



*From the wings: Jacky Lansley on her roles in *The London Story* and *The Gold Diggers**

In the mid-1970s, having met at the London School of Contemporary Dance, Sally Potter and I co-founded Limited Dance Company, a performing duo of two. The name Limited Dance Company illustrated the paradox in our work, for although we related to theatrical and dance traditions, enjoying the pleasures of performance, we could not be said to be part of a mainstream of dance activity or even the fringe. Disciplined or skilled physical performance was simply one of the elements in works that were primarily image based and certainly came closer to the category of Performance Art than to any other. This experience has given us a shared language, at times a useful shorthand that I have been able to draw on when working on Sally's films as an actress and choreographer.

The rigorous and beautiful use of image and location in *The London Story* I recognised from our earlier performance practice, which Sally transmuted so brilliantly into film. At the same time, the role of Jack Winger gave me the opportunity to quote from and use my mainstream classical experience as a dancer and actress, which was sometimes underused in those early minimalist performance art events. My character, Jack Winger, is an interesting hybrid, sketched from various screen archetypes and autobiographical qualities; she is the glamorous spy detective, political activist, photographer, magician and dancer (among other things); her name foregrounds her androgynous and clever investigatory abilities; she is a chameleon, able to become anything needed – to wing it. The military trench coat and stylish tough haircut evokes and combines the power dressing of the 1980s with the 1940s gangster; all this integrating with the gorgeous and iconic red dress designed by Sandy Powell. I remember well the pleasure of moving in the dress in the triumphant final dance on the South Bank with my excellent accomplices Mr Popper – Lol Coxhill – and The Door – George Yiasoumi. As a filmmaker, Sally has always appreciated the needs of performers, and the time and detail it takes to perform well. Her own training in dance has given her an understanding of theatrical and technical finesse, an approach that was not always understood within the conceptual worlds of visual performance, or avant-garde film, where

art and theatrical discourses often clashed – theatricality perceived and caricatured as only and always concerned with slavish convention and cliché. As a young dancer I had left the hot house environment of classical ballet and theatre with, however, a huge bag of skills; in my collaboration with Sally I was able to exploit these skills in a new context that re-invigorated and re-invented them. *The London Story* celebrated this convergence of disciplines particularly as one of its rich locations was The Royal Opera House. When Jack Winger emerges from the taxi in her fur coat escorted by The Minister and enters the auditorium, I, the performer, re-invent my own history. This subjective objective dichotomy in performance is part of the challenge and strength of Sally's process, and the avant-garde/mainstream overlap within *The London Story* provided a most interesting platform for its cast of interdisciplinary performers.

Sally has a profound relationship with music; it is a hallmark of her filmmaking. As a choreographer, I too have strong creative links with music – which is not an assumed relationship within post-modern dance – and in 2007 I worked with the composer Lindsay Cooper's beautiful *Concerto for Sopranino Saxophone and Strings* in my work *View from the Shore*. Lindsay Cooper has been one of Sally's major collaborators and created music for many of her projects including *The Gold Diggers*, she also arranged Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* for the electric organ in *The London Story*. The film is moved along by the motifs in the music, including the light and witty use of the organ in the ice skating scene in juxtaposition to the dramatic full orchestral version in the final dance. Another exquisite intertextual moment is created when Jack waits, shivering outside the opera house in her blue evening dress and diamonds, for the delivery of the secret memo (which will overthrow the government), accompanied by Juliet's theme music from the ballet.

As *The Tap Dancer* in *The Gold Diggers* I inhabit my own back stage world frozen in time and space. The character seems to be constantly rehearsing the same routine – repeating a loop of dance rehearsal which is an intriguing fusion of cabaret tap and classical ballet – which she forgets when she looks at the audience. She explains this process to her visitor Ruby (Julie Christie) who asks her questions about her repetitive dance activity. *The Tap Dancer* tries to explain – “I forget...I forget...my steps”. She expresses the subjective anxiety of the female performer who, quite literally in mid-flight, is frozen by the audience gaze; de-stabilized, paradoxically at her most powerful leaping moment, and forgets her steps. Each time she goes back to the beginning of her routine in a quest for technical and performative perfection – not understanding, as yet, the psychological impact of this gaze. Ruby is fascinated and takes the dancer's outstretched hand to join her in a duet. The implication is that

collaboration is liberating to both. It is the duet – not the solo – which frees the memory and liberates the dancer from the intrusive voyeurism. She is no longer alone.

The character's world is an interior world in stark contrast to the vast Icelandic landscapes within the film. Certainly for me it conjures the wings of the stage (playfully too the choreography includes tap 'wings' where both feet appear to fly sideways) buried in the depths of an opera house. Sally, with art director and co-screenwriter Rose English, creates stages within stages using the image of old sets, theatre flats, mirrors and doors through which *The Tap Dancer* can continuously enter and exit as she explores her questions about the visibility and erasure of performance. At one point she leaps across an abandoned row of footlights while Ruby sits on a little bench on the other side to watch in her role as the audience. Ruby is viewer, counsellor, and mentor – but there are no answers to her questions until, still wearing her black beret and large raincoat, she too leaps across the foot lights to join the hooper on the other side. Their dance is interrupted by the presence of a small man, whom we see reflected in the mirror, watching them; he rushes Ruby off to her own performance through labyrinthine landscapes that are both real and theatrical; it is a journey which investigates the female performer, including Julie Christie's own iconic status as a film star, and the function of performance in women's lives. For me too *The Tap Dancer* provided an opportunity to investigate and reveal the instinctive performer moving into consciousness of both her oppression and her power.



As a choreographer, my practice is primarily located in live work – usually a very different space and process from film or filmmaking. Sally Potter is one of the few filmmakers who fuse these worlds through the performers she works with, the use of and focus on music, dance, cabaret and theatre skills, her concern with time and her passion for that which is artistic and extraordinary; all these are strategies which have the effect of questioning and deconstructing the industrial and mainstream elements in her films. In *Orlando* the landscape of ice and ice skating became a central and evocative language, and as the choreographer I had the opportunity to work with brilliant Russian ice skaters on location in St. Petersburg. Although I felt at times as wobbly as Mr Popper when he visits the ice rink in *The London Story*, Sally's confidence in me was inspiring – I had never done any ice skating – but she knew, from our work together as Limited Dance Company that I could 'wing' it. My working relationship with Sally Potter over more than three decades has been immensely important to the development of my own practice and beyond. As a performer I am delighted that she captured me as Jack Winger and The Tap Dancer – two roles I am very proud to have created, in two films I feel privileged to be part of. *The Gold Diggers* and *The London Story*, on different scales, explore and confront stereotypical representations of both men and women; and, as Limited Dance Company did in performance works which carefully emphasised their formal and structural make up, Sally Potter's films ingeniously exploit the traditions of the female entertainer and the performing arts to subvert and delight.

Jacky Lansley is a choreographer, performance artist and Artistic Director of the Dance Research Studio in London, a founder of UK's radical New Dance Movement and is renowned for her interdisciplinary and site specific dance projects. She also works as a choreographer and director in theatre and film, and writes on dance and performance. She is currently co-editing a book – *The Wise Body* – about experienced dancers. www.jackylansley.com

The London Story

16mm | 16 mins | col | 1986

CAST

Jack Winger
Jacky Lansley
Mr Popper
Lol Coxhill
'The Door'
George Yiasoumi
The Minister
Arthur Fincham
Ice Skater
Dennis Greenwood
Newscaster
Dermot Murnaghan

CREDITS

Production company
Sally Potter
In association with
The British Film
Institute and Film Four
International
Written and directed by
Sally Potter
Lighting and camera
Belinda Parsons
Sound recordist
George Richards
Camera assistants
Harriet Cox,
Louise Stoner
Runners
Warren Hewlett,
Laura Kanerick
Production stills
Simon Corder
Red dress by
Sandy Powell
Production
Nancy Vandenberg
Editor
Budge Tremlett
Assistant editor
Livia Gainham
Dubbing mixer
Peter Maxwell at
De Lane Lea

Colour consultant
Paul de Burgh
Lights
Film Lighting Services
Sound transfer
Hackenbacker
Titles
Frameline
Laboratories
Filmatic, Rank

MUSIC
Romeo and Juliet by
Prokofiev
Played by
The Philadelphia
Orchestra
Conducted by
Riccardo Muti
EMI Records

Arrangement for organ
Lindsay Cooper
Organist
David Lowe at the
Lee Valley Ice Centre

Filmed on location
in London

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