

MILDRED FIERCE

Tilda Swinton profile

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The celebrity who cut the most glamorous figure at this year's Sundance Film Festival was not party vixen Paris Hilton, grunge widow Courtney Love or even tranny rocker Hedwig Schmidt — it was Tilda Swinton, for whom vulgarity, excess and punk rock seem as distant as the Scottish Highlands where the forty-one year old British actress lives in comfortable seclusion with her husband and two children. Sauntering through the snowy streets of Park City in a sweeping gray ankle-length Yohji Yamamoto coat that looked straight out of Bloomsbury — this is the woman who played Virginia Woolf's elegant century-hopper in *Orlando*, after all — Swinton appeared austere yet radiant; cultivated and poised, quite the opposite of all the tweaked-out, parka-clad, cell-phone wielding studio minxes.

Swinton also turned heads at Sundance with her performance in *The Deep End*, a domestic melodrama set in Lake Tahoe, written and directed by Scott McGehee and David Siegel, the duo responsible for 1995's indie thriller *Suture*. Swinton delivers an uncanny performance as Margaret Hall, a khaki-clad SUV mom who discovers her musical prodigy son Beau (Jonathan Tucker) embroiled in an affair with a gay nightclub impresario who winds up dead on the shore of the Hall family's quaint lakefront home. Swinton's disturbingly cool, calm and collected character spends much of the picture trying to make sure everything stays that way, after stashing the corpse in a watery grave.

Crisis upon crisis leads to a handsome blackmailer (former *ER* hunk Goran Visnjic) threatening to go public with an incriminating tape of 17-year-old Beau in flagrante delicto, unless Margaret coughs up \$50,000 in 24 hours. An undercurrent of romantic intrigue surges between blackmailer and housewife — all this from a woman who doesn't register her first emotion until she dives underwater to obtain a set of car keys from the dead club owner's body.

If the film feels anachronistic, even otherworldly at times, it's due to the directors' passion for a certain style of filmmaking that has all but disappeared — the postwar woman's melodrama, as cultivated by directors like George Cukor and Douglas Sirk. The rest is due to Swinton's performance and comes from the actress's own interest in the same soapy, sinister fare. Indeed, the best way to describe Swinton's remarkable turn as Margaret Hall is to compare it to Joan Crawford's most enduring role — in *The Deep End*, Swinton is nothing less than *Mildred Pierce* fierce. She's got the glassy eyes, the deadpan stare revealing everything and nothing, and a near-total devotion to the welfare of her children that verges on the unsettling.

“That film was always there in the back of my mind,” Swinton admits in an interview several days prior to the 54th Cannes Film Festival, where *The Deep End* unspools before an international audience. “It was only a few weeks into the shoot that I realized we were making *Mildred Pierce* on some level.” That 1945 Michael Curtiz film, and the slew of films it inspired in the ‘50s, was a compelling factor in Swinton’s as well as McGehee and Siegel’s decision to make *The Deep End*. “We never see these films being made that we all sit up until three o’clock in the morning to watch on television,” Swinton says. “These great films with women — and I mean women, not girls — usually in these melodramatic, film noir-type situations. Where were these stories?”

The filmmakers — who adapted the film from an obscure novel, *The Blank Wall* by Elizabeth Sanxay Holding, which was serialized in *Ladies Home Journal* — went looking for an actress who could embody both strength and vulnerability. Swinton was their first choice for the role from the beginning. “You have to start with the strong part,” says McGehee, “because some people just can’t get there. You hope someone can also bring in the vulnerability. Tilda has that range. Margaret goes through all these extraordinary crises that she has to deal with by herself, without talking to people, or interacting directly with anybody. Tilda’s so compelling just to watch; if you really start looking at her work, what she does in close-up, how subtle that stuff is — that’s what clinched it for us.”

Swinton believes the woman’s melodrama fell out of favor after the women’s movement kicked in because directors didn’t want to make films about women who were going to stick around and fight for the family — as Margaret Hall does. “They wanted to make films about women who would say ‘Fuck you!’ or ‘Let’s talk about it,’ or ‘Don’t threaten me, you horrible man, I’m going to the police!’ What I think is so radical about making a film like *The Deep End* now, and driving into the curve of that archetype, is that women are always meant to be doing this, they’re always going to be in these situations. It’s not a political issue, it’s a natural issue. Women are always going to be mothers and they’re always going to be dealing with sacrifices.”

Swinton’s recent past includes marriage and motherhood, though her private life, which she won’t discuss, is the subject of much debate. The product of Scottish nobility, Swinton attended the Royal Shakespeare College but dropped out in the ‘80s to pursue a career as a film actress. She wound up befriending and working with Derek Jarman, the revered experimental filmmaker who helped revolutionize independent filmmaking in England before his AIDS-related death in 1994. Swinton appeared in many of Jarman’s works, including *Caravaggio*, *The Last of England*, *The Garden* and *Edward II*, in which she played a cuckolded wife whose husband is involved with the gay king. In 1989, Swinton starred in *Orlando*, Sally Potter’s stylish adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s novel about a gender-bending royal who roams the centuries in search of herself. It’s Swinton’s most recognized and popular role — one that earned her accolades around the world. But it’s also a movie that took five years to make, leaving Swinton frustrated as the rest of the world embraced her as a style icon.

Swinton shifted course dramatically after Jarman's death, playing the control-freak villainess Sal in Danny Boyle's dystopian nightmare *The Beach* ("We went to Thailand for five months, what can I tell you?") before she shot a succession of American films including *The Deep End* and this fall's double-whammy freak-out of *Adaptation* (Spike Jonze and Charlie Kaufman's anarchic follow-up to *Being John Malkovich*, in which Swinton plays a studio executive in Hollywood, of all things) — and *Vanilla Sky*, the Cameron Crowe thriller starring Tom Cruise and Penelope Cruz. Swinton says she has no intention of continuing her stretch in big-ticket American films, opting instead to remain ensconced in her Highlands lair. "It probably sounds flippant to say that I'm lazy," Swinton confesses, "but I'm deadly serious. I am lazy. And I do believe that it's a really useful policy for life. Certainly for film performances, it's essential."

Caravaggio, in which she played a painter's model, revealed early on Swinton's subdued, vacant style of acting, which often involves staring directly into the camera with something akin to a poker face — a painterly technique she used to incredible effect in *Orlando*, addressing the camera with a fixed gaze that's as inquisitive as it is seductive. "I'm a Bresson girl, I believe in models in front of the camera," Swinton concedes. "I was recently asked to name my film of the century, and I nominated *Au Hasard Balthazar*," (Robert Bresson's 1966 film about a donkey's downward trajectory). "That donkey gives the most phenomenal performance," Swinton says. "If actors would learn a lesson or two from that, we'd all be better off." ■