



**BIG SCREEN CLASSICS**

# The Tango Lesson

The director and star of *The Tango Lesson*, Sally Potter, has described her film as one which ‘exists, perilously, on the knife edge between reality and fiction’. Potter’s previous feature *Orlando* (based on a Virginia Woolf novel which was part fictionalised biography, part historical time-travel and part love letter) also balanced on this knife edge, but the fact that it was a literary adaptation made the combination safer. By contrast, *The Tango Lesson*, based on real experiences from Potter’s life, is a significant personal risk, one intensified by Potter’s decision to play herself on screen.

Shot mostly in exquisite black and white by veteran cinematographer Robby Müller, it dramatises and documents Potter’s fascination with the Argentinian tango. The film shows her single minded desire to learn the dance and her fluctuating emotional relationship with her teacher/partner Pablo Veron (a real-life tango star, also playing himself) who comes across as macho, predictably over-accustomed to adulation, and prone to giving ego-bruising criticism of the older, female Potter. Given Potter’s near-constant presence on screen in an allegedly autobiographical film, *The Tango Lesson* will inevitably be rejected by some viewers and critics as self-indulgent. But for a filmmaker like Potter who has never marketed herself as a media or screen personality, the experience must have been closer to self-exposure. Miraculously, she transforms this highly personal material and uses her ambiguous screen presence (is it Potter we are watching, or a construction named ‘Sally Potter’?) well to make a film which is mostly intriguing and affecting. This has the same light touch, the same playfulness about gender relations and the magical aura which made *Orlando* a pleasure. The film’s weaknesses (of which the chummy casting of poet Heathcote Williams as an unlikely builder is one) are generally minor, although the ‘happy ending’, in which Potter serenades Pablo by the Buenos Aires docks, is not just cheesy but unsatisfying.

To criticise *The Tango Lesson* in such terms, though, misses the point. Its real richness lies in the multi-layered themes which Potter’s immersion in the dance allows her to explore. She has written that the film is about: ‘the attraction of opposites: between Anglo-Saxon and Latin-American cultures; between male and female; between the watcher and watched and about power’. Obviously, *The Tango Lesson* is also about the imbalance of power between man and woman – a theme for which the tango itself stands as a potent metaphor. To be a satisfactory tango partner, a woman must learn to ‘do nothing’, to follow. When Sally, used to taking charge as a film director, fails to achieve this passivity, Pablo rages that she has ‘destroyed his freedom to move.’ But, more interestingly, *The Tango Lesson* is also an exploration of the relationships between pleasure and work, life and art. Rather than dramatising the distance between rehearsal and performance, inspiration and artefact, *The Tango Lesson* constantly continuity-edits them together. Crucially, Pablo’s insistence that personal and professional relationships should be kept distinct results in the disintegration of his relationship with Sally.

Thus our uncertainty about whether Potter’s presence on screen is personal or professional, and the related ‘problem’ the film seems to pose – why, some

might ask, has Potter pursued this personal project rather than a more mainstream movie? – are exactly the subjects *The Tango Lesson* seeks to explore. Potter's dramatisation in the film of her dissatisfaction with *Rage*, the film project she abandoned in real life, and with her abortive encounter with Hollywood executives, provocatively suggests that her powerlessness as a woman and tango amateur are not so different from her position in an industry in which films and directors are fundamentally commodities. With ironic aptness, *The Tango Lesson*'s only colour sequences (highly reminiscent of *Orlando*'s lavish spectacle) are imagined glimpses from this parallel film which wasn't made. For those who wonder why Potter has followed *Orlando* with a film which seems to retreat from the mainstream – while recalling the more stringent political critiques of her earlier work – *The Tango Lesson* offers its own answer.

**Claire Monk, *Sight and Sound*, December 1997**

*Orlando* received Oscar nominations and many awards worldwide, and Sally Potter became a hot property. The film's visual panache, the minimalist exuberance of a screenplay that neatly compressed an unwieldy novel, and its witty and highly cinematic solutions to the novel's challenges elicited seductive offers of music videos and studio deals. Sally, the protagonist of Potter's next film *The Tango Lesson* (1997), finds herself in the same position: courted by Hollywood, she starts work on a murder-mystery screenplay set in the glamorous world of fashion. Little glimpses of this potential film appear in vivid Technicolor, contrasting Sally's inner eye with the velvety black and white of her daily reality of cleaning, location recces and dealing with cowboy builders.

Yet Sally's *Eyes of Laura Mars*-style project gets sidelined, first by her growing interest in tango – and in tanguero Pablo Veron – and then by pressure from its producers to corral her film into Hollywood conformity. The tango lesson, it turns out, springs not from success but from failure: after fighting with the producers and with Pablo, Sally decides to make a film where she is, in Buenos Aires, with what she has to hand. In a wonderful sequence (pasted since on every dance reality show), Sally, Pablo and two other tangueros join in a fluid four-person dance, charted by a single long take through an empty, light-filled warehouse. It's a scene whose joyous use of music and movement combines with a deep sense of film history.

Potter's audacity is reflected in the decision to cast herself as Sally. Her bravura performance, especially in the tango sequences, parallels the complex narrative interplay, via which the film Sally wants to make gradually meshes with the film we're watching. Her acting and dancing abilities allow Potter to be the most self-sufficient of auteurs – she has also choreographed, sung and even composed for her films.

**Sophie Mayer, *Sight & Sound*, January 2010**

**The Tango Lesson**

*Director:* Sally Potter  
*Production Companies:* Adventure Pictures, OKCK Films, PIE, Nippon Film Development & Finance, Imagica, Pandora Filmproduktion, Sigma Films  
*Participation:* Arts Council of England, European Co-Production Fund, Eurimages Conseil de l’europe, Medien- und Filmgesellschaft Baden-Württemberg, NPS Televisie, Stichting Co-productiefonds Binnenlandse Omroep  
*Supported by:* National Lottery through the Arts Council of England  
*Producer:* Christopher Sheppard  
*Buenos Aires Line Producer:* Oscar Kramer  
*France Co-producer:* Simona Benzakein  
*Argentina Co-producer:* Oscar Kramer, Christian Keller Sarmiento  
*Associate Producers:* Diane Gelon, Cat Villiers  
*Production Co-ordinator:* Roanne Moore  
*Buenos Aires Production Co-ordinator:* Barbara Factorovich  
*Paris Production Co-ordinators:* Marie-Laure Compain, Florence Forney  
*Paris Production Manager:* Philippe Besnier  
*Buenos Aires Production Manager:* Diana Frey  
*Paris Location Managers:* Eric Vidart-Loeb, Denise Cassotti  
*Buenos Aires Location Manager:* Alberto Hasse  
*1st Assistant Director:* Waldo Roeg  
*Paris 1st Assistant Director:* Jérôme Borenstein  
*Paris 3rd Assistant Director:* Oona Seiler  
*Buenos Aires 1st Assistant Director:* Carlos Gil  
*Buenos Aires 2nd Assistant Director:* Rodrigo Carvajal  
*Buenos Aires 3rd Assistant Director:* Nicolas Cubria  
*London 2nd Assistant Director:* Mel Nortcliffe  
*Script Supervisor:* Penny Eyles  
*Casting Director:* Irene Lamb  
*Paris Casting Director:* Frédérique Moidon  
*Paris Models Casting Director:* Prudence Harington  
*Story Editor:* Walter Donohue  
*Screenplay:* Sally Potter

*Director of Photography:* Robby Müller  
*Paris Steadicam Operator:* Jörg Widmer  
*Buenos Aires Steadicam Operator:* Gustavo Mosquera  
*Paris Special Effects Supervisor:* Christian Talenton  
*Buenos Aire Special Effects Supervisor:* Tom Cundom  
*Editor:* Hervé Schneid  
*Production Designer:* Carlos Conti  
*Buenos Aires Art Director:* Graciela Oderigo  
*Buenos Aires Sculptor:* Adriana Maestri  
*Costume Designer:* Paul Minter  
*Wardrobe Supervisor:* Michael Weldon  
*Make-up Artists:* Thi-Loan Nguyen, Chantal Léothier  
*Wigs:* Peter King  
*Paris Hairdresser:* Christian Gruau  
*Buenos Aires Hairdresser:* Ricardo Fassan  
*Titles:* Ranch Associates, Steve Masters  
*Optical Effects:* Peerless Camera Company  
*Music:* Sally Potter  
*With the participation of:* Fred Frith  
*Ondes Martenot Music Performed by:* Thomas Bloch  
*Guitars, Violins Music Performed by:* Cristal Bachet, Fred Frith  
*Vocals Music Performed by:* Sally Potter  
*Music Supervisors:* Ivan Chandler, Musicalities  
*[Music] Recording Engineer:* Franck Lebon  
*Choreography:* Pablo Veron  
*Buenos Aires Additional Choreography:* Gustavo Naveira, Fabian Salas, Carlos Copello  
*Sound:* Jean-Paul Mugel, Gérard Hardy  
*Re-recording Mixer:* Robin O’Donoghue  
*ADR Mixer:* Gilles Missir  
*ADR Editors:* Patrice Raffi, Corinne Raffi  
*Foley Artist:* Jean-Pierre Lelong  
*Foley Mixer:* Jacques Thomas-Gérard  
*Paris Stunt Supervisor:* Patrick Cauderlier  
*Paris Stunt Woman:* Pascaline Girardot  
*Script Translation:* Elie Robert-Nicoud

**CAST**

Sally Potter (*Sally*)  
Pablo Veron (*Pablo*)  
Gustavo Naveira (*Gustavo*)  
Fabian Salas (*Fabian*)  
David Toole (*fashion designer*)  
Carolina lotti (*Pablo’s partner*)  
Carlos Copello (*Carlos*)  
Peter Eyre (*English tango fan*)  
Heathcote Williams (*builder*)  
Morgane Maugran (*red model*)  
Geraldine Maillet (*yellow model*)  
Katerina Mechera (*blue model*)  
George Yiasoumi (*photographer*)  
Michele Parent, Claudine Mavros, Monique Couturier (*seamstresses*)  
Matthew Hawkins, Simon Worgan (*bodyguards*)  
Zobeida, Orazio Massaro, Anne Fassio, Guillaume Gallienne, Michel Andre, Flaminio Corcos (*Pablo’s friends*)  
Howard Lee (*man at tea dance*)  
Juan José Czalkin (*waiter*)  
Horacio Marassi (*shoe man*)  
David Derman, Oscar Dante Lorenzo, Omar Vega (*salon dancers*)  
Olga Besio (*Olga*)  
Cantilo Pena (*hotel porter*)  
Maria Noel, Fabian Stratas, Gregory Dayton (*movie executives*)  
Emmanuelle Tertipis (*woman in dressing room*)  
Ruben Orlando Di Napoli (*Master of Ceremonies*)  
Tito Haas (*taxi driver*)

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