

Tilda's Perversions

Actress Swinton on the mysteries of "homeovestism"

WHEN PEOPLE TALK about mainstream culture, what they are discussing is completely marginal to me," says the bold and eclectic British actress Tilda Swinton. "The very least that I learned at Derek's knee is the absolute freedom of understanding one's own work to be mainstream."

Swinton is referring to her "apprentice years" with film director Derek Jarman, who died of AIDS in 1994. From *Caravaggio* to *Wittgenstein*—and most memorably, playing queen to a rebellious gay king in Jarman's *Edward II*—Swinton has delighted us in the provocative roles Jarman's iconoclastic movies provided. Queer audiences also cherish her tour de force in Sally Potter's film *Orlando*, in which Swinton brought

to life Virginia Woolf's Elizabethan nobleman who changes gender and lives as a woman over the course of four centuries.

Her latest riveting portrayal is a change of pace: Contemporary and American, Swinton's Eve is the smart, powerful prosecutor at the center of Susan Streitfeld's *Female Perversions*, coming March 28 from October Films. Swinton came on board after the screenplay was completed, but the project is no less personal for her. "It's as if the subtitles have come to life in this film, like some trick of light," enthuses the 36-year-old actress.

With her runway walk, designer clothes, and jungle-red lipstick, Eve seems a high-fashion predator not unlike

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Edward II's power-dressing Queen Isabella, whose couture grew more glamorous as her appetite for revenge increased. Inspired by the nonfiction work of feminist psychoanalyst Louise J. Kaplan, *Perversions* uncovers the hidden neuroses and traumas beneath Eve's glamorous and superconfident facade. "I'm very interested in the idea of homeovestism, the practice of same-sex dressing," says Swinton. "There's a dissonance between the true identity and the expected identity as given by the clothes, the look, and the mannerisms."

At last year's San Francisco gay and lesbian film festival, *Perversions* proved a big hit, and the audience "surf[ed] [the movie], going around every bend of it," reports Swinton. "Obviously, gay and lesbian people work with issues of identity all the time," she adds. (Asked about her own sexuality, she says, "That's personal business for me; I would go so far as to say that I'm a sexual being and that's it.")

Transcending the boundaries of gender identity is of course Swinton's forte. In *Orlando* she went from male to female; in *Man to Man*, Manfred Karge's one-woman show, which Swinton performed both onstage and on film, she played a widow who adopts her late husband's identity in order to keep his job. There's no telling where her boundless artistic curiosity will take her. In a performance-art piece she presented for a week in September 1995 at London's Serpentine Gallery, she slept for eight hours each day in a glass case. It was as much a provocation to herself as to the 22,000 people who visited the gallery, she acknowledges, but she refuses to describe the experience: "It's important that people project whatever they need to project—it's like being a cross between a confessional and the back of a lavatory door sometimes."—GERARD RAYMOND

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