



Tootsie:

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"Tootsie" a été acclamé en 1983 comme le film féministe de l'année produit par Hollywood. Le film est bon sur certains points, mais il est également inquiétant d'y trouver des déformations de la réalité. Le film montre bien que les femmes n'apprécient guère d'être sexuellement harcelées: mais aucune des femmes décrites n'a une forte personnalité. Il n'est suggéré nulle part dans le film que de nombreuses femmes sont heureuses d'être femmes — surtout lorsque l'alternative est d'être hommes. Dans "Tootsie", seul un homme peut prouver qu'il fier d'être femme. Cela n'arriverait pas s'il y avait des femmes fortes dans le film. Or les deux caractères principaux, Sandy et Julie,

NO TREAT FOR FEMINISTS

sont des stéréotypes, et sont passives. Dorothy, elle, est sûre d'elle et réussit bien et dans le "soap" et en dehors. Le message implicite est que si les femmes sont des victimes, c'est de leur propre faute.

Le film, de plus, est "homophobe": bien qu'il n'y ait pas, dans "Tootsie", de caractères homosexuels, l'hétérosexualité de Michael y est sans arrêt affirmée, l'homosexualité y est déni-grée.

I read a lot of rave reviews hailing Tootsie as Hollywood's feminist film of the year. So I went off to see it.

On the plus side: 1) I'm sure the film-makers had good intentions; 2) they do show that women don't

enjoy sexual harassment; 3) Dustin Hoffman, the star of the film, claims that playing a man pretending to be a woman has made him learn much about women and about himself.

On the other side, Tootsie contains disturbing distortions of reality, most notably a virtually complete absence of strong women. The film is also extremely homophobic.

I'll deal with the distortions first. Tootsie is about Michael, a man who lands that part of a woman on a soap opera. Why does he, of all people, get the part? After all, there's no shortage of actresses eager to do the part. The answer is easy: the role is that of a hospital

Photos: From Tootsie (1983) by Sydney Pollack

administrator, a capable and assertive woman. In the audition scene, she has to say "I'm proud to be a woman" and get angry.

In the world of *Tootsie*, there isn't a single woman who can assert that with conviction or get properly pissed off. In fact, there's no suggestion that many women are pleased to be women (especially when we consider that the alternative is to be men). There's also no suggestion that many actresses are forced to hide their anger and strength because most of the few available parts are for weak women.

Instead, in *Tootsie*, only a man can prove he's proud to be a woman — because, in *Tootsie*, only a man can consistently stand up for him/herself.

It wouldn't be all that terrible, having Michael beat out all women for the part of a strong woman, if there were other strong women in the show. With one exception — I'll come to her soon — there aren't any.

Near the beginning of the show, there's a party. The men talk ideas. The women listen admiringly to the men talking ideas. Where, I asked myself, are the women talking ideas either with men or with each other? We don't exist in *Tootsie*.

The two prototypic women in the movie are Sandy (Terri Garr) and Julie (Jessica Lange). The major difference between them is that Julie is presented as much more sweetly sexy, much more desirable, and less attainable. Sandy and Michael go to bed together once near the beginning of the show. After that, she proceeds to wait for him night after night, though he forgets date after date or breaks each date he does remember.

Julie is in a similar "relationship." She's the hospital slut (her words) in the soap. Her "lover" is the soap's director — who is philandering around while she devotedly waits for him.

In one scene on the soap, she's sexually assaulted by a rabid patient. The conveniently present "Dorothy Michaels" (Michael in his disguise) pulls her away far more rapidly than scripted. "You

saved my ass — literally," breathes Julie in grateful, smiling friendliness. There's no trace of annoyance that her ass almost didn't get saved, no hostility at the groper.

Dorothy saves Julie's ass in more ways than one. Since Dorothy's a woman consistently unwilling to be treated badly, she proves such a splendid role model that Julie eventually learns to stand up for herself.

Yet Julie, a sweet young thing in need of rescuing, is the woman Dorothy/Michael falls in love with. In other words, Julie — and not a woman like Dorothy — is the one desired by the hero of the show.

To be fair to *Tootsie*, Sandy and Julie aren't entirely saps. Sandy lives on her own in a nice apartment, so she probably earns enough to be able to afford it. And when she's finally dumped by Michael, she doesn't fall apart; she gets screaming angry. Nor does she walk out of the play in which she is to co-star with him: she's a professional and not about to let personal problems mess up her career.

As for Julie, she has an even nicer place than Sandy. She doesn't cancel plans to be with a woman friend should a man call and ask her out. Further, she's a single mother devoted to her infant daughter (though terrified of the baby's strict nanny). Still, both Sandy and Julie are largely passive.

There is one striking exception to everything I've been saying about the women in *Tootsie*: the soap's producer. She — and not any male character — selects "Dorothy" over all the biologically female contenders for the part of the hospital administrator. She also, more positively, lets Dorothy get away with making the administrator ever more assertive. So we do see one strong woman standing up for another.

It's interesting that the producer is never sexually harassed or sexually desired, and that we're given no indication as to how she got where she is or what her private life is like. She is, all in all, simply the plot mechanism that enables Dorothy to do her thing.

And what is Dorothy's thing? Announcing her pride in being a

woman isn't all she can do better than any woman. No assertive woman has ever had a role in the soap. Instead, the resident lech kisses any woman with even a bit part. Resourceful Dorothy changes the script and hits him over the head. Hasn't any actress ever done this before and been forced to retake the scene?

Having made one script change, Dorothy begins improvising whenever she feels so inclined. As in the first instance, her ad-libbing is never edited out — not even when her advice is dangerous. When faced with a patient who has been battered by her husband, Dorothy is supposed to tell the woman to leave her home and get counseling. Instead she states that the home belongs to the wife as much as to the husband; so there's no reason why the woman should be the one to leave. This off-the-cuff remark could prove fatal to the woman: battered women are almost certain to be beaten again, especially while isolated in their homes.

Dorothy isn't only successfully assertive on-screen. The soap's director takes to addressing her as Tootsie. She responds with "My name is Dorothy. It's a perfectly good name. D-O-R-O-T-H-Y. Not Tootsie. Not Toots. Dorothy."

From then on he never, in public, refers to her as Tootsie. In *Tootsie*, it takes a man both to react to the put-down of women and to know exactly how to put men in their place.

The implication of Dorothy's easy achieving is clear: if women are victimized, it's all our fault for being too wishy-washy.

Dustin Hoffman claims playing Dorothy has increased his awareness of the difficulties women face. But, in that part, he's faced hardly any of them. He's able to surmount almost every obstacle. Women who refuse to be called Tootsie have to reiterate their refusal — day after day. Actresses who don't like their lines are rarely given the licence to change them any way they please. And actresses are rarely offered the parts of positively presented strong women: note that the hospital administrator is the first part in the soap in which a



woman has to be proud to be a woman. Most of all, Hoffman has — luckily for him — missed out on the social conditioning most women go through.

There's an even greater distortion than the presentation of yet another man as the saviour of women too weak to take care of our own lives. *Tootsie* erases the past twenty years of growing feminist consciousness. During this time far more women than men have been trying to stop sexual harassment, have organized for legal reforms and increased educational opportunities, have set up rape-crisis centres, shelters for battered women, daycare centres, women's bookstores, and so on.

Tootsie is set in a historical vacuum. Somehow or other, a woman producer, a woman hospital administrator, and unstigmatized single motherhood are everyday occurrences. Yet seemingly no one (and especially no woman) has worked for feminist reforms. In fact, the word "feminist" doesn't crop up in the film.

A third distortion is the film's negative presentation of men. Michael is the most sensitive and feminist man in *Tootsie*. According to my experience, though men as a gender certainly don't merit blanket approval, Michael isn't the best of a bad lot.

Now for the show's other serious limitation: its homophobia. The first indication comes early on.

Soon after landing the part on the soap, Michael visits Sandy. She also tried out for it but doesn't know he auditioned (though only after she was ruled out). She's showering. On her bed is a dress. It occurs to Michael that the dress might be right for the part. He strips and . . . in comes Sandy. Rather than admit he got the part or pretend that he enjoys wearing dresses or that he needs a shower, he pretends — to a friend of six years — that he finds her sexually irresistible. In other words, he has intercourse with her because, in his view, that's better than letting her think he could be a (straight or gay) closet transvestite.

In *Tootsie*, Michael's disguising himself as a woman is a topic for discussion. His treatment of Sandy, on the other hand, isn't considered worth commenting on. Of course, Michael's going to bed with Sandy has a purpose other than demonstrating his disregard for her and men's generally callous treatment of women. It's proof that he can get it up with a woman, that his temporary passing as a woman doesn't mean he's gay.

His heterosexuality is indicated very early in the show. At the party near the beginning, he makes blatant passes at women. But the episode with Sandy is evidence that not only does he seem to be straight, he is.

It's worth noting that there isn't any need for Michael's heterosexu-

ality to be demonstrated in the way it is. He could have succeeded in picking up a woman at the party. He could have been having an affair with a woman. He could even have gone to bed with Sandy because neither of them liked what was on TV that night.

Michael's abuse of Sandy is far from the only evidence of homophobia. In Michael's opinion (and the film-makers'), the most upsetting consequences from his role in the soap are Sandy's growing conviction that he's gay and Julie's belief that he's lesbian.

Julie's assumption is understandable. Toward the end of the show, she and Dorothy/Michael are sexually attracted to each other. We, the audience, know Dorothy is actually Michael. So does Michael.

"Dorothy" leans over to kiss Julie. (After all, he's a man deep down, so he would be the one to make the first move.)

Julie recoils.

Dorothy/Michael responds with "It's not what you think. I can explain." "She" isn't about to explain the joys of lesbian lovemaking. Nor is "she" about to deny the sexual attraction. "I have a penis" — that's the gist of what he wanted to say.

In *Tootsie*, Julie is right to recoil from any woman attracted to her, even when the attraction is mutual. Soon after, she lets Dorothy know they can't ever see each other again, even though she's magnanimous enough to admit she'll always remember the past few weeks as very special.

Still, their friendship is over — despite the fact that it's the example of Dorothy's personal integrity which gave Julie the courage to leave her many-timing "lover." Dorothy is also Julie's best friend, someone Julie loves for whom she is (or appears to be). Yet there isn't any suggestion the two could remain close even if they chose, for whatever reason, not to become lovers.

(By the end of the film, their attraction is revealed for what it is: male-female magnetism. Somehow or other, Julie has responded to Dorothy/Michael's male hormones.)

Tootsie's homophobia — which extends so far that there aren't any

lesbians or gay men in the film; such people form an entirely invisible off-screen menace — can't be ascribed to the film-makers' desire to make a commercially successful product. Recent Hollywood films that have done well despite, or because of, the presence of homosexual characters include *Personal Best*, *Death Trap*, *Making Love*, *Victor/Victoria*, and *10*.

The world of *Tootsie* is filled (quite realistically) with lying, philtering, groping, verbally and physically abusive straight men. Small wonder that the presumably heterosexual male film-makers want to repress any awareness of the possibility that women might opt out of relating sexually to such undesirables.

At the end of *Tootsie*, Michael claims he's learned a lot from his weeks as Dorothy. According to

him, now he knows how to be friends with a woman. But he was friends with Sandy for six years before he went to bed with her so that she wouldn't think he wanted to try on her dress. And he was standing Sandy up just when he was supposedly learning to make friends with women. It doesn't seem as if he's learned much.

In some shows, doctors or lawyers are called in as consultants to make sure the medical or legal facts are right. *Tootsie*'s writers, producers, director, and star are all men. Their topic has to do with women. I submit that the show could have done a lot of good if a variety of women had been consulted. Since the film deals with feminist issues and touches on lesbianism, feminist and lesbian women might have made helpful suggestions.

It's quite likely Dorothy/Michael wouldn't have found himself women's one and only saviour. "She" might have had to choose between redoing some scenes as scripted and being fired for being a trouble-maker. His abuse of Sandy wouldn't have been presented as funny. Just think, Julie might even have responded positively to Dorothy's kiss, only to be faced with the difficulty of adjusting to Dorothy's being Michael.

Then Michael might really have learned a lot.

Elsa Schieder, who lives in Montreal, is very interested in discrepancies between what books and films are saying and what they're widely perceived to be saying.

it'S NOT TIME FOR THE BIRTH YET

it's not time for the birth yet
and you already want out —
insisting that the growing should stop —
while your belly keeps swelling with sea.

with time she will come out,
eyes stinging with salt,
body quivering
from the force of the waves.

and i, who thought i was alone,
now find myself carrying —
my nostrils full
of the deep-sea smell.

i often bragged of not wanting
to go through labour pains like my mother,
and now look at me,
screaming myself into birth.

well, that'll teach you
to want to leave the shore.

Clara Valverde
Montreal, Quebec

Love has knocked again on my door

Love has knocked again on my door
has asked nothing
and taken everything I had to offer

love has come in the cold winter season
unexpected fire, burning down the shelter
it took so long for me to raise.

This time it has your eyes,
this time it speaks your words,
this time it has no hopes to offer me,
this time I find no reason not to let you in.

Annamaria Guiffrida
Toronto, Ontario

Sisters

Can it be that the winds have changed?
Are we to be brought together once more
body and soul, eternally?
The love that was sown at our birth
has flowered once again.
Will it once more be crushed
Or will it bloom
Fed on the tears of our lifelong affinity?

Michelle Alfano
Toronto, Ontario