



Patricia Rozema.
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Patricia Rozema.

Rozema, Patricia (b. 1958)

by Kelly A. Wacker

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Canadian filmmaker Patricia Rozema is known for imbuing her films, which she usually writes as well as directs, with feminist analysis and sensual cinematography.

Rozema was born on August 20, 1958 to Dutch immigrants in Kingston, Ontario and raised in Sarnia, Ontario in a strict Calvinist community. She did not see a film until she was a teen-ager.

She has identified herself as lesbian, although she has resisted being narrowly categorized as a lesbian filmmaker.

Rozema studied philosophy at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Upon her graduation in 1981, she intended to pursue journalism as a career. While working as a producer at CBC-TV in Toronto, however, she decided to leave journalism; and, after taking a course in film production, she made a short film in 16mm, *Passion: A Letter* (1985), and worked as an assistant director on several other film projects.

Made on a shoestring budget of \$350,000, her first feature film, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* (1987), was warmly received at the Cannes Film Festival and went on to gross \$6 million. The film focuses on a daydreaming assistant to a lesbian curator who yearns to be sophisticated and cosmopolitan.

As a result of this work, Rozema became the first female Canadian filmmaker to win significant international acclaim. *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* also presented themes that Rozema, a magical realist, has continued to explore in many of her subsequent film projects: sublimated and realized desire, voyeurism, transcendence through love, the role of religion, and the desire to break free from restrictive situations.

Although her second film, *The White Room* (1990), received sharply negative criticism for being too bleakly melancholic, her third film, *When Night is Falling* (1995), demonstrated her growing maturity as a filmmaker.

Although earlier films such as *Personal Best* (1982), *Lianna* (1983), and *Desert Hearts* (1986) set precedents for lesbian romances, *When Night is Falling* is the first to present a lesbian romance in a rich and voluptuous production.

The film tells the story of a professor of mythology at a small Calvinist college who falls in love with a female circus performer while struggling with the inflexibility of her religion and her increasingly strained relationship with her fiancé.

Rozema's characteristically sensual cinematography reappeared in her brief film "Bach Cello Suite #6: Six Gestures" (1997), one of six works commissioned by Yo Yo Ma to interpret his performances of J. S. Bach's cello suites (*Yo Yo Ma: Inspired by Bach*).

Rozema layered sequences of Jayne Torville and Christopher Dean ice skating with monologues by Tom McCamus as J.S. Bach. Using an approach from one of her earlier short films, "Desperanto" (1991), she included overlaid written text in the film, which resulted in a visually deft mix of music, spoken word, written word, and fluid movement.

Rozema's most mainstream film, *Mansfield Park* (1999), is an interpretation of Jane Austen's novel. It portrays the main character, Fanny Price, as a strong willed, intelligent young woman struggling to find her place in the world. The film has been lauded for its portrayal of gender and class issues, but criticized for focusing on the autobiographical aspects of Austen's novel and for recreating the main character with a feminist sensibility.

Rozema's misreading of Austen is deliberate and consistent with her desire to portray strong, self-realized female characters, regardless of whether they are heterosexual or lesbian.

Rozema's film, *The Five Senses* (2000), explores the difficulties and problems of connection, as it examines the ways in which five individuals, whose lives run parallel and eventually intersect, cope with the loss of one of their senses.

Rozema has recently completed a filmed version of Samuel Beckett's play *Happy Days* for "The Beckett Film Project" (other directors involved in the project include David Mamet, Neil Jordan, Anthony Minghella and Atom Egoyan). Presented at the Venice Film Festival and the Toronto International Film Festival in 2001, it was released on video and DVD in 2002.

Rozema has also written and directed a short film in honor of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Toronto International Film Festival, *This Might Be Good*.

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