting, but I tried to balance it with a relaxed, natural vernacular to give the character’s authenticity.

**Excluding the wonderful Karine Vanasse in *Emporte-moi*, this was the youngest selection of actresses you’d ever worked with. How did this affect you?**

I loved it. They have a kind of courage and determination that fascinates me. They take responsibility for their characters; they’re practically kamikaze! They dedicate themselves to body and soul. They had so much to say about the nature of passion, of love, of that awakening to life, to sexuality. Adolescence is so fragile. I try to imagine my daughter at that stage sometimes, and it moves me.

**Did the ready-made aspect of the script modify your work with the actors?**

Yes, in the beginning, but after a week or two I let my instincts run free and realized it was impossible to please the screenwriter and author and still make a film that had soul. What I did at the start was film what I thought the author would want, but I quickly realized that it was to everyone’s advantage that I do it as I felt it. What’s funny is that even though this was the first time I worked in English, it wasn’t the language that worried me, but rather the struggle of working on such a finished project and adopting it to make it my own.

**Why did you do an international casting call?**

We searched in Quebec in the fall, then in Toronto. We were interested in Sarah Polley, who couldn’t do it because she was on another movie. I actually flew to Alberta to try to convince her, to no avail. We really searched to the best of our abilities in Quebec, but when we’d done the rounds without finding who we wanted, and since it’s a film with a subject matter that concerns the whole of North America, there was no reason to limit ourselves. I didn’t know the two actresses we finally chose, Mischa Barton and Piper Perabo, beforehand. All I’d seen of Piper’s was a short audition tape she sent us, on which she sang a song [laughs] – I thought that very charming. And for Mischa, all I’d seen was a photo. So it really wasn’t the fact that they were American that interested me, but rather the way each fitted their character. I got lucky, because I knew Jessica Paré would be perfect to play Tory but Paulie was a difficult role to cast. Piper just had the energy for the part. I feared financial difficulties for us to get her because she’d



# Interview Léa Pool

already worked on a couple of big movies. Luckily she fell in love with the script and was determined to play the role. It was the film's cachet that allowed us to work with her.

*Had you ever considered making a film in English before?*

No. The funny thing is that I never planned to be a filmmaker, and here I am; I never planned to live in the country, and I fell in love with an extraordinary country house; I never planned to become a mother at 45, and then I go and adopt a child. All the important things in my life have happened by chance. This film was also a stroke of life's luck, and the fact that it's in English never bothered me. If we were making a film set in Paris, let's say, with the Algerian war as a backdrop and we made it in English, that wouldn't make sense to me. I would feel cheap to culturally transpose it. Or a film like *Emporte-moi*, which was highly personal – that wouldn't have worked in English either. But here the language is justified by the universal nature of boarding schools. They are peppered all over the Western world; they exist in Portugal, in England... so it works.

*Whose idea was it to contemporize the screenplay from the original 1960s setting?*

It was Judith's decision, but we discussed it when I joined the project. My opinion was that a boarding school like the one depicted has no age; those institutions were the same 50 years ago as they are today. The students stuck in such schools are children practically preserved out of time. They're lucky if they even know what's going on in the outside world. Also, I'd read a startling article on the difficulty for gay youths to feel free to live with their homosexuality, full of alarming statistics concerning the suicide rate among young gay men. I don't think there was really an awareness of such things in the 1960s, so a more contemporary context was apropos. We take for granted in an artistic milieu that the world is okay with homosexuality, but this isn't the case. Even the reaction to the film has been entertaining to watch because in certain parts of the U.S., they're treating it like soft porn! Whereas in Berlin, on the contrary, they found it too soft.

*In a sense, *Lost and Delirious* is more sexually explicit than your previous work, though sex is always in the background. Why is this?*

It's true that it's more explicit in some ways, especially in contrast with other films like *Boys Don't Cry*. I watched that film many times to see how sexuality was dealt with – well, there isn't any. It's all suggested. For me, *Lost and Delirious* is a story of love and passion – too much passion – so much that it becomes disturbing. I couldn't avoid sexuality. It's such an intrinsic part of adolescence.

*A point I found interesting in the film is that contrary to your previous work, in which the grey areas of sexual identity and the nature of attraction are taken for granted, here you*

*have the character of Paulie actually voice your point, proclaiming in so many words, in answer to Mouse's labelling her a lesbian, "I'm not a lesbian, I'm just Paulie who's in love with a girl named Tory." Did you find the need to do this because the film was aimed at a wider audience?*

No! It's just part of the character; she doesn't want to put a label on such a love. For her, a love like this is much more than just heterosexuality or homosexuality. I see it as a real turning point in the film. This is a point that has always been close to my heart; it has always annoyed me that people have such a need to reduce things, as if sticking a name onto something somehow simplifies its reality. And for the two actresses, Jessica and Piper, who are both heterosexual, it was a particularly important point. In fact, the story has little to do with the fact that they're gay and everything to do with the fact that they're simply in love, a love that flows over into feelings they can no longer control. That's something that everyone knows about, homosexual or heterosexual. Loving excessively, loving badly, is a universal, touching theme.

*Do you see yourself as an advocate?*

The motivation for making a film that dealt so explicitly with homosexuality was in an effort, to move beyond boundaries of description and to give a new angle to the exploration of the theme in cinema. I think that the more films deal with such subjects, the better the public will be educated. Filmmakers shy away from projects like this that are hybrids, that deal with so-called indie subjects but have a more commercial nature. I like that hybrid. It's important to work with unusual themes, because when I think of *Boys Don't Cry* or *My Own Private Idaho*, even *Bagdad Café* or *Arizona Dreams*, they're wonderful, mind-opening films. They are films I'm intent on mentioning in interviews, because I really believe it's important for auteur filmmakers to try to break from the ghetto either of the festival circuit, or the art-and-essay circuit, both of which have extremely limited audiences. It's important to risk bigger commercial projects for exactly the reason that these subjects need to be expanded outside of the art-cinema niche.

*Are bigger projects, therefore, on the menu for your future?*

I don't know [laughs]. I've been doing this for 20 years, and as much as I'm intent on continuing my personal, poetic approach to certain themes, I'm also intent on breaking my barriers. It's an odd situation. If with *Lost and Delirious* I were to have made another film like my previous ones, people would say I lack imagination; if I make something different, people wonder why I've changed.

TAKE ONE