

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH PATRICIA ROZEMA

Canadian director Patricia Rozema made her name with the quirky, contemporary independent features *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* and *When Night Is Falling*. She changed direction with the period film *Mansfield Park*, an adaptation of Jane Austen's most difficult novel. "It's a tangled and dark work with a kind of atmosphere of sexuality and menace in the whole," [should it say "on the whole"?] says Rozema, as she talks candidly and intelligently about how she created a film that brought a modern perspective to its interpretation of the Jane Austen novel, while remaining true to the spirit of the book.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of *Mansfield Park*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (November 9, 1999):

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome Patricia Rozema. (Applause)

First, I want to ask you about this novel. Jane Austen published six novels, which pretty much have all been turned into films, I think, with the exception of *Northanger Abbey*, which is coming out as a film. But this novel [*Mansfield Park*] was, at the time, considered one of her controversial works, and hasn't been done as a feature film. So could you talk a little bit about how the book stands in relation to the rest of her work and sort of why it hasn't been done before.

ROZEMA: It's very different from her other novels. I guess it's less accessible. That's largely because of a choice she made—and it was very clearly a choice—to make Fanny Price sort of insufferable. Not allowed to say that, am I? No. It really was a choice, and it's hard to know exactly what the reason was for her choice. I mean, it's kind of divided scholars for years, and it's a completely interesting debate. I read the novel, and it made me rush to sort of learn more about the author because I thought, "Now why—" you know, especially Jane Austen, who's capable of unbelievably engaging, scintillating sort of main characters—"why would she choose to do this? And I can't say that I have a complete answer to that. In fact, in the whole novel, it's quite difficult to know exactly what the author's relationship is to the work, which makes it a bit—completely

interesting.

The BBC did a several-part version of *Mansfield Park* in 1975, and it's a sort of very literal translation to the screen, I guess. And this isn't.

SCHWARTZ: Yeah, it's not correct to call this a straight adaptation. There are changes in the character, and there's also—you've incorporated aspects of Jane Austen's life and her own letters and her writings. So, could you talk about how you decided to approach...

ROZEMA: I think the changes are mostly, in my mind, additions. Like, "insufferable" is perhaps a strong word. But she's [Fanny is] very sort of thinly drawn, and you can't quite know what she thinks most of the time in the novel. But it's a tangled and dark work with a kind of atmosphere of sexuality and menace in the whole—the establishment is actually dubious, in this case.

So it seemed a shame not to see the rest of this novel because the central character wouldn't be able to carry it. And I think, in fact, in a novel—I sincerely hope that this movie brings people to that novel because it definitely needs reading. It's very fulfilling reading. It's very fulfilling re-reading, actually. It really sustains re-examination over and over again, as does any work by a serious author, I think. But so what I was saying, the additions: I added her stories, Jane Austen's short stories—her juvenilia, it's called, her stories when she was a teenager. And some lines from her letters. I didn't change her [Fanny's] behavior. She doesn't suddenly become some great catalyst who

moves mountains and is actually a really sort of a powerful sort of figure. She actually—her behavior is pretty much what it is in the book. And then the other thing I add is a sense of historical awareness of what was going on with slavery.

SCHWARTZ: Right. Which was part of her real life, part of Jane Austen's real life. So, could you talk about that?

ROZEMA: Jane Austen's father was a rector. He was also a trustee for a plantation in Antigua—basically took care of the sort of accounts of this plantation.

SCHWARTZ: Now, you're making a film for modern audiences, for you know 1999–2000 audiences. And I'm wondering about your approach to dealing with period and modernity because Jane Austen was in a way ahead of her times and had a modern approach to language. One of the interesting things I read was that, in your research on the language of the film and keeping the language appropriate to the times, [you found that] a lot of times Jane Austen's own language was considered ahead of the ahead of its times. So I'm wondering sort of how you approached that question.

ROZEMA: Well, I had checkers...there's not that much dialogue in the novel, so I'd use as much dialogue as I could from the novel, and then when I couldn't, I would go to other Austen sources. And when I couldn't, I would make it up. And I kind of tried to translate it into the language of 1806, and I have this very religious background, so actually, I kind of thrill in the whole scriptural ring to things.

But often, when I would sort of pass my draft by the scholars, they would sort of point to Austen lines as "modern usage, modern usage." And I don't know whether they were sort of especially alerted because I was doing it, or—she has so much sort of wit and irreverence in her language throughout that it feels modern. And I selected throughout—in the novel and the entire situation—I selected that which I could feel, because I can't make an audience feel what I don't feel. So I selected that which I believe in, and left the rest.

SCHWARTZ: Was it daunting for you to do a period film? I mean, your previous films had been modern-day. In a way, this is obviously a big change. But—

ROZEMA: And it never would have crossed my mind, to tell you the truth. Yeah, it was Harvey Weinstein's idea. They—like, "Patricia, do you want to adapt this novel?" "Why me?" Really, that was the first meeting. "Why me?" You know, I've only done these sort of urban, almost non-genre films, but the more I looked into the novel itself and the more I examined what kind of respect I could bring to the enterprise, I thought it was a good idea.

SCHWARTZ: The tone of the film is so assured to me in that it respects the period, but is also sort of modern in how it's shot. There are things like handheld camera work, scenes against totally dark backgrounds. Yet, at the same time, it doesn't feel—it's not like you're making the version of *Romeo + Juliet*—the Baz Luhrmann *Romeo + Juliet*. It's very respectful of the period but, at the same time, sort of playing with it and updating it. How...

ROZEMA: Yeah, but there is no sort of cinematographic style true to 1806. That's a hilarious assumption we bring to period pieces—that there's a proper way of framing these things. And there isn't.

SCHWARTZ: Right. But remember, we have in mind, of course, other period films, which tend to be more opulent, more lavish, sort of laying on—one of the things I love about the film is the sparseness. It's not minimalist, but there's a cleanness and sparseness to it, which—

ROZEMA: Which is definitely my taste, which is my preference. But, you know, I was working with Christopher Hobbs, the designer, and he knows the period so well, he could find me the examples of what I liked. So he knew it so well that he could find kind of—in fact, he believes that Austen's work has been Victorianized a little bit and that, in the Victorian period, there was a little bit more of that kind of overstuffed, cluttered feel and that in fact the Regency wasn't.

I know—it's like, what is the style of 1999? There

are many styles, and some people would be living in, you know, 100 years in the past with their furniture. They wouldn't have bought it all at that moment. So, there's a lot of room for—there's a big sort of range. But, yeah, we chose a very sort of—that's my choice. I like a frame that has almost nothing in it, and then you put your character in, and it's complete.

Christopher always used to say that—he was very wise, I thought—if you look at your set and it looks complete, then something's wrong, because it has to need the actors in it in order to be complete.

SCHWARTZ: I do want to ask you about your work with Michael Coulter, who I think is just one of the great cinematographers, who shot films for Terence Davies and for Bill Forsyth. So could you talk a bit about your approach with him? What did you decide on your visual style?

ROZEMA: Well, for one, just to use completely contemporary cinematic styles that will do whatever we can to bring us closer to the experience of Fanny Price. So she arrives at Mansfield Park, and it's disorienting and hurried and jagged and upsetting, so it's hand-held.

I love as much depth in the frame as possible. We tended towards slightly longer lenses, but it varied from scene to scene. I think that, as a director, there's a very overwhelming kind of impulse to try to show off, and any time we had that inclination, I think you really have to examine yourself. You know you're going to damage the work. You have to be really humble in front of your content. And if it does not completely aid the drama of that scene, then, you know, you're wanking, and it's going to show. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: The ensemble cast is amazing. It's a film that's filled with great performances, and in talking about sort of the acting style that you were going for, one thing I read was that you were interested in almost a documentary quality or a documentary realism to the performances. So, what does that mean to you?

ROZEMA: Well, that's almost impossible to get.

You know, the smile that people have when they

think they're alone—that look people have when they think they're alone or they're not being watched is entirely different from the way we are with others in the room. I'm probably attracted to making movies because I'm a voyeur, because I wish for those moments. And since it's illegal, for the most part, to capture them, you have to recreate them. And then I just, you know, especially with this, the great literature, there is a tendency to deliver the lines on a plate for the audience and make it a big moment. And *most* of my direction was: throw it away, throw it away, just make it as absolutely,—it has to be as natural as we are.

SCHWARTZ: There were a lot of observed moments where, in looking at close-ups, you see little nuances and facial gestures and responses. And could you just talk a little bit about sort of what your rehearsal process or shooting process was like that you could achieve that?

ROZEMA: Well, we didn't rehearse a lot. The actors actually asked me for more rehearsals, and I said no. (Laughter) But I think maybe next time. I understand why they wanted more, because I am kind of rehearsing over and over again when I'm writing it. That's when I become completely familiar with it, and I think I'm so, so, so terrified of killing the life in it.

And the entire agenda is to somehow—through this massive, complicated, you know, technological torture that filmmaking is—to keep just a little spark of real life and truth and the reality. So what we did a fair amount, though, was to sit and talk about the characters, and talk about why they would say this next line and not something else more expected, or to really—we had a kind of a physical protocol expert come in and teach us how to curtsy and bow, and basic rules of body language that they would have been taught and then could have broken.

You know, we would break the rules deliberately in some cases. Like, for instance, when Mary Crawford makes her shocking speech at the end, and she leaves. They—the men would have ordinarily stood up to let her leave, but they don't. It's a dis. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: And how much of this comes from

sort of Austen's own writing—Jane Austen's own approach? I'm wondering how much you felt as—making the first film that you didn't write from scratch. What that was like for you and how you were balancing doing something that was Jane Austen and something that was Patricia Rozema.

ROZEMA: It's a high-wire act because you have to be humble in front of the work. You have to respect the fact that this has someone else's name on it, it has someone else's title. You have to pay attention to that, but on the other hand, you have to claim ownership as a director because it's not a Jane Austen movie, it's a Patricia Rozema movie. That sounds outrageous, but it shouldn't be. It's a completely different form. I tried to look at the book, read it as many times as possible, read as much around it as possible, as in this sort of debate about its intent and its style and its subtext. And then read as much about Austen herself as I could. And then write something in the spirit of, "Oh, I get it. Is this what you mean, Jane? Is this—? I think I can feel it. This is what I can feel what you've done."

It'll definitely offend some. No question. And I'm just going to have to live with that. It's a slightly odd situation because everyone, unless they really know the novel, they're saying, "So now what percentage is you and what percentage is her?" And I can't really answer that. But, it's great because it leads to people wanting to read the novel, which is fantastic, and it stands pure without, you know—I haven't mucked with that.

SCHWARTZ: We want to give people a chance to jump in if anybody has questions. There's one right down here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: The Fanny Price that you've presented in the movie is delightful, far more interesting and delightful than the character I'm reading in the book... How much of the character that you created for the film is influenced by Jane Austen herself?

ROZEMA: Oh, I think that the Fanny Price on the screen is probably—hypothesis—I mean, is probably more like Jane Austen herself. Absolutely. She [Austen] had a wicked tongue, so she probably wasn't even quite as innocent as this. So it's still a kind of a hybrid. There's lots we

don't know about Jane Austen. Several years of her letters were destroyed by her sister after her death, and you can project anything into that black hole, which is fantastic because it keeps debate alive forever, and projection, yeah.

She couldn't even really do a romance with a straight face, Jane Austen, and she was working within this genre, but she was very anti-sentimental, which is what I love. I really am attracted to her. I think it's a crime to portray Jane Austen as a kind of a sentimental, romance-y, gushy, soap opera-y person, which is strangely how she comes off. She was tough-minded, unbelievably naturally sort of gifted with language. It just seems so pure and just tossed off, and yet the constructions are so unbelievable.

SCHWARTZ: This seems like an affinity to your work, the combination of the ability to satire and genuine romanticism. I mean *When Night Is Falling* has real romanticism in it.

ROZEMA: She would have found that too gushy, I think.

SCHWARTZ: Really?

ROZEMA: Yeah. I mean, she would have found it way too romantic.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible]

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) What was it like working with Harold Pinter?

ROZEMA: I acted like a director who wasn't intimidated. He was a delight, actually. He was very, very committed to the work. We sent him the script. I had lunch with him. I stated my aims. We sort of introduced each other and immediately came to somewhere where we could joke together. And he went away, read the script, called back the next day, said he was in. He was the first one in. And he wasn't—he's acted, he started his career as an actor, but he hasn't done that much. He's sort of done cameos lately, and I saw him in two of them. He wasn't completely secure as an actor, which was an amazing position to be in with someone I admire so terribly much.

He's a great storyteller. He was never happier than when we had ten people in the scene, and we were waiting for the room to be lit, and he could entertain the masses. He wouldn't try to change the writing—which [would have been] a nightmare of course—any more than anyone else, like if he had difficulty in getting his mouth around it.

And it's a career high for me to actually have worked with someone I respect so much. His attraction to the piece was political. I mean, I think, you know, artistic, as well. He wouldn't have—but he really loved the amplification of the slavery issue. He thought that that was really an important contribution to make to what can become sort of a celebration of the gentle, lovely ways of the gentle, lovely English people or something. So he was really attracted to pointing to the historical economic fact of why the people could have that leisure.

Jane Austen kept a list of how people reacted to this novel. She didn't do that with other ones. So for some reason, she would say, "So and so hates Fanny Price, so and so likes Fanny Price, so and so thinks she should have married Henry Crawford." There were a number of people of her contemporaries who thought she should have married Henry Crawford. So clearly in the novel itself, there is a kind of a dilemma, and I just sort of heightened that and made it a little bit more excruciating.

It's a dangerous thing to do. It's sort of like, in this context, to have someone accept a proposal of marriage and then turn around and say, "No." It's kind of a violation of what you've come to expect from movies like this, or what you think you're getting from movies like this. That moment wasn't actually in the novel, the accepting. That was from Jane Austen's life. She almost went down in history as Jane Harris Bigwither. Jane Bigwither, she would have been. Because she accepted a proposal of marriage from Mr. Bigwither and then...

SCHWARTZ: Thought better of it.

ROZEMA: And then thought better of it the next morning and made a hasty retreat.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about the ending of the movie]

ROZEMA: Well, we do have her leaving at the end. She goes off. I mean, she's going off to the parsonage at the end, right? She's leaving; she's moving into her new life with Edmond. I could have had the big speech from the heroine at the end, and that's what the sort of contemporary screenwriting books would have had me do, I think. But I kind of drew the line there in terms of altering her character, and I felt like I had to address this point. I had to show it. But I was in a way caught, because—as does Jane Austen, she shows it very clearly in her book.

And her title—I maintain that the title *Mansfield Park* is actually a clue to what her intentions were. The Mansfield Judgment was a very well-known judgment at the time. It was the first judgment that limited slavery in England, and everyone would have known what the Mansfield Judgment was. It was the first sort of great stride for abolitionists. And she didn't title her novels lightly. You know, I think she was actually—that was my starting point. This book is, and this movie will be, a meditation on captivity in all of its forms and the treatment of humans as property. So my initial attraction was that I could show something that isn't normally seen in this context and that is pivotal. It is built into the foundation. It was important. But I couldn't change the entire story at the end, right? I couldn't have her suddenly burn the place down, or—so, I mean, I think her disapproval is registered. You, the audience, register the disapproval on the part of the film. Like, the filmmaking tells you that this—it's clear what your reaction is to be, and that felt like enough.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: [Inaudible question about Jane Austen's relationship to the English slave trade]

ROZEMA: Was Jane Austen an abolitionist? She wrote in one of her letters, "I have fallen in love with the writings of Thomas Clarkson," and Thomas Clarkson was an abolitionist. That's all he ever wrote about. So...

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Have you seen the other screen adaptations of Jane Austen's work?

ROZEMA: I had seen *Persuasion*, *Sense and Sensibility*. I didn't get all the way through the TV version of *Pride and Prejudice*. And that's it. But I had seen them long before I entered into this, and I didn't re-view them when I was about to make [this]. I didn't want to just be reacting against them. I remember thinking that there was beautiful dialogue, there was beautiful character definition, that it was all a bit too pretty for me.

SCHWARTZ: Even *Persuasion*?

ROZEMA: Yeah. Even *Persuasion*. I know that's like the dirty—that's funny. In England, they would say, "So, you're doing a dirty Austen or a clean Austen?" (Laughter) And then this rumor, "She's doing the punk Austen." (Laughter) Hardly. Even *Persuasion*. I mean I really, really do admire them. I just don't want to be in a position where I have to criticize good films.

I think that the respect Emma Thompson got for her adaptation—I did look at Emma Thompson's adaptation just to sort of, just to kind of glance at her scene structure, because I thought it all flowed so beautifully. And I was curious to see how closely she stuck, and there are certainly some very key moments in the film that aren't in the novel. So that gave me a bit of a sense of liberty. But no, I really, really liked that. I think that deserved the honors it got.

SCHWARTZ: A question about Lesley Barber, the composer. How did you come to work with her? And what was your process like—working process on this film?

ROZEMA: Well, I met Lesley Barber—her agent sent me a tape of her music, and I used to listen to it while I was writing, actually. I listened to it for about a year, and I thought, "Boy, this guy's really good." In my little sexist brain, I kind of thought it was a guy. But I was working with this other composer that I was quite pleased with, so there was no reason to be interviewing anybody else.

And then when I did *When Night Is Falling*, I thought, "Well, let's just open up the doors and see who's there." She brought in some new music, again, that I found had a real gravity to it, an intelligence that was thrilling for me. So, we

worked together on *When Night Is Falling*. And then I did another film, *An Hour with Yo-Yo Ma: Inspired by Bach*. It was a PBS thing, and she did the non—it involved Bach's sixth cello suite—she did the non-Bach part. I intended to work [with her] again. I mean, to me, she could do anything. So the process was—first we had to kind of decide how close to the period we would stick—we would stay—and how far we would let ourselves go. And that's just a process of playing snippets of music and picking a couple of inspirational composers. I mean, Handel was one for this. We go pretty far afield from Handel, obviously.

She would give me a tape. Once I was getting close to final cut, she'd give me tapes with twenty themes on [them], and I would listen to them all and pick out ones that I (a) loved and (b) tried to think of placement for them, like where they would go in the film. So that would give her sort of an overview. And then the most difficult part of that whole process is, how often do you repeat themes? That is deadly because, you know, it can deaden...

I believe that music does more for your experience of the movie than we have any inkling [of]. It creates the atmosphere. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that in a novel, the atmosphere is created by narrative, by the narrative voice, and in film, the music is doing that. The voice of the director or the voice of the filmmakers comes out through the music. The music is telling you whether to find this happy, sad, neutral. The music is telling you what to feel. And if it's out of sync, if it's telling you, "Oh, this is a big, emotional moment," and you're looking at it and saying, "Yeah, I don't buy this," then it's infuriating, and the audience is removed from the experience of the movie.

It's such a fine-tuning of playing a dramatic moment. So, yeah, the process is just a lot, a lot of back-and-forth. And that's an ongoing process—"How much do I leave her alone to come up with her own thing?" Because if I'm right in there in every little phase, then it kind of hampers her creativity. That's the biggest decision for the director in relation to any other creative person: how much freedom do you give them so that they can really make it theirs? And

then how much do you trample all over them?

SCHWARTZ: The song during the credits. If you can talk about that.

ROZEMA: Salif Keita—I love this man’s voice and his music and his whole being. He’s an amazing—he’s a Malian. And I asked him to write a piece for the film because I knew that we were going to have that little snippet of music when she passes the boat in the opening sequence, and then I wanted to have just little hints of it during the sketches—when she discovers the sketches. This made a couple of people nervous in the process, but I felt it was very pointed and important to play that piece at the end. It’s kind of like, “And don’t forget, you know. And don’t forget.”

And he wrote this song. It’s called “Slavery,” and it takes the voice of a young African man who’s been brought to the West Indies. And he’s working, and he sees a bird flying overhead, and—he speaks to the bird, and he says, “If you see the chief of my village, tell him I am far. If you see my father, tell him...perhaps it is God’s will.” Which breaks my heart—to even think that anyone could think something so horrible could be God’s will, if there is a God. So I think he did a beautiful, beautiful job. He’s a remarkable man. He comes on stage, and he... I saw him at Royal Festival Hall in England, and he drops to his knees and blesses the audience first, and then he does his performance.

SCHWARTZ: Well, I really want to thank you again for coming down just to be with us tonight, and to congratulate you again on the film. (Applause)

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