

## THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Bravely bending gender

Society has struggled mightily in recent years to understand and accept transsexual men and women, and so have filmmakers. Ground-breaking movies such as *The Crying Game* and *Le sexe des étoiles* were emotionally irresistible when they appeared, but the situation is evolving quickly and a new film treating the same subject can make earlier ones seem dated. Especially if it's a fine movie such as Pierre-Alain Meier's *Thelma*.

As with *The Crying Game*, *Thelma* begins with the strangely comic dilemma of the duped male. Vincent, a taxi driver in Lausanne, picks up an odd fare one day, a young woman who asks to be taken to the distant island of Crete. It's a crazy request, but it involves a man who has jilted her, and she's willing to pay well. So off they go.

Thelma is flirtatious, and Vincent, estranged from his wife and young son, is tempted. They take a hotel room. There are romantic preliminaries. But a glance inside Thelma's passport, followed by a lunge into the washroom where he strips off her bathrobe, reveals that Thelma has attractive breasts but also a penis.

This is the only time in the movie that we see her unclothed, a moment that director Meier describes as necessary to establish "the documentary truth of Pascale's body."

Pascale Ourbih, who plays Thelma, is in fact a transsexual. When Vincent, who has fled the room in disgust but eventually returns, apologizes for his behaviour, she replies: "It's okay. Usually I just get beaten up."

One might wonder: Is this Thelma speaking, or Pascale Ourbih from her own experience?

But Ourbih's performance is so captivating that the problem doesn't arise. In fact, as Meier has suggested in speaking of the film, a transsexual's life is in itself a performance. His or her life is "based on creation, acting and imagination."

In a strict sense, in a world where she should not exist and which has no place for her, Thelma "imposes" herself by acting as if she has every right to be there. She is hurt, of course, but she recovers instantly. She resumes the performance, in which she is an attractive woman and Vincent is a coward. But she will show him how to overcome his fear and love her. (And it is a wonderful performance: Thelma loves being a woman.)

Vincent (Laurent Schilling) is a former boxer and man's man who is temporarily disoriented by separation from his family. This, and his discovery that Thelma has a wife and child of her own on the island of Crete, from whom she is estranged, makes Vincent feel sympathy at least. Then one day, to his astonishment -- he splutters it out as they walk on the seafront -- he has a "lunatic desire" to make love with her. So he does.

The scene works because Thelma and Vincent are warm and affectionate characters, and it is possible by this point in the story to believe they are falling in love.

We meet Thelma's former lover, Fenia (Nathalia Capo d'Istria), who Thelma had abandoned before her transformation into a woman. Now Fenia learns what happened, and she is sickened. She doesn't want Thelma anywhere near their daughter.

At this point, a delicate three-way relationship begins where Vincent serves as a sexual bridge between the worlds of Fenia and Thelma. In effect, he becomes the lover of both, and with considerable compassion labours to keep them from turning their backs on each other.

One can imagine how difficult it is to tell this part of the story, where the psychological terrain is terra incognita and it is hard for any viewer to know what is and isn't plausible. It is fascinating to watch, but I'm not sure how much of it I believe.

Meier has created an emotionally dense and ambitious story, and toiled mightily to make it real. It's not completely successful, but it is engrossing because it's apparent that he is struggling to make a film both for the world that exists, and for a world that does not yet quite exist.

By Ray Conlogue, Friday, March 14, 2003