

# REVEALING ROZEMA

## A Talk with the Maker of *Mermaids*

by JOEL WEINBERG

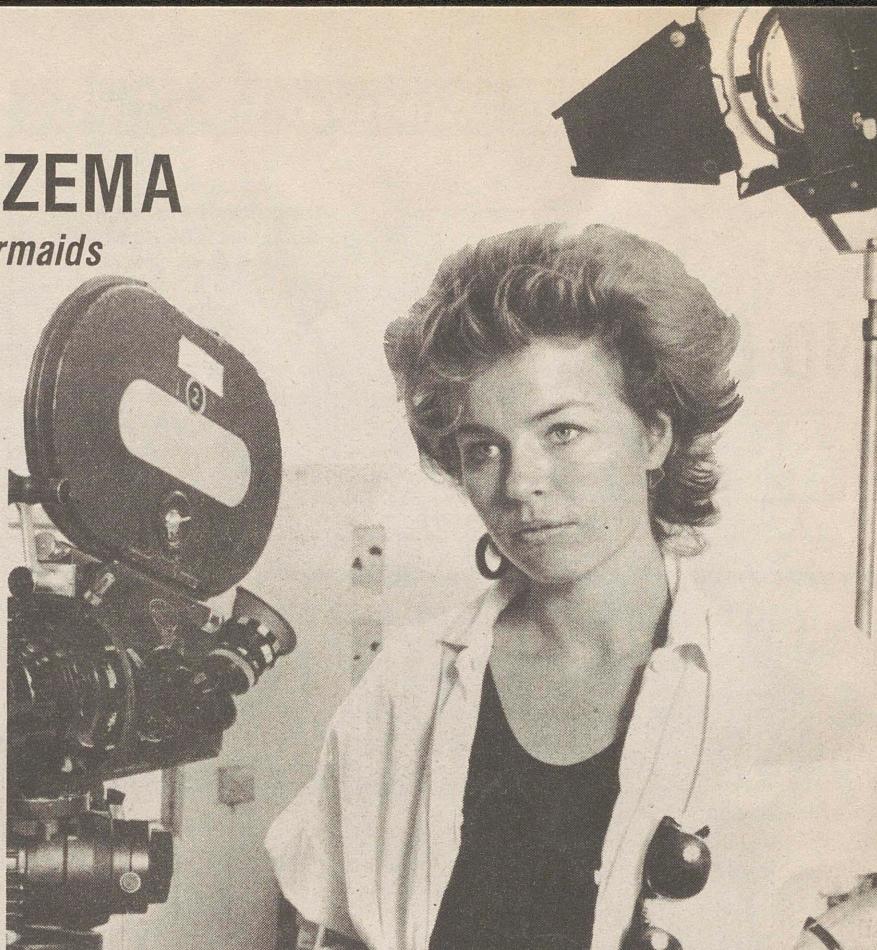
**P**atricia Rozema is a 29-year-old Canadian film director whose first feature film, *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, was the "discovery" of the 1987 Cannes film festival. The picture was sold to 32 countries in seven days, something of a record for a low-budget, independently made movie—especially considering the subject matter. *Mermaids* is about a quirky, bisexual office temp named Polly whose greatest skill is her ability to engage in adventurous flights of fantasy. *Mermaids* was also honored at Cannes with the Prix de la Jeunesse, a prize awarded by a young jury to their choice of best film in the festival.

Rozema comes from a small industrial town in southern Ontario, where she was raised in a strict Dutch Calvinist family. Her education from grade school through college was rigorously religious; she missed out on most of the usual activities a typical North American youngster might engage in. The only films she saw while growing up were Disney movies; at age 16 she saw her first "real" movie—*The Exorcist*—and it gave her nightmares for days afterward.

Rozema started acting in high school theater productions and continued performing in college, where she majored in philosophy. After a stint in broadcast journalism, she began writing movie scripts while working as an assistant director on American and Canadian films. She then made *Passion: A Letter in 16mm*, a 30-minute dramatic short film that won an award at the Chicago Film Festival. At that point Rozema decided to take the plunge into feature films. She wrote the screenplay for *Mermaids* and raised the budgeted \$275,000 entirely from Canadian government grants.

### How did this project come about?

I had done a film [*Passion*] about a woman who was educated and articulate and together, but she ended up being sort of neurotic. I really wanted to show someone much less educated, much less sophisti-



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cated, and I wanted to approach the issues of ambition from the other side. So I decided to do an unsuccessful career woman. And basically I knew that I wanted to do something much lighter with a more deft touch. The first one was kind of heavy. I wanted to do this character. I just suddenly knew Polly.

### How did the character of Polly come to you? Is she based on someone you know?

She's based on sides of myself, basically. But I'm not as klutzy as she is. I've got a degree in philosophy. But for me, writing a character is isolating a side of yourself and embroidering it and developing it. So all the characters—Gabrielle and Mary—are sides of me too. People ask me why I didn't put male characters in. As a female, I just know female experience better.

### Was it important to make Gabrielle bisexual? Is *Mermaids* a feminist film in that women are presented as being independent of men?

Well, I suppose it's feminist in that movies for years haven't really given women much prominence. Movies that have women as the movers and shakers and have their interrelationships as the primary concerns are very rare and sort of token. And you write what you know, so I write female characters

and have them interacting. And making Gabrielle bisexual and in a relationship with Mary is sort of more contemporary, more interesting, more mind-blowing for Polly. A more unusual relationship. Part of the goal is to do something that you haven't really seen before.

### Gabrielle and Mary's relationship is treated naturally; you don't make a big deal about it. Is that your approach to gay relationships in real life?

Yeah, it's just one fact about people. It's not the most important characteristic about Gabrielle by any means. We don't see much of Mary, so it can be seen to be the most important fact about her. But it's *one* fact about their lives. And that seems to me to be the most well-balanced and healthy approach to one's sexual orientation. I've seen this approach in one film with male characters, and that was *My Beautiful Laundrette*. You get to know those characters first, and then you discover they're gay. It's really refreshing. I really like that approach, but I hadn't seen it yet with female characters.

### In one of her fantasies, Polly talks about being polymorphously perverse. Is that an ideal state?

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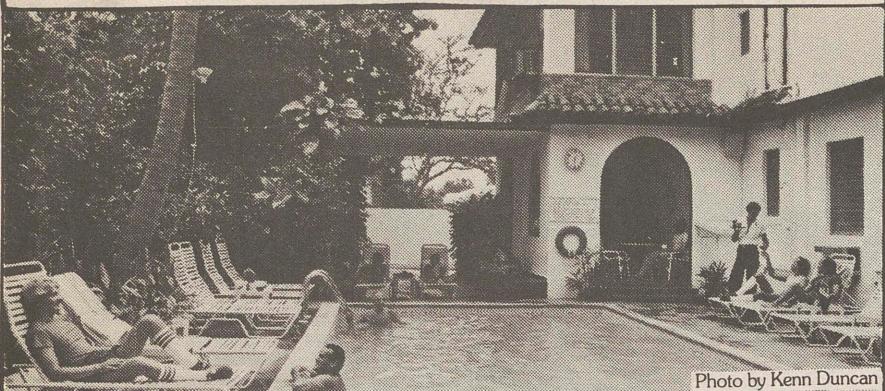


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## IN REVIEW

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Well, actually, that scene is my wink at the audience. Those are my opinions being spoken through Polly's mouth. The idea is that (a) Polly's subconscious is trying to be the intellectual to impress Gabrielle and (b) she's assimilating the new information she has about Gabrielle and Mary. In this way, Polly, being a completely accepting, non-judgmental person, can accept the relationship quite openly. And, yeah, polymorphous perversity is kind of an ideal. It's no accident that that's her name.

**What is the importance of Polly's fantasy life?**

To show how important [Polly's fantasies] are to her. To show her inner life, that no one would guess that she had this rich internal universe. I really believe that everyone is a universe. You can never understand someone completely. You can never go in far enough and say, "Yeah, now I've got a grip on this person." And I guess the whole film in a way is a plea for respect of the little people who don't make it big, of little people who don't have the obvious ability to translate their insides to the outside.

**So the fantasies were a means of expanding her character from the inside?**

Yes. I think a lot of women's adventures are internal. And men's adventures are often external: That's why they've been easier to film. I thought, *Wouldn't it be neat to film a woman's internal adventures and make it visual and not just verbal?*

**I found the humor in *Mermaids* to be very funny, but it also struck me as rather poignant and sad. Does this reflect your feeling about life, that it's a comic tragedy?**

Yeah. Every day something bizarre happens, and I find it so odd I just can't get my head around it. And every day people are dying in the gutter. And every day we step closer to the potential of global annihilation. My attitude is completely dialectic in a way. I swing back and forth between seeing these hopeless, ugly, vile tragedies out there and [laughs] complete absurdity. I get such a kick out of it. And I love having both in one scene. I really love having something so sad.

You know how when you're really sad, somebody farts or something and it's

funny? But it seems really inappropriate. Or when you're completely happy and you've got to go to the bathroom anyway? There's always something that mitigates any strong emotion. I studied philosophy, and I know how to get into these heavy-duty thoughts about the meaning of everything. I get distrustful of myself if someone doesn't make a joke every once in a while or bring in the mundane again because majesty and banality go hand in hand for me.

**How did you end up wearing so many hats—being writer, director, editor, and coproducer—on *Mermaids*?**

No one will work for as little money as I will. I have a very clear idea of what I want to do, and I know how I want to do it. And I can work at my own pace, and it just makes sense. People seem to find it weird, but it's not really.

**Do you intend always to have such a multi-faceted involvement in your films?**

Very personal, very immediate, yeah. Every little jot and tittle has to be the way I imagined it. I'm a perfectionist in *nothing* in my life—I'm really disorganized in everything except my films. That's where I say, "This has got to be perfect. I can't change it once it's done. This is the only thing I can take personal pride in, so do it right."

**Are you interested in working in Hollywood?**

Not really. I'm not interested in having bosses, that's all. I'm not interested in having to fight for control. I never had to scream or be a heavy on *Mermaids*. I just find people that I like and say, "This is the script, this is what I see." It's really a rational, decent, civilized process, and I know that it does occasionally happen in Hollywood, but I don't want bosses. I don't want to have to argue. I can still get money and be independent.

**How has your Calvinist background colored your approach to life and movie-making?**

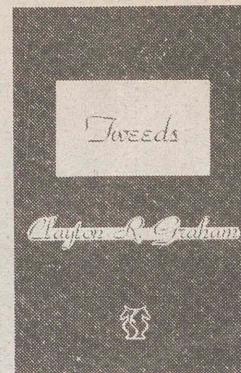
Basically, I grew up believing that there was an authority. And my rebellion has been that there is no authority. We're all on exactly the same plane, and there is no authority, and *none* of us has any closer tie to some supreme knowledge—or what in the film I call "the hot line to the omnipotent." There is no right way of doing things. And we're all in the boat together, and we're all going to sink together or float. I'm really very, very antiauthority, but I'm nice about it. I'm not a bitch. I'm a nice girl from a good home who believes that no one can tell her what to do.

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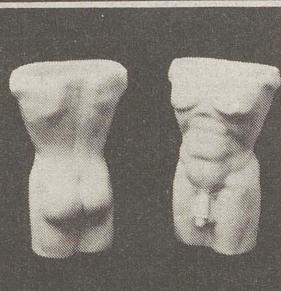


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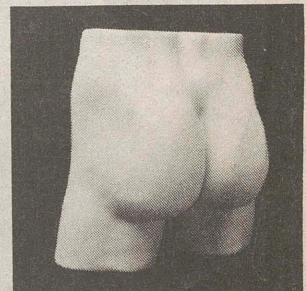


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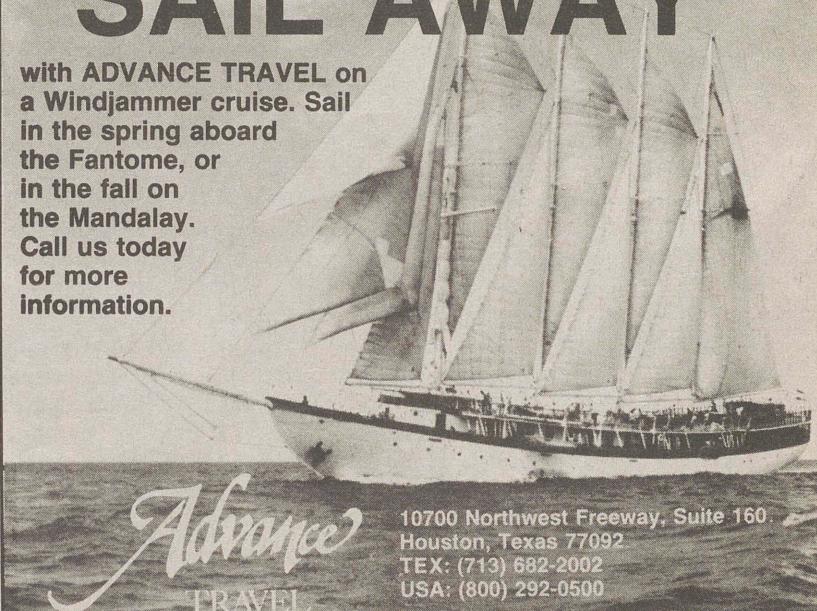
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