

## "I've Heard the Mermaids Singing"

Strange little allegory about dreams, art, women and life.

BY ELEANOR MALIN

So bad at her job as a person Friday that the temp agency warned her new boss about her, Polly Vandersma is Everylittleperson. Or anybody at all on an "off" day.

Polly is beguiled, entranced, darn near struck dumb by the other side of the coin, her new boss, Gabrielle. Silk-draped, aristocratic, tall and able to target all the right buzzwords in the artbabbler of the day, Gabrielle started with some family money, great looks and a French accent and parlayed same into the successful Church Gallery.

Church is a symbol the filmmaker, Patricia

## Cinema

Rozema, uses for art in the modern world. Moneyed people and C.E.O.s, most of them art ignorant, really, give works of art the same reverence that rich people used to give to the church. Like when they would donate expensive works of art to the cathedral of their choice — only now the expensive art works go in the Board room or penthouse apartment.

Much of Polly's lifestyle to date has been voyeuristic. Her hobby is photography. She bicycles around Toronto on a funny little old bike, snapping shots of mothers and babies, lovers loving, buildings — "things I like." She does this as a process, not thinking of her work as art. When we see Polly in her darkroom she prints photos and spaces out. She goes into trances and dreams sugar dreams. The Mer-

maids "sing" to her during her time at her craft, and by the red safelight, Polly turns from a plain ducklingette into a really beautiful woman. She hangs her photos, unframed, around her apartment like wallpaper. Thoughts of money or fame from doing this work never enter her mind.

Black-and-white dream sequences intercut with the grainy-looking video narration by Polly, and the third part of the amalgam — flashbacks of what has happened here. In the end, Gabrielle has turned out to be the worst kind of fraud, Mary Joseph was in on it, and Polly has committed a couple of crimes. But she also has figured out some Basic Truths: Art is what you make of it; your opinion is as valid as anyone's; making art is as important as showing it off, and people who seem like really big deals usually turn out to be well-packaged small deals.

A delicate balance of well-chosen words and visuals get us there. The dialogue is very well written. The humor is clever, and there are many, many quotable lines.

Paule Baillargeon was excellent as Gabrielle, the curator. Ann-Marie McDonald as the beautiful and sexy Mary Joseph was beautiful and sexy. And Sheila McCarthy as Polly Vandersma was a gas! She sparkles her way off the celluloid and into your heart. As she gropes for words and recalls the events that got her here, we can identify with her, no problem. McCarthy, whose film debut this was, started as a dancer, and has had extensive stage training. She has played Audrey in "Little Shop of Horrors" all the way to Ophelia in "Hamlet." Currently, she is playing Sally Bowles in "Cabaret." McCarthy is simply the perfect Polly... a perfect person in tune with her own mermaid's song. •

## Patricia Rozema: Filmmaker, risk-taker

Funny, a little sad, mythical, fantastical, "I've Heard the Mermaids Singing" works.

Patricia Rozema wrote a little story, got some money together, picked some good players, and proceeded to make a film that she would want to see. It's so personal, unusual, and untheatrical, she worried it would attract derision at the Cannes Film Festival. Instead, her work drew cheers, standing ovations, and Rozema won the *Prix de la Jeunesse* award for her efforts.

Rozema is what I am used to seeing in women film directors: young (29), pretty, articulate, and generous with ideas. Blonde (from Dutch Calvin ancestry), and casual in her dress, she is really the epitome of what it is she works through in her movie — it ain't the packaging — it's the process.

Some of the religious symbolism in the movie she wrote, directed, and co-produced, (with Alexandra Raffe), "I've Heard the Mermaids Singing," Rozema admits, seems to upset some viewers. Some people do have trouble when their metaphors, political or religious, are tampered with. Rozema says her plot line is a basic reworking of the story of Jesus. She says she thinks "E.T." was, too, consciously so.

Rozema says her film is "autobiographical, but not really." The characters, bumbling, lovable, "organizationally impaired" Polly, slick and marketable Gabrielle, and intense, artistic Mary Joseph are elements from her personality, though she has never been a shutterbug, art world aficionado, or plastic artist herself. Subdivided in this way, the characters do seem to stem from one person, Gabrielle the god-like or authority figure, Mary Joseph, the artistic toiler, and Polly, as the mere mortal (possibly why audiences warm so much to Polly, she is so human). The strongly mythical quality to the workings of this film stem from Rozema's per-

sonal fantasies. She says she has admired heroes and heroines, and found they have feet of clay.

Rozema began her film career as third assistant director on "The Fly." After a 5-week course on the basics of filmmaking, she got some money from the Canada and Ontario Arts Councils, and wrote and directed, "Passion: A Letter in 16MM." After writing "Mermaids," she got together \$262,000, interviewed 200 actresses for Polly, and when she saw Sheila McCarthy, said to herself, "Please be able to act." Talk about your wishes coming true. She and McCarthy achieved instant rapport, and it shows in the final product.

I asked Rozema about filming a feature-length film with such a small budget. It's my prejudice that small budget movies can be better, because filmmakers have to get on with it, and can't think of silly things like raking the sand for "Ishtar," with part of the 40 million Elaine May rode to the dust for that fiasco. Rozema disagreed with me. She claims it's not so terrible to have money to work with, but agreed that, "if something's not working, you can't fix it with money."

Rozema says she would be perfectly happy to have a nice budget, story and crew, and keep making films forever, with no thoughts of distribution. That's "Polly" talking. Competition among distributors for "I've Heard the Mermaids Singing" was fierce. As a debut feature film, lots of things went well, and some things went as well as they could ever go. Rozema is working on her next project, the working title for which is "Zelda, The High Priestess of the Universe." Ohhh-kayyy. I predict as long as she casts someone else besides Madonna for Zelda, she'll come out looking good. •

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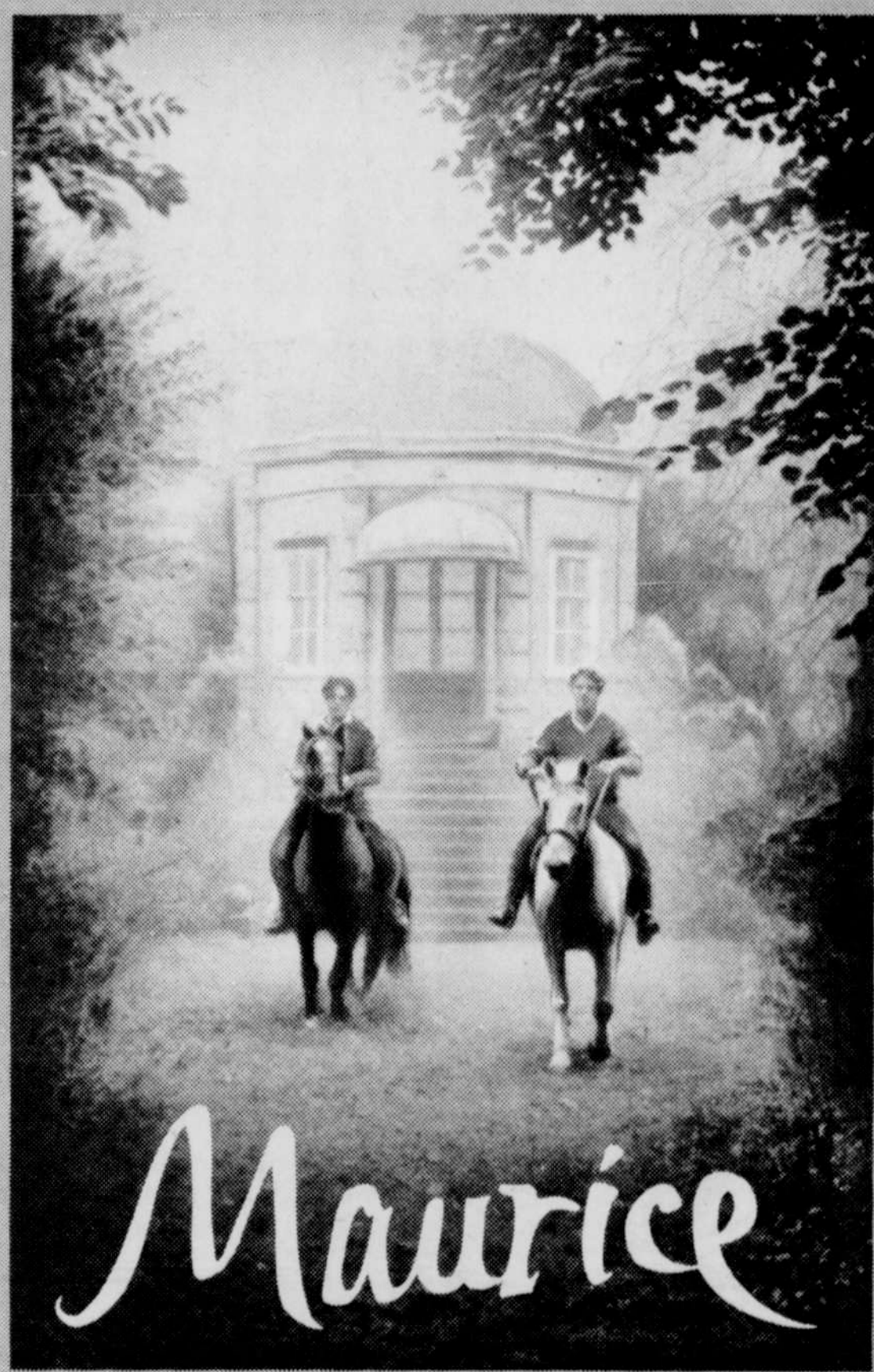
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