

What Becomes a Legend?

By Gerard Raymond

"Somewhere there is a very deep taboo about gender that has to be cracked. It's interesting how worked up people get about it," says Tilda Swinton. The subject is a key to the 31-year-old British actress's dazzling and eclectic career on stage and screen. "Gender is the first set of limitations that are placed on a human being," Swinton complains. The remarkable quality of her acting is how she subverts and stretches those limits.

Swinton won the Best Actress award in Venice last year for her performance in Derek Jarman's film of Christopher Marlowe's *Edward II*. She plays Queen Isabella, a woman alienated by her gay husband who finds refuge in the world of exquisite haute couture. Her stature increases as her earnings get more elaborate. Acquiring power by aligning herself with the disgruntled barons in Edward's court, she takes a lover and leads an insurrection against her husband. The powerful and mysterious monster she becomes is a startling and uncompromising icon—a resplendently attired, vampiric bitch with the serene ex-

pression of a porcelain madonna. Swinton concedes that this image leaves the film open to charges of misogyny, but argues that the extremes to which her character is driven are very much the point. The film, she is clear, is not a comfortable ride. "It is entirely for people to decide what they feel about this, but I do think there is something depressing about fascistic heterosexual bigotry just as there is about a gay ghettoized existence."

Swinton says her power-dressing portrait of Isabella was partly inspired by historical evidence that the queen spent enormous amounts on clothes. "Even when she was in retreat, at the end of her life, she spent a very great deal of money on candles so that her dressmakers could sit up all night sewing her new dresses, even though there was no one to see her." Swinton also drew from the current obsession with contemporary fashions, adding to the contemporary slant of Jarman's film.

"I started to wonder why so much money was spent printing photographs every week of what women like the Princess of Wales, Ivana Trump, Imelda Marcos, and Jackie Onassis wear. What is

OFF SCREEN



Tilda Swinton: gender's her agenda.

TIM RICHMOND/OUTLINE PRESS

Diana Spencer's power over anybody? She has no power except that she has a lot of money and she buys a lot of clothes, and people are interested in looking at her wearing them. If she wore the same clothes all the time, they would stop taking photographs of her and she wouldn't be imprinted on our retinas, or whatever."

While Swinton explores the limitations of being a woman and the ways in which some women break out of their confines in *Edward II*, she transcends gender in *Man to Man*, a one-woman play by Manfred Karge, which she recently completed filming. She plays a widow who adopts her late husband's identity in order to keep his job as a crane operator. Swinton gives a tour de force performance, completely transforming herself by stuffing her jockeys with fake genitals. "It's a very

freeing experience to walk about onstage and scratch your balls. Even if you haven't any," Swinton was reported as saying when she first performed *Man to Man* on stage in 1987.

Swinton's career is anything but conventional. After graduating from Cambridge she joined the Royal Shakespeare Company. But instead of following a path that could have established her as one of the leading classical actresses in the country, she left after a year, convinced that institutional theater was exactly what she didn't want to do. Her work in films is similarly unorthodox. At the age of 25 she met Derek Jarman, who cast her as the prostitute who becomes an artist's model in *Caravaggio*. Since then she has appeared in four other Jarman films, of which *Edward II* is the latest. She likes working with Jarman,

she says, because of his collaborative approach.

"Fate threw us together," says Jarman. "What really interested me was that she had done this degree in social and political science and seemed so preoccupied with how women are portrayed in film. It is as if there is another agenda for Tilda beyond just becoming a film star. So she was capable of turning down a part in David Lean's *Nostramo*. I think it was quite courageous of her to do that because people in [the industry] don't like that—it makes her difficult. I have always quite enjoyed working with people that are considered difficult, because they never turn out to be like that."

Swinton's new project is one that she has been working on for the past three years—a film version of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, written and directed by Sally Potter. After shooting on location in St. Petersburg and Uzbekistan they are now completing the film in England. The celebrated novel charts the progress of an Elizabethan nobleman through four centuries, during which he changes gender and lives as a woman. A dream project for the actress—exploring androgyny and immortality; playing both male and female. "I remember a journalist once, rather petulantly asking me if it wasn't a limitation, my playing women who are dressing up as men or men who are turning into women. I can't understand why it is not obvious that to play with both genders is to actually take the limits away." ■