

KINO LORBER

REPERTORY

Presents



I've Heard the Mermaids Singing

A Film by Patricia Rozema

A TIFF Top 10 Canadian Films of All Time

Official Selection – Director's Fortnight, Cannes Film Festival, Toronto International Film Festival

To commemorate Canada 150, this film was digitally restored by Library and Archives Canada, Cinematheque Quebecoise, The Cinematheque, and TIFF.

4K restoration made possible by The Government of Canada, Canada 150, RBC, Ontario 150 and Telefilm.

Canada | 1987 | 81 mins | Color | English

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Synopsis

I've Heard the Mermaids Singing is a quietly amusing and whimsical tale told from the point of view of Polly (Sheila McCarthy), a self-admitted “organizationally impaired” temporary secretary. In her videotaped confession, she tells us how she got caught up in a voyeuristic fascination for her new boss, the beautiful and ambitious Curator (Paule Baillargeon) of the Church Gallery, and art gallery in downtown Toronto. Polly, innocent beyond her years, witnesses many things quite beyond her ken: pseudo-intellectual “art talk” and the sexual relationship between the Curator and a young woman named Mary (Anne-Marie McDonald).

Polly responds to her discoveries through her hobby of amateur photography. After expeditions around the city, snapping pictures of her various new obsessions, she develops her pictures in her bachelorette bathroom. In the little red womb of her bathroom, she spaces off and slips into the black and white worlds inside, worlds where she can fly, walk on water and hear mermaids singing.

One night in a bout of drunken self-doubt, the Curator agrees to show Polly her own paintings. Polly is introduced to the most magical scene she's ever witnessed: paintings so beautiful that, to Polly, they seem to glow with a supernatural, golden light. In an effort to help the Curator overcome her self-doubt, Polly steals one of the paintings and shows it to a critic. The Curator's work is greeted by instantly ecstatic public praise.

Polly, heartened by the Curator's experience, sends her photos, her own secret visions, to the Curator, under a “pseudo-name.” But the Curator dismisses them as “the trite made flesh.” And Polly's spirit is broken. She burns her pictures and resigns herself to being the defender and admirer of the Curator.

And then one night, when Polly, deprived of her hobby and her visions, is just hanging around the Church Gallery, she again sees something she isn't supposed to see: she discovers that the woman she had revered, in fact worshiped as a god, is merely a desperate woman driven by the fact of her own mortality to dupe not only Polly but the rest of the world. In a rage, Polly disfigures the Curator who is then rushed to the hospital. Alone again, Polly regains her visionary power and conducts a black and white symphony in a final triumphant catharsis. And then just as Polly is finishing up her confession and we think the film is over, the story takes one more fantastical twist.



Director's Statement

I've Heard the Mermaids Singing was born from three simple ideas: for a character, a tone, and a point.

The character I wanted to draw was a “little” person, a quirky and vulnerable Innocent whose inept exterior belies a vast and vivid internal universe. This character, Polly, came to me full-blown and I loved her immediately.

The tone was to be quietly absurd, compassionate and, most of all, whimsical—just enough reality to recognize the emotions and just enough fairytale to let the mind fly.

And the point I wanted to make (not least to myself) can be stated most simply as “trust yourself.” I wanted to reaffirm and celebrate my belief that, as whoever it was said, “we do not see things as they are but as we are.” I wanted to make a warm-spirited anti-authority film. But most of all I wanted to make a film with Polly in it, one where she and I get to hear the mermaids singing.

About Director Patricia Rozema

Patricia Rozema's films, though remarkably varied in style and content, have always been marked by a humane and tender sensibility. Described as “so fresh, so funny, it amazes the heart” to “visually sensuous” and “wryly sophisticated,” her work invariably shows political prescience and deep humanity.

Born in Kingston, ON and raised in the small town of Sarnia, Ontario in a Dutch Calvinist immigrant family where television was severely restricted, Rozema didn't go to a movie theater until she was 16 years old. Rozema then studied philosophy at Calvin College and Seminary in Michigan (Paul Schrader's alma mater).

After a brief stint in television journalism, her first feature, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, a magical realist film about a socially inept secretary in an art gallery, made one of the most outstanding feature debuts in the history of Canadian cinema. At the 1987 Cannes Film Festival, in the Director's Fortnight, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* won the Prix de la Jeunesse and was runner-up for the Camera D'Or (best first feature) and sold to over 40 countries in one week. The film opened the Toronto International Film Festival and went on to win numerous awards including being ranked in TIFF's list of Top 10 Canadian Films of all time. Miramax released the film in the US to great acclaim.

Rozema directed *Six Gestures* as part of the *Yo-Yo Ma Inspired by Bach* series. It debuted at the Venice Film Festival. Rozema's film was nominated for a Grammy and was awarded a

PrimeTime Emmy, as well as a Golden Rose at the Rose d'Or Global Television Festival, the highest prize in television in Europe.

In 1995, she wrote and directed an interracial lesbian love story, *When Night is Falling*, which premiered in competition at the Berlin Film Festival and won festival audience prizes around the world. It remains a classic in the gay community.

Her next films were made outside of Canada. Rozema's elegant progressive adaptation of *Mansfield Park* (1999, UK, Miramax) with Harold Pinter, Jonny Lee Miller, Frances O'Connor, Alessandro Nivola, Lindsay Duncan, and Embeth Davitz included the then controversial inclusion of a sub-plot critiquing Western colonialism and how slavery was "paying for this tea party." Roger Ebert called it "uncommonly intelligent" and declared it the film that year most likely to receive an Oscar best picture nomination (he was, sadly, wrong). It opened the 1999 World Film Festival in Montreal and was featured as a Special Presentation at TIFF.

Her socially conscious children's film which predicted the US economic collapse, *Kit Kittredge: An American Girl* (2008) starred Abigail Breslin, Stanley Tucci, Julia Ormond, Chris O'Donnell, Joan Cusack, Wallace Shawn, Glenn Hedley, and Jane Krakowski. The film earned a Director's Guild Best Director nomination and New York Times critic A.O. Scott hailed the film as featuring one of the Top 5 Female Performances of the year.

In 2000, Rozema was invited to direct *Happy Days* (2000), part of an Irish production filming all of Samuel Beckett's plays which included Anthony Minghella, Neil Jordan, and David Mamet.

In 2009, Rozema co-wrote *Grey Gardens* for HBO starring Drew Barrymore and Jessica Lange. She received an Emmy nomination, a Writer's Guild nomination, and a PEN USA award. Other television credits include the pilot and several episodes of the ground-breaking sexually explicit HBO's *Tell Me You Love Me* (2008) with Jane Alexander, Adam Scott, Luke Kirby, and an episode of the critically acclaimed HBO series *In Treatment* (2010) starring Gabriel Byrne and Debra Winger.

In 2016, Rozema adapted and directed the feature film *Into the Forest* with Elliot Page and Evan Rachel Wood, Max Minghella, a deeply unnerving post-apocalyptic story about two sisters surviving in the forest when all power has gone out for reasons unknown. She directed two episodes of Amazon's Golden Globe-winning *Mozart in the Jungle* starring Gael García Bernal and Lola Kirke and an episode of CBC's *Anne with an E*.

Rozema's feature, *Mouthpiece* (2018), was adapted from a play of the same name by Amy Nostbakken and Norah Sadava. When Jodie Foster saw the play in Toronto she decided to bring it to Los Angeles and wrote "*Mouthpiece* touches on every part of the female experience from birth to death using dance, music, and wicked humour with just a bathtub for scenery. The result is a new kind of feminist language which ignites pure, intravenous emotion. It's impossible to describe and truly unforgettable."

In the film version, co-written with Rozema, Nostabkken and Sadava also star in this powerful, funny and highly original look into a women's conflicted psyche in the first 48 hours following her mother's sudden death. The film premiered as the Special Presentation Opening Night Film at the Toronto International Film Festival and was named one of TIFF's Top Ten Canadian Films of the year. Top critic Mark Kermode of the BBC compared it to Charlie Kaufman's work, calling it a "brilliantly experimental, engaging and empathetic film."

Most recently, she has directed the pilot for Netflix's hit series *Sex/Life*.

Rozema holds an honorary doctorate from the Ontario Academy of Art & Design University.

She is a member of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.



Interview with Patricia Rozema

From [Forest City Film Festival 2019](#)

I had made a short which was about a successful career woman trying to juggle her life and her love and then her work and I sort of thought, "Okay, successful career woman... I want to do an *unsuccessful* career woman!" That made me laugh and I just came up with this idea of Polly. That was the first title of it, *Polly*, and I felt so much affection for this person. She was just someone who had lived under everybody's radar, had so little affirmation in her life. She was a temporary secretary. I knew how she dressed right away. I almost felt that I needed to make the film for her because I loved her. I just loved that character so much.

Then I just looked around for money. I came from an entrepreneurial family so I knew what it was to just do one brick at a time. I was like, "Okay, where do I start? I need money. There's lots

of money in the world; where will I get mine?" and sort of figured it out. Atom Egoyan had made a film. I called him up and he told me, and I met some people and had coffees and got more and more names.

I wrote the script out on foolscap and there was new money in this country. Our country had been focused on documentaries for a long time and we shifted at that moment and I was just lucky. I was, as Malcolm Gladwell would say, the outlier of the time and I happened to be in with my film, and I got some money, \$275,000, which is sort of laughable. I didn't pay myself but I paid everyone else a pittance. I was the location scout on my bicycle, I did sound, whatever. Another friend who had no experience in filmmaking also came along and helped on the organizational level.

I found Sheila (McCarthy), who is gold. Sheila's amazing and she just had the seriousness but this sense of comedy. She was so mesmerizing to look at but unconventional. I always say that as soon as she came in I thought, "Wow, she's like a bird who's just hatched," and that was so fitting with the character. I've always liked the characters that are not society's hero or favorite. And I knew that I wanted to have a gay element in it, a queer element. It wouldn't have been called queer at the time, but I had to kind of hide that. I had to put sugar on the pill, because it was 1987 and that wasn't what people were doing. A lot of the people that helped me went on to become major artists in their own right, the cinematographer, and designers and everything.

Then I saw an application form for a thing called the Cannes Film Festival and I thought, "No one needs to know..." and just filled it out and sent it off and, lo and behold, I'm in! We emerged to show it at the center of film festivals and the biggest film festival in the world. I could hear them laughing. There was the English speakers' laugh first and then the French-speakers reading the subtitles and their laugh would come, and I thought "wow, they're really getting it." And they were quiet at the right moments and I was just starting to feel like, this is working. It's several thousand people in this theater. Then it was a standing ovation and applause for ten minutes and I thought, "Well, that went well. I should do this more often!"

Then there was a bidding war for the distributors. We didn't even have a sales agent. We had nobody to represent us. It was me and Alex Raffé, who was co-producing with me, and we just sort of stumbled our way through. We sold it to 40 countries and it still seems to have a life. It was really moving to have a film be responded to that profoundly and that universally. I thought I was more alone in the world and to find out that so many other people could laugh and cry in the same way somehow made me feel more connected to my species.

Everywhere I go since I've started I'm asked what is it like to be a female filmmaker and I always think, well, I've never been a male filmmaker so I can't really compare. I feel like I was an outsider on so many levels that that was just another one of the oddnesses about me. But it's funny; there might have been some kind of a self-denial going on because I can remember, I had this list of my ten top filmmakers when I was just starting out and there was not a woman on that list, and it never crossed my mind that that was unusual. I suddenly realized how few women there were in the world of filmmaking. I was always fairly instinctive about my choices of

having a female lead all the time. Also, being in Canada I think helped me. I think Canada is a more progressive nation. We've had major artists in our literary fiction who are women. I think the idea of a female artist is not as foreign here as it is in many other countries. We're open to a greater diversity earlier on.



About the Restoration

To commemorate Canada 150, this film was digitally restored by Library and Archives Canada, Cinematheque Quebecoise, The Cinematheque, and TIFF.

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Credits and Awards

Director: Patricia Rozema

Producer: Patricia Rozema, Alexandra Raffé

Executive Producer: Don Haig

Writer: Patricia Rozema

Cinematographer: Douglas Koch

Editor: Patricia Rozema

Sound: Gordon Thompson, Michele Moses

Music: Mark Korven

Cast: Paule Baillargeon, Ann-Marie McDonald, Brenda Kamino, John Evans, Richard Monette, Sheila McCarthy

Production Company: Vos Productions Ltd.

Filmed in Toronto, September 24, 1986—October 24, 1986

World Premiere: Cannes Film Festival, Director's Fortnight, May 10, 1987

Canadian Premiere (Toronto): Festival of Festivals (Toronto International Film Festival), September 1987

US Premiere/Theatrical Release (New York): 68th Street Playhouse, September 11, 1987

Primary Awards:

Cannes Film Festival, Prix de la jeunesse, Director's Fortnight, May 19, 1987

Best Actress: Sheila McCarthy, Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television (Genies)

Best Supporting Actress: Paule Baillargeon, Academy of Canadian Cinema and Television

A Top Ten Film of the 20th Century, *Maclean's*, January 2000

A TIFF Top Ten Canadian Film of All Time, 1993

"Top 25 Films That Changed Our Lives," Outfest (Los Angeles) Film Festival, 2007

