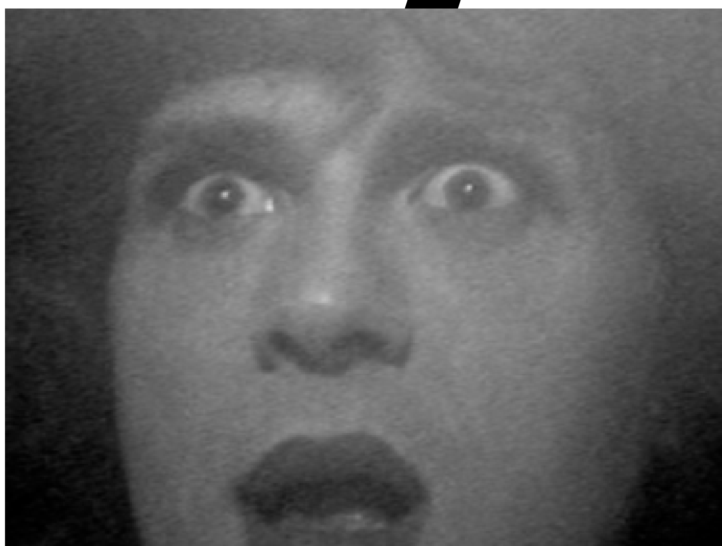
THRILLERS



Tuesday, October 30, 9pm

PROGRAM:

SALLY POTTER, *Thriller*, 1979
BRICE DELLSPERGER, selections from *Body Double*, 1995–2011

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES

From "Femicide Investigation: *Thriller*" (1980)

Thriller is the first feminist murder mystery. Working within a tradition defined by such filmmakers as Maya Deren and Yvonne Rainer, Sally Potter synthesizes fantasy, wit, and intellectual rigor into a fresh, startling work. Like Deren and Rainer, Potter began as a performer; like them, she has retained a sense of timing, of entertainment, and of the audience (she still performs, in fact, as a member of the Feminist Improvising Group of musicians).

A most unlikely murder mystery, *Thriller* is based on the Puccini opera *La Bohème*. Yet by its example, *Thriller* points to the vast quantity of female-murdered mysteries waiting for filmmakers with the imagination to decode them. The film opens with the screen black and the timeless music of *La Bohème* filling the space. The first image is that of a contemporary woman laughing hysterically in a bare, unfurnished space, like an attic or garret. The dissolve to a period production of *La Bohème* documented by a still photograph suggests that the bare space is the world of the opera stripped of its props and fantasies, reduced to its basics. It is, in other words, the scene of the crime; in keeping with this realization, the music of *La Bohème* is interrupted by shrill, anxious strains from the *Psycho* shower scene. Again, there are still shots of the woman, her leg, her eye gazing into a mirror. In a heavily accented voice, she begins to speak, while she stares into the mirror as into a reverie, searching for clues, trying to discover what really occurred at that moment of death so many years before. This woman, with her broken English and close-cropped hair and obviously contemporary appearance, is Mimi. Here in the rough, unfinished space of the film, she inhabits the terrain of creation. Not the original Creation, not God's. Rather, she is stalking the hardly less idealized specter of the male artist and excavating the hardly less mythologized process by which art is created.

For those not knowledgeable in opera matters, it comes as some relief when Potter breaks with the hallowed codes of avant-garde ambiguities to tell straight out the "story" of this opera in four acts. Set in Paris in 1830*, La Bohème* describes the bohemian life of four poor artists sharing a studio. The central theme is the love affair between one of the artists, Rodolpho, and a poor seamstress, Mimi, who lives in the same building and dies of consumption at the finale. Musetta, the "bad girl" with whom the other artists consort, brings the dying Mimi back to Rodolpho for the last act. Potter economically suggests the terms of the story through the use of stills from various lavish productions of the opera; her focus is on meaning rather than spectacle. "Can these be the facts?" muses the resurrected Mimi of the film. "Was that the story of my life? Can this be the story of my death?" As the strains of *Psycho* return, Mimi settles in front of the mirror to await a clue. This simple scene of the woman, archetypically staring into a mirror in a room stripped of all elaboration, is repeated at intervals throughout the film. It has all the power of a true symbol, evocative and transcendent. Maya Deren's dangerous search for identity in *Meshes of the Afternoon* comes immediately to mind, as does *Psycho's* ending, with its resolution of false identity and its exposure of the male appropriation of female identity for his own ends. Again and again, Mimi searches the mirror, as Potter moves through the structure of a suspense movie, enlivening her own theoretical search with all the magic and intensity of a séance.

For a long time in feminist filmmaking and film criticism, there has been an apparent rift between works concerned with the representation of women in film and those concerned with the oppression of women in actual society. *Thriller* ingeniously connects the two issues; it shows how smoothly male artists manipulating woman's image naturalize and obscure the manipulation in women's lives. As a result, *Thriller* goes farther than many feminist films. It not only reclaims the past, not only rereads the official history in terms of the present, but also dares to imagine the future. Many avant-garde films dealing with feminist themes have involved deconstruction—the dismantling of oppressive cinematic machinery. *Thriller* begins the work of reconstruction in which the personae and materials that once were invisible, omitted, or unspoken become inevitable and get to play out their own evolution on the screen.

The murder suspense story is an appropriate structure. Mimi sifts through the opera's data (people, places, suspicious events, crucial scenes), much as a private eye might in the early stages of a murder investigation. Each retelling of *La Bohème* unearths different sets of implications and clues. Other films have used repetition. In *Celine and Julie Go Boating,* for instance, the heroines return again and again to a suspicious fiction in an attempt to find clues and influence the outcome. Though their awareness progresses, the fiction remains relatively unchanged. In *Thriller*, however, the locus of concern shifts again and again as different perspectives are brought to bear upon it. This is because Potter insists on Mimi's own consciousness and point of view as the only guiding force. The Mimi of the opera is a working-class woman; the Mimi of the film (Colette Laffont) is a foreigner, in keeping with Potter's shift to an English location, and furthermore, she is Black. Her point of view, therefore, can only expose the opera's overwhelming deceptions in dealing with the material of her life. It is not necessary for Mimi to be an exceptional woman for her to achieve a correct analysis of the opera. On the contrary, this analysis is the inevitable consequence of Potter's staged meeting between the "real" Mimi and the opera's. By presenting such a dialectic, Potter radicalizes the previous boundaries of avant-garde art: she assumes the genius of her public.

Excerpted with permission from *Chick Flicks: Theories and Memories of the Feminist Film Movement* (Duke University Press, 1998)

Years before "Thriller" became synonymous with Michael Jackson's zombie dance music video, and before Puccini's opera *La Bohème* spawned the copycat Broadway musical *Rent* set in the AIDS era, Sally Potter's film *Thriller* secured its place as a classic of feminist cinema. Pulling no punches, *Thriller* gets in the ring with Puccini's *La Bohème*, pitting its protagonist Mimi toe to toe with the misogyny of opera's narrative logic that dictates the heroine's tragic demise. Appropriating the Hollywood genre of the film noir thriller, Potter transforms the source code into a murder mystery: Why do we get pleasure from the woman's death and suffering? *Was I murdered?* asks Mimi, speaking instead of singing. The film gives a feminist voice to the opera's doomed heroine, asking whodunnit about her own fate.

Sally Potter made *Thriller* in England in 1979, following on a series of short experimental films and early in a career that would later produce the celebrated filmic interpretation of Virginia Woolf's gender-bending novel *Orlando* (1992), starring Tilda Swinton, and *The Tango Lesson* (1997), in which Potter herself acts opposite tango legend Pablo Veron. Both of these feature films blossomed from the seeds of innovative narrative and gender fluidity planted with *Thriller*. Like her later films, *Thriller* both marshals critical strategies to reinterpret a canonical text, and is imbued with Potter's training as a dancer.

Thriller re-imagines the story and upends the staging of *La Bohème*, one of the most popular operas of all time, composed by Giacomo Puccini with a libretto in Italian, which debuted in Torino in 1896. The opera adapted stories titled *Scènes de la vie de bohème* romanticizing the life of artists in the Latin Quarter of Paris, published in France the 1840s. Celebrated sopranos from Montserrat Caballé to Anna Nebtrenko shaped the role of ill-fated seamstress Mimi in the century since diva Nellie Melba sang the role at the New York debut of *La Bohème* at the Metropolitan Opera in 1900. The story of down and out artsy Left Bank bohemians continues to appeal: witness the 2001 film *Moulin Rouge,* based on the original story, and the musical *Rent*, based on the opera. Yet Sally Potter's earlier critical intervention is way more incisive than any of the popular adaptations.

Sketching the skeleton of the opera is helpful to grasping Potter's subversion. Four bohemians are hanging out in their cold attic loft in Paris on Christmas Eve, burning manuscripts to keep warm as the landlord comes a-knocking for the rent. Writer Rodolfo stays behind while his buddies go out for a night on the town. Mimi, a poor young seamstress, knocks on his door. Her candle had gone out. She dropped her keys. Rodolfo finds her keys, entreats her to visit. She is pale and sick. They fall in love, singing a passionate duet. Meanwhile, in a lively cafe scene, the bohemians party with bad girl Musetta. By Act Three, Rodolfo abandons Mimi. He cannot bear to see her ill. Coughing and feverish, she is sick with consumption. In the final act, Mimi dies, dramatically. Rodolfo weeps heroically over her body. *Fin*.

Like many operatic heroines, Mimi succumbs to a tragic end, indicative of the misogynist bent of many if not most opera narratives. As philosopher Catherine Clément argued in a book published in France the same year that Potter made *Thriller*, opera is the "undoing of women."[1] Floria Tosca in Verdi's *Tosca*, Cio-Cio-San in Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*, Lucia in *Lucia de Lammermoor*, Carmen, Isolde, Desdemona in Verdi's *Othello*, Violetta in *La Traviata* – all perish before the curtain falls, either by murder or driven to suicide or madness, their death or demise culturally constructed as a necessary resolution of the opera's narrative arc.

Tapping conventions of Hollywood film noir, Potter conducts an undressing and unpacking of *La Bohème*, and by extension, critiques representations of woman as victim. At the opening of *Thriller*, a musical overture melds audio of the 1938 La Scala recording of *La Bohème*'s deathbed crescendo with the unnerving screeching sounds of the shower scene of Hitchcock's *Psycho*. From the start—a film noir murder mystery is announced. Investigating the mystery is Potter's updated Mimi (Colette Laffont), a modern woman of African descent who speaks English with a heavy French accent. Mimi probes: "I'm trying to remember, to understand. There were some bodies on the floor. One of them is mine. Did I die? Was I murdered? If so, who killed me, and why?"

The film quickly relates the opera's narrative in bare bones voice over, ending with "Mimi dies." Refusing to accept her fate, Mimi's voice asks, "Can these be the facts? ... Is this the story of my life? Was that the story of my death?" Images of bodies on the floor are paired with more *Psycho* shower scene screeches (from Bernard Herrmann's 1960 soundtrack score) and dramatic shadows in the black and white 16mm cinematography, shot by Potter. Effect: Crime scene. Mimi looks in the mirror for clues. Clue #1: she realizes that Rodolfo hid her key to prolong her visit, that is, to keep her from leaving (which to contemporary ears may strike a chord of domestic violence or date rape, *n'est-ce pas*?). Clue #2: Another woman flits through film's stage-like setting. The visual narrative first is built up of still photos—calling to mind Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* photos from the late 1970s and early 80s, which similarly deconstructed the representation of women in cultural production—sequenced in slow animation. Mimi deduces: the male bohemians were *making something* in their cold studio, maybe art, perhaps even plotting an opera. Mimi re-inscribes herself as the subject of the plot instead of its object. "Would I have preferred to be the hero?" she asks as the film enacts a gender inversion, with Mimi balletically lifting a tutu-clad Rodolfo. Throughout the film, dance provides a language of gesture that complements or contradicts the voice-over or on-screen narration.

At the analytical crux of the film, Mimi reveals in the third person that "she was searching for a theory that would explain her life... her death." But this quest for theory distracts her as well. She reads Mallarmé and Marx aloud in French from a thick book of theory, while the other woman, Musetta, the bad girl who didn't die, is carried off stage in an arabesque. "Was she the victim also?" A fleeting seductive caress is exchanged between them.

Repetition drills down to hidden layers of meaning. When Mimi curtly retells *La Bohème* a second time, we now hear a class-based analysis of Mimi's status as producer. Mimi is recast as "a flower maker sewing satin flowers...often until the early hours with a cold and a candle as companions. *They* produce stories to disguise how I must produce their goods." At this point, Potter inserts historic photos of needlewomen from England's labor history museum. Mimi dies of the disease then called *consumption*—tuberculosis, an endemic infectious disease of the urban poor in the 19th and ^{20th} centuries, causing nearly 1 in 4 deaths in Europe in the 1800s prior to the advent of antibiotics and a vaccine. I posit that *Thriller* leads us to see that Mimi dies not of consumption but of *production*—forced to produce the endless satin flowers whose scent she cannot enjoy, as well as to produce the generative engine of the opera's logic through her own death.

But: "What if I hadn't died?" *Thriller*'s Mimi provides a realistic answer: "Without my death, my love with Rodolfo might have bore children. I would have become a mother. I would have had to work even harder to give them food ... And if they had let me live, I would have become an old woman and an old seamstress would not be considered the proper subject of a love story." The film deftly unpacks how the heroine is required to be young, single, and vulnerable with a death that serves the interests of the hero's grief-fueled self-posturing, fulfilling patriarchy's skewed logic.

Verdict? "Yes, it was murder," Mimi's heavy French accent declares with solemn finality. The other, shadowy loss brought to light is of Musetta (Rose English), whose pale white face repeatedly lurks in the mirror or is seen carried off in a frozen arabesque by the two male artists. "We never got to know each other. We could have loved each other." As the imaginary curtain drops on *Thriller*, Mimi and Musetta embrace silently in the closing shot, a glimmer of an alternate—queer, revisionist, utopian—vision of the opera's ending.

Thriller's release in 1980 marked the confluence of two important strands of critical film culture in the UK: structuralist film and feminist analysis of the gaze in cinema (and by extension, societal power relations). Key works of the era, such as Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977), tackled patriarchy in a theoretically rigorous investigation steeped in psychoanalysis and in countercurrent to women's representation for visual pleasure. Echoing the feminist film theorists of its moment yet relevant today, *Thriller* critiques the stereotype of women as passive victim utilizing 1980s-vintage postmodernist appropriation and deconstruction. In a mélange of borrowed and staged imagery, *mise-en-scène*, strategic sound design, dance-influenced staging, and theory, Potter's cinematic apparition rewrites *La Bohème* as feminist film noir.

1 Catherine Clement, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women [*1979]. Translated by Betsy Wing, University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

ELISABETH KLEY

In 1995, Brice Dellsperger began recreating portions of iconic movies for a project called *Body Double* that now numbers 27 films. Sources have included Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* and *Blow Out,* David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive,* Ken Russell's *Women in Love* and Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*. Original scripts are followed, line by line and gesture by gesture, but replacement performers, often in drag, are substituted for original characters of either sex, turning them into artificial constructs hovering between male and female. Dramas between separate individuals of differing gender are thus turned into solitary dialogues among ambigously gendered selves. Like a hall of mirrors, popular culture's artificiality reflects endlessly back upon itself. The results are exquisitely skewed reflections of their sources, as if gender-scrambling mirrors have distorted them.

Body Double 15 (2001), for example, hones in on an ambiguous and uncharacteristically elegiac sequence from De Palma's *Dressed to Kill*. In the original, a well-dressed woman resting on a bench during an afternoon visit to the Metropolitan Museum is joined by a man wearing sunglasses. She removes her glove to reveal a wedding ring, and he gets up and leaves. Dropping the glove, she follows him through room after room until he disappears. A hand wearing her glove taps her on the shoulder – suddenly it's her turn to be pursued. Lost, she raises her hand towards a floor plan, and realizes her glove is gone. She returns to the bench, remembers the gloved hand on her shoulder, and seeks him again. Outside, she sees a hand idly flapping her glove outside the window of a taxi. When she approaches, he pulls her into the car.

Are they strangers or lovers playing an elaborate kinky game? We never can be sure. Without dialogue, we experience their encounter through music, alternating between her point of view and close-ups of emotions passing over her face. After a tryst in a fancy apartment, she discovers a letter notifying her lover that he has a venereal disease. Next, she is brutally slashed to death in the elevator. The killer turns out to be her own psychiatrist, whose split personality drives him to disguise himself as a woman and kill the women his male side desires. For both killer and victim, a female identity is clearly very hazardous.

In Dellsperger's version (set to the original music), a gentler interaction takes place: an androgynous conversation between a dual-sexed pair of twins. Seen from the rear, Dellsberger enters a German museum, in ladylike makeup, clothing and heels. Seated on a bench in front of series of bright monochrome prints, he writes in a notebook and impatiently looks around. His double soon appears, identically dressed, and a tender yet farcical pursuit ensues. Throughout the chase, the camera seems to waver. Taking on Dellsperger's drag identity, we see through this unsteady eye, and experience a dreamlike sensation of floating erratically through the museum, never quite having our feet on the ground. De Palma's chase between male and female, with its consequences fraught with violence and fear, is replaced by a fragmentary circular narrative that follows a person of ambiguous gender, pursuing him or herself through a labyrinth of rooms.

Body doubles negate the idea of essential selves, as does the transvestite's contrived persona. Standing in for valuable people in dangerous situations—decoys guarding politicians against assassination, substitutes for movie stars in stunts and sex scenes—body doubles prevent things from happening to celebrities. Whatever happens, happens to nobody, but in this case, nothing happens. Narrative disappears. Lightly humorous, but slightly uncanny, Dellsperger enacts a delicately open-ended romance between a pair of illusory selves. Nobody is in love with its double, with whom it never catches up. The museum is never escaped, and the affair remains unconsumated.

Like all of the works in the series, the more frightening *Body Double 12* (1997) can be viewed as a cinematic doppelgänger for the lurid excerpt from de Palma's *Blow Out* it reproduces. The original's plot aptly features a series of interchangeable murders set up to make it seem that the final execution is the work of a serial killer rather than the elimination of a witness to another crime.

The famous strangulation scene is recreated on three channels that are seamlessly connected side by side. Three hookers wearing short dresses (played by three different men in drag) are each seen entering railway station bathroom cubicles, shadowed by slightly more masculine doubles dressed in raincoats. As the femmes brush their teeth (to freshen up after a just-finished blow job), the butches creep up to peer over walls, draw thin metal wires from their wristwatches, and garotte their other selves. In the final shot, three pairs of high heels kicking in final death throes are visible underneath the closed stall doors, toes pointed as they would be in a ballet. An already violent sequence is lifted to a crescendo of vaudeville-tinged horror.

Jean-Luc Verna, the peformer on the right, carries disguise even further by hiding his distinctive facial tattoos and piercings under a thick layer of makeup. More recenly, Verna has played every character in *Body Double X* (2000) and *Body Double 22 (After Eyes Wide Shut)* (2007-2010). Seen in various wigs, with and without prosthetic breasts, his tattoos and piercings visible or hidden, Verna's singular, insistently bizarre identity ultimately turns into a flamboyantly anonymous illusion. Dellsperger thus exposes cinema's fakery, making contrivance apparent while blasting Kubrick's gender distinctions to smithereens.

Drag becomes uncanny when relationships between faces and costumes don't jibe with what we are taught to expect, and Verna's extreme physical transformations defy the societal restrictions at the heart of mainstream films. Remaking artifacts of popular culture, Dellsperger exposes how ridiculous gendered behavior can be. At the same time, he conjures up a sense of endless isolation, plunging us into nightmares where every participant represents the dreamer and the mirror cannot be escaped.

This piece was adapted from essays originally published in *Performing Arts Journal* and *Artnet Magazine.*

Brice Dellsperger began his *Body Double* series in 1995 with meticulously faithful, if low budget, remakes of iconic scenes from 1980s Brian De Palma films, playing all the roles, often in drag. The series takes its name from the 1984 Brian De Palma film, *Body Double*, itself a reworking of scenes and motifs from previous De Palma films *Blow Out* and *Dressed to Kill*, as well as the Hitchcock films *Vertigo* and *Rear Window*. Even these earlier De Palma films may be seen as remakes of a kind, *Blow Out* a remake of both *Blow Up* and *The Conversation* and *Dressed to Kill* another revision of Hitchcockian themes and motifs from *Vertigo* and *Rear Window*. Indeed, De Palma, much like Dellsperger, is known for his remakes—"rip-offs" or "cheap imitations" in the view of detractors, such as Andrew Sarris, for supporters like Pauline Kael or J. Hoberman, clever recalculations of the grammar of Classical Hollywood, that of Hitchcock in particular. Dellsperger treatments of these De Palma films, then, are not just remakes, but remakes of remakes. Even when Dellsperger turns to the work of other filmmakers, it is typically to scenes that repeat well-worn cinematic conventions and clichés, most of them voyeuristic spectacles of sex and violence: the film noir iconography of David Lynch, the campfire romance of *My Own Private Idaho*, or the Hammer Horror theatrics of *Eyes Wide Shut* and its campy orgy scenes, for instance. The performance of gender in one of these scenes is, like the remake itself, an imitation of an imitation, a copy of a copy.

But these *Body Double* remakes are not just copies. They are bad copies. In early *Body Double* titles, Dellsperger plays all the roles himself, usually in drag. In later titles, other performers appear. Typically just one performer takes on all the roles in a scene, male and female, making sharply gendered distinctions suddenly ambiguous. Rather than the "realness" of drag, these disidentificatory performances are marked by a giddily unreal quality. The DIY blue-screen effects, lip synching, and low budget sets only add to this unreal effect. In this aesthetic of the bad or failed copy, Dellsperger follows a path blazed by queer artists like Jack Smith, who, for José Esteban Muñoz, helped forge a utopian aesthetic of "queer failure" and "queer virtuosity." Like the "dime-store glitter that became diamond dust" and the "cheap polyester transformed into silken veils" in the films of Jack Smith, the cheapness of the sets or special effects, the failure of the performers to properly embody their gender roles in Dellsperger remakes simultaneously attest to the failure of the queer spectator and the queer artist within the mainstream and a heroic virtuosity in the face of this failure.[1]

A *tour de force* of queer failure and queer virtuosity, *Body Double 17* takes on the Bang Bang Bar sequence from *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me*. In the David Lynch film, blonde bad girl Laura Palmer leads her best friend, wholesome brunette Donna, to a roadhouse across the border for a night of drunken debauchery. Lynch continually and obsessively reworks these good girl and bad girl and blonde and brunette motifs, Hollywood clichés, throughout his films. Dellsperger casts two sisters, Morgane Rousseau and Gwen Roch, almost identical in appearance, in both roles. In fact, between them, the two sisters play all the roles, from the eccentric, spinsterish Log Lady to fat, violent, and oversexed French Canadian bartender, Jacques. (A quick cutaway shot even reveals one of the sisters posing as Laura Palmer in her iconic high school senior portrait.) In the Lynch version, the Bang Bang Bar is a hellish, lawless place, the kind of nightmarish site of unrestrained violence and sexual aggression that reappears throughout his work. In *Body Double 17*, its two sisters playing all the parts, from the strippers to the hypermasculine sexual aggressors lurking throughout the bar to singer Julee Cruise and every member of her prodigious backup band, the Bang Bang Bar looks like a lesbian dive and like a lot more fun. Floating in front of a blue-screened background ripped off from the Lynch film, in crunchy video, the sisters run riot through these scenes, the queer art of failure at its most dizzyingly utopian.

1 José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity,* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 169.

DIRTY LOOKS is a roaming series held on the last Wednesday of the month. Curated by Bradford Nordeen, Dirty Looks is a screening series designed to trace contemporary queer aesthetics through historical works, presenting quintessential GLBT film and video alongside up-and-coming artists and filmmakers. A salon of influences, Dirty Looks is an open platform for inquiry, discussion and debate.

"Deliver us from Daddy! Dirty Looks sets its sights on artist film and video that pierces dominant narratives, wanders with deviant eyes or captures the counter in salacious glares."

SALLY POTTER directed her first feature, *The Gold Diggers,* starring Julie Christie, in 1983. Potter then made a short, *The London Story,* and several documentaries before the internationally acclaimed and multi-award winning *Orlando* (1992), starring Tilda Swinton, which Potter adapted from the classic Virginia Woolf novel. This was followed by *The Tango Lesson* (1996) and *The Man Who Cried* (2000), starring Christina Ricci, Johnny Depp and Cate Blanchet. In 2004 Potter made *Yes,* starring Joan Allen, Simon Abkarian, and Sam Neill. *Rage* (2009), stars Judi Dench, Jude Law, Steve Buscemi, Simon Abkarian and Dianne Wiest and was the first film to premiere simultaneously in cinemas and on mobile phones. Her most recent feature, *Ginger & Rosa* (2012), stars Annette Bening, Christina Hendricks, and Elle Fanning.

BRICE DELLSPERGER was born in 1972 in Cannes, France. After studying fine arts for five years in Nice Villa Arson, he moved to Paris where he has lived and worked as a visual artist since 1995 and as a teacher at ENSAD since 2003. He is represented by galleries Air de Paris (Paris) and Team Gallery (New York). Dellsperger works have been exhibited in various locations such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York and Centre Pompidou in Paris, and in various countries, including Brazil, Germany, UK, Spain, Italy, Turkey, and Japan. His work is included in a number of prominent public collections including that of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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