

SLOW BURN: EVEN DEAD BODIES, BLACKMAIL, AND BALLET CLASS CAN'T MAKE TILDA SWINTON LOSE HER COOL

WRITTEN BY ANDREAMEYER

PHOTO BY PAMELA CONWAN/CAMERA PRESS/RETNA

The unconscious does have a habit of sneaking up on you when you most think you're in control," says Tilda Swinton, referring to the demons lurking inside many of the characters she's played. The actress has spent a good chunk of her career portraying intelligent women of high moral ground and extreme self-control who slowly or swiftly come completely undone. Whether it's the high-powered lawyer in Susan Streitfeld's *Female Perversions* or the perfect mother in this summer's *The Deep End*, many of Swinton's characters are driven by forces entirely out of their control. They chuck their characteristic composure and start acting in a morally questionable fashion—or, in some cases, like a total maniac.

The spurned queen in Derek Jarman's *Edward II*, initially an object of our sympathy, starts knocking off her rivals and eventually

kills her brother-in-law with her bare teeth. At that point she wipes the blood off her mouth, tells her son, the prince, everything's going to be cool, and leaves the room. In *The Beach*, the beneficent matriarch of a paradise island commune ends up pointing a gun at the angelfaced Leo Di Caprio. She can't help it—things got out of control.

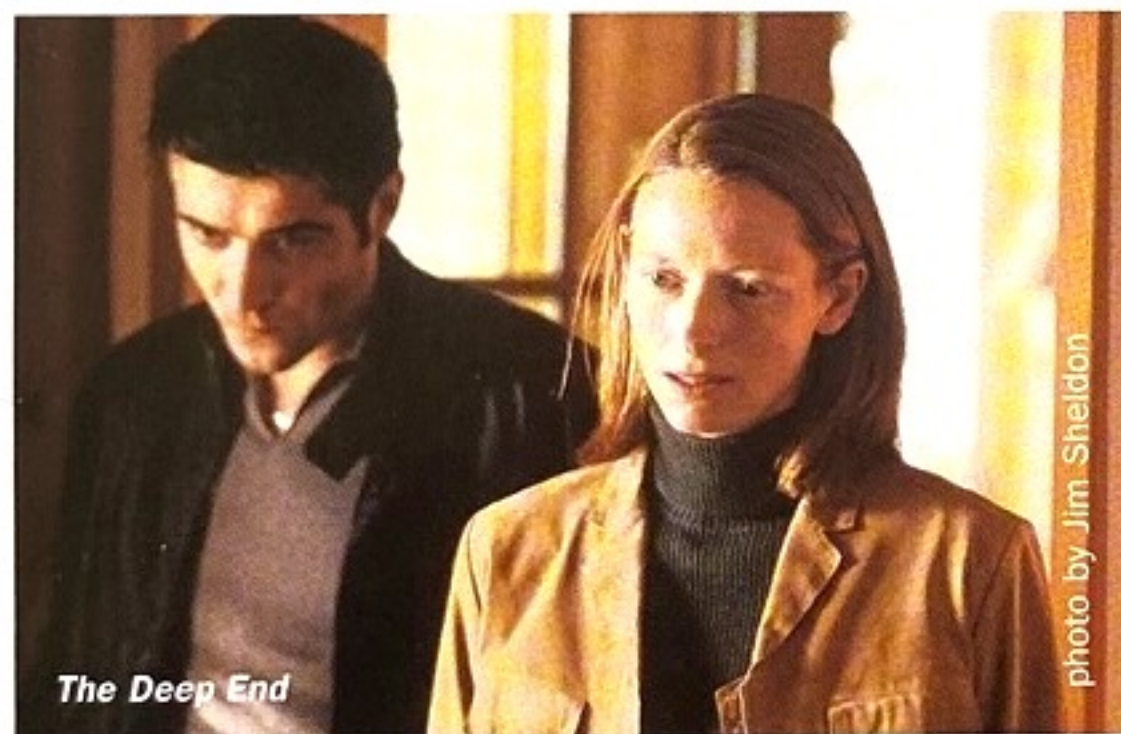
"I have a kind of gleeful interest in what I call the slow burn," says Swinton, speaking from her home in Northern Scotland. "I've always been interested in people who live in a hidden state and then are forced to come out. We all live our lives under the guise of a series of lies, and the best way of getting the unconscious to get up and bite you is to be the most controlling you can. All of those women are at their most controlling when something comes screaming out of their eyeballs."

Tilda Swinton is a picture of serenity. Her impossibly pale skin, elegant features, delicate frame, and eyes that seem to change from brown to hazel to blue from film to film could be plucked from a 15th century Flemish painting. Combined with a history of roles that personify feminine ideals—from Madonna to Mother to Muse—with longtime collaborator Derek Jarman, her refined looks made Swinton the obvious choice to star in *Orlando*. In Sally Potter's 1992 film, based on the Virginia Woolf novel, Swinton plays Orlando, a young aristocrat who lives for 400 years and wakes up one 17th century day to find he's become a woman. "Same person, no difference at all. Just a different sex," Orlando declares, upon waking up to find a pair of full breasts in "his" mirror.

This ability to proceed with life's business, as if unfazed by rather strange unforeseen circumstances, also defines Swinton's most recent slow-burning role, as Margaret Hall in David Siegel and Scott McGehee's rousing thriller *The Deep End*. When the Lake Tahoe soccer mom tries to interfere in the relationship her teenage son, Beau (Jonathan Tucker), is having with an older man, she winds up with a dead body in her backyard. No sooner does Supermom dump her son's lover's corpse into the lake than a handsome blackmailer (Goran Visnjic) turns up with a tape of Beau in some pretty compromising positions with the dead guy.

"My flippant byline on the film is, 'It's a mess. She's a mother. She clears it up. Next!'" Swinton says. "It could be a father-in-law having a heart attack. It could be a child throwing up all over the table. It could be somebody coming home with a spear in their eye. It could be a body on the beach. It could be anything, and she just has to keep rolling on. You still have to go pick up the children at school and you still have to get the roast in the oven."

What's important to recognize about Margaret Hall is that she's a mother, and one with a strict order to



her life. "It's all very neat and tidy," Swinton explains. "If the plot works at all, it's because we see what she has to lose." Margaret is one of those women, straight out of cinema's melodramatic tradition of the forties and fifties, who acts quickly, effectively, and to outrageous lengths in order to protect her family. Mundane questions of legality, principle, and consequence become unimportant in the face of a threat to a woman's family. The classic example is *Mildred Pierce*, who marries a man she doesn't love, loses her business, and takes a murder rap, all in a self-sacrificing attempt to protect her undeserving daughter.

"I suppose it was round about the sixties when all those films stopped being made," Swinton says. "When women's liberation made it less possible to make stories about women who try to

protect their man or their family. What became more interesting was a woman who said, 'Fuck it, I'm leaving' or 'I'm going to the police' or 'I'm going to kill him myself.' I find a woman trying to protect her standard of life—the level of control she is determined to retain—a very claustrophobic thing."

Swinton, a mother of three-year-old twins, is clearly not that kind of mother. (Incidentally, her post-pregnancy body is boldly displayed in Tim Roth's 1999 film *The War Zone*, in which she plays a mother whose family is ravaged by incest.) "I'm far less interested in covering things up," she says. "I'm far less interested in controlling things than Margaret is. And I don't fold laundry like that." But that's about all she would say about her personal life. Besides the fact that she was born on November 15, 1960, studied at Cambridge, and has been acting in movies since 1986, it's hard to dig up personal facts about Swinton. "There is no personal information about me," the secretive thespian confirms. "I have no personal life. There is nothing to know. I'm not actually in a real space right now—I'm sitting on a cloud."

It's easy to imagine the ethereal redhead lounging on a puffy white perch, maybe with a winged Jimmy Somerville serenading her from above, as in the end of *Orlando*, and a pretty daughter running through radiant fields. Swinton has remained conspicuously removed from the film industry and its celebrity culture, despite being regarded with great respect by critics and fans. She has even achieved status as something of a gay icon based on the string of Jarman films, the gender-bending *Orlando*, and other "queer" films like *Love is the Devil* and now *The Deep End*.

"For a long time, the whole concept of identity and then, of course, gender identity interested me. It still does. And I've had the great revenge—God's revenge—of having talked for such a long time

WE ALL LIVE OUR LIVES UNDER THE GUISE OF A SERIES OF LIES.

about there being no difference between men and women: I was given boy-and-girl twins," laughs the actress. "I was banged on the head with the differences early on and every day am reminded, in a kind of sick joke, because they certainly are very different.

"When Sally Potter and I were working on the script [for *Orlando*]," Swinton recalls, "I remember talking about this question of whether we could give her a son—Virginia Woolf's novel had Orlando having a son. And of course we eventually gave her a daughter. When I had my twins, I got a letter from a friend that said, 'But of course! Why didn't you ever think that Orlando would have boy-and-girl twins?' But we never did. We missed the real trick."

While real-life motherhood is full of surprises, the actress is not sure she'll continue the mom-playing trend she's been following lately. "I've got a funny feeling that *The Deep End* might close that chapter," she says. "To start that motherhood chapter with *The War Zone* and end up with *The Deep End*, that feels quite right." Does motherhood seem like a hard act to follow? Swinton laughs and says, "I'll be tap-dancing next." ❖