



**17th LONDON
Lesbian & Gay
FILM FESTIVAL**
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**National Film Theatre
South Bank
London SE1**

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A Road Less Travelled

Thelma is an honest and compelling character study of a beguiling, restless woman and the people whose lives are affected by her. Pierre-Alain Meier, the Director, took time-out to tell us about his film.

Thelma has an extremely powerful theme, where did the inspiration come from?

During the shooting of *Douleur d'amour*, a documentary shot in São Paulo in the late 80's, I met Thelma Lipp, a famous transsexual TV animator. It immediately brought me to another planet: fiction, lies and poetry were all of a sudden much more exceptional than reality. From then on, I was obsessed with the idea of creating a character for this person whose life was based on creation, acting and imagination. This is how Thelma started."

I imagine the film was pretty tough to write, how did you approach it?

The writing process of this film was long and complex. First we had to create Thelma's universe, make her personality plausible and get to the bottom of her inner tensions. We had to show to what extent denying one's sex can generate such a unique person, and we didn't try to explain the inexplicable: the fact that one day, a man decides to lead a woman's life. Then, we created a character, Vincent, meant to show the gulf between our world and Thelma's universe. Separated from his wife, living apart from his son, Vincent is not the kind of man who should be attracted by Thelma's sexual difference. Like her, he is lonely and is able to understand her shifty ambivalence."

In other films with transsexual themes a woman often plays the lead. You chose a transsexual actor. Was this a conscious decision? Do you feel it added to the realism?

I decided to shoot the film with a transsexual woman, Pascale Ourbih accepted this part even though it meant taking personal risks. From the moment you see Pascale naked in the film, the narration no longer works in a classical way.

The documentary truth of Pascale's body inevitably questions the fictional narration of the film. Our usual references are no longer valid. Thelma/Pascale echoes our own ambivalence, and we endlessly confuse Thelma's and Pascale's respective realities.

The three actors, Pascale Ourbih, Laurent Schilling (Vincent) and Nathalia Capo d'Istria (Fenia) intelligently adjusted their acting in order to avoid the pitfalls of such a narrative. They had to draw strength from within themselves.

An actor, like a transsexual person, is the reflection of the different characters that he invents at each moment. Roles are vital for both of them. My challenge was to make the three actors' heterogeneous and almost contradictory ways of acting work together. All three of them started the project at the last moment, and each of them profoundly questioned me. I also insisted upon shooting the film in the script's chronological order, because the actors brought something new, precious, light and funny every day. It was therefore impossible to predict the evolution of their relationships ahead of time, as is the case in most films. "Should they make love? How should they interpret this scene? Won't this be ridiculous? What will happen next? When does he start loving her?" We kept asking ourselves questions like this."

The question of how a man can become a woman has trouble many academics. Your film seems to go a long way towards explaining this. How did you do this?

I tried to answer this question by showing Thelma's naked body and unveiling her provocative and troubling being.

The rest of the movie is filmed simply. Through Vincent's eyes, the spectator should understand, love or reject Thelma... and should be moved when discovering a part of her secret.

Colm OutUK

The Thelma website is at <http://www.thelma.ch/>
You can find details of organisations who can give you more information about TV/TS issues at http://www.queenscene.com/Gay_Scene/Helpines/Help/help.html

