

THE NATION

The Idea of Freedom

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Ginger & Rosa is one of those semi- autobiographical dramas that writer-directors sometimes make as their debut feature, when they have all of a decade's perspective on their teenage protagonists. Parents shrink in stature in these films from overpowering gods to wounded mortals; friends bind themselves to the soul but then fall away; and the world, though threatened by disruptions large and small, somehow manages to go on so that the budding artist at the center of attention can grow up to make the movie. In all this, *Ginger & Rosa* runs true to form—except that Sally Potter, never one to do things normally, chose to make the picture in her early 60s, as her seventh feature.

To the young person who typically dreams up such a movie, everything remains a discovery, whether it's a trick of the filmmaker's craft or an insight into still-recent turmoil. To Potter, everything is long familiar, which is part of what makes *Ginger & Rosa* rewarding. Her emotional juices are intense rather than fresh, having simmered for years into a complex reduction. Her filmmaking radiates the justifiable self-assurance that comes from experience, but also from a willingness (new to Potter) not to second-guess her story.

Abandoning the framing devices she's used from *The Gold Diggers* and *Orlando* through *The Tango Lesson* and *Rage*, she has made her first straightforward narrative, never pausing to remind you that "Ginger" is actually a young actress named Elle Fanning, or that "London" is a photographic construction brought into being for discursive purposes. You're allowed to believe in what you're seeing for as long as it's on the screen. Maybe, by taking an approach that some would call naïve, Potter has yielded to convention at last; but having reached her early 60s, she knows that not every convention is necessarily at war with inner conviction.

That, as it happens, is one of the themes of *Ginger & Rosa*. Set during the autumn of the Cuban missile crisis, *Ginger & Rosa* concerns nuclear war and nuclear-family war—twin threats that seem inseparable to an alert 17-year-old whose ears are filled with BBC reports of projected fatalities, and whose classically dingy brick row house is full of parental recriminations. Ginger's father (Alessandro Nivola), an anarchist pamphleteer of blue-chinned Byronic allure who wants to be "Roland," not "Dad," has charm to spare for his daughter—reminding her, as a small joke, to challenge him too when she questions authority—but for domestic life as such can muster only glowers. The mother, Natalie (Christina Hendricks), who abandoned her artistic aspirations to rear Ginger and clean up after Roland, no longer seems to make jokes, even those that are small and insincere. Hanging untouched on the vine in full ripeness, Natalie frets over her family's penury, seethes over Roland's absences, and boils over at his indifference when she makes a special dinner and he doesn't deign to notice. One parent seems weak, dependent and homebound; the other, strong, free and out in the world, where he fights against nuclear doom. It's no mystery which one Ginger would rather be, and which she will follow when the parents split.

But Ginger has another ideal as well, another second self, who may be even more magnetic than Roland: her best friend from birth, Rosa (Alice Englert). Crescent-faced under a tumble of dark hair where Ginger is a full moon framed in red, Rosa is the one who tries on matching outfits with Ginger in front of the bedroom mirror, chats and smokes away the afternoons with her in the lane or the cafe, tells her that her dream of being a poet has already come true, and leads the way for her into the adventure of boys. Rosa is the first to pair off at a party and start necking, the first to thumb a ride to get to the sea (and the first to jump out of the car when the going gets rough). Ginger follows right behind—although she prefers a side-by-side position, or to lean her head close to Rosa's with their lips almost touching. Despite Ginger's anxieties over nuclear weapons and parental bitterness, she still lives in paradise whenever she's with Rosa.

Then come knowledge and expulsion.

Part of the subtlety of *Ginger & Rosa* lies in the uncertainty that Potter calls up around her protagonist's response to the break: when exactly Ginger first perceives it coming, whether some of her actions are attempts to head it off, why she tries for so long to swallow her pain, whom she blames. You might feel as if half the movie takes place in Ginger's head, and half of what goes on there is hidden even from her. It's a dramatic scheme that often requires Fanning to be reactive—watchful, still, endlessly nuanced, and yet imbued with enough wit and resilience that you want to join imaginatively with Ginger, rather than run from her in fear that her victimhood might be catching. This is a lot to expect from a performance by a pale, skinny, pert-featured kid, and in response, the kid gives even more. Maybe Potter calls on her once too often to make a tear trickle down her cheek, but Fanning seems to overflow unfailingly, with tears and every other emotion drawn straight from the source. Even as Ginger becomes more and more agitated throughout the film—and paradoxically driven more and more inward—Fanning shrinks herself toward zero while making Ginger's thoughts bubble up effortlessly before you. By the final shot, she's able to dominate the screen, and break your heart, by doing almost nothing at all. Quiet, impassive, responding minimally to her father's interruptions, she simply faces the camera with Roland at her back and looks up at odd moments, as if to glimpse the next line of the poem she's writing.

If the performance is remarkable, so too is the filmmaking in which it's embedded. Aided by the intimate lighting of cinematographer Robbie Ryan, who delights in a deep red and can make a British interior's murk seem honeyed, Potter assembles the images of *Ginger & Rosa* with the concision and varied pulse of a good song lyric, set in this case to a soundtrack of the best-loved bebop of early 1960s bohemians. As far as that goes, Potter too seems to love Thelonious Monk. You can guess it from some of her quiet but telling decisions, as when she chooses to begin a scene with tender close-ups and then follow them, on the off-beat, with the moody establishing shot.

This is merely to say that in a film that's largely about *The Idea of Freedom* (to quote the title of one of Roland's books), Potter shows she can move at liberty within the norms of psychological realism. She even gives her realism a slight once-upon-a-time undertone, providing Ginger and Rosa with a fable-like coincidence at their births. Less happily, Potter also provides Ginger with a pair of protective family friends who are too cute precisely by half, and who I fear are meant to be fairy godfathers.

As for the rest, the film is clear-eyed, sad, thoroughly intelligent and—the hardest thing of all—able to forgive without illusions. By the time Ginger reaches that final shot, she has learned which parent is really the strong

one. She's also learned that a free spirit who hopes to startle the world should nevertheless take care about how she treats the people closest to her.

Which is what Sally Potter does for her audience in *Ginger & Rosa*.

If the bohemian family in *Ginger & Rosa* had been living in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn in 2005, by 2010 they probably would have had their building sold out from under them and demolished, so that a developer could slap a new condominium tower in its place, with doorman, health club, Cardboard Moderne styling and down payments as elevated as the views. Such was the result, dozens of times over, of a rezoning instituted by the Bloomberg administration. Choosing to ignore the viability of a community of small-scale industrial shops, mom-and-pop stores and low-rent loft tenants, city officials encouraged developers to plow under the neighborhood to make way for high-density residences, built for a clientele that the billionaire mayor's administration refers to as "middle-class," and that filmmaker Su Friedrich (among the artists shoved out of their homes) more bluntly calls "rich."

Referring to the fate of her former loft and neighborhood alike, Friedrich has titled her new film essay *Gut Renovation*. Like much of her work, the movie complicates snatches of autobiography and authorial voice-overs with texts, interviews, eclectic musical choices and playful structuring devices, both alphabetical and numeric. Repeatedly showing a map on which she colors in the properties that were demolished, Friedrich patiently counts the lots until she gives up somewhere north of 170. She also offers a visual tour of the industrial businesses that used to operate in Williamsburg, showing them by name from A through Z, to the accompaniment of a bouncy German pop song she dug up God knows where.

If you are among the multitude who do not live in New York City and do not claim to be artists, you might be tempted to dismiss *Gut Renovation* unseen as being of parochial interest. Or, at best, you might imagine it to be a corrective to the version of Williamsburg in *Girls*, a show whose mere existence might be enough to send Friedrich into one of her sputtering tirades.

Such explosions make it into the film by way of honest self-mockery, and as a rueful admission that the people who have screwed Friedrich over don't mind that she's angry. The necessary, futile outbursts also carry with them a suggestion that *Gut Renovation* concerns more than the immediate case, however vivid its details. Moviegoers who recognize Friedrich's feelings in themselves, and who always suspected there might be a connection between crap economic policies and crap aesthetics, will understand that *Gut Renovation* is based on a kind of faith. Friedrich believes that something can outlast the history written by winners: the bitingly funny poems of the temporarily losing side.

When I say that the most impressive film to be released theatrically in April 2013 is likely to be Shirley Clarke's *Portrait of Jason*, that's because the years have turned a risky proposition into an easy bet. By the time Clarke made the picture, in late 1966, a handful of independent filmmakers had attracted a following, distinguished if relatively small, for queer subject matter and seemingly endless takes; but no one could have promised her that people would choose to watch a single figure, Jason Holliday—black, gay, aspiring to be an entertainer, experienced at hustling—as he talked about his life for a solid 105 minutes. The odds were improbable—but by the end of the long night's shoot, Clarke knew she had captured one of the most involving, uncompromising and revelatory human documents in the history of cinema (as you can hear her

crow, off camera, over the final image). A new print of *Portrait of Jason*, based on better materials than were available for earlier restorations, is now rolling into US theaters after a premiere at the Berlin Film Festival. We have the Academy Film Archive and Milestone Films to thank.

Revisiting the days when Annette Funicello abandoned her Mouseketeer ears for a two-piece swimsuit and the *Beach Party* movies, Harmony Korine has tossed two Disney sweethearts, Selena Gomez and Vanessa Hudgens, into his movie *Spring Breakers*, so they can swim in the ocean of pulsating young flesh that is St. Petersburg, Florida, in high season. The action is considerably rougher than anything Annette had to deal with, as you might expect from the screenwriter of *Kids*; and as you may surmise on the same basis, the moralism is more stultifying than anything American International Pictures would have foisted on an audience in the early 1960s. While pretending merely to indulge in exploitation-movie silliness, Korine lavishes his disgust on young Americans woozily partying en masse—how's that for an easy target?—and on the special depravity of mindless white girls who play at being black gangsters, like the ones they've seen in video games and movies. Korine ought to include his own movie on the list. By a distasteful coincidence, the black people in *Spring Breakers* are all thugs, hookers, dealers and lowlifes, including the White Negro who opens the way for the Disney girls into full debauchery.

In this flashy role, which allows him to wear his hair in cornrows and chant about "Sprang brike yall," James Franco is outstanding—much better than in his lazy, charmless performance in *Oz the Great and Powerful*, the 3-D Disney blockbuster released almost simultaneously. But then, compared with the emptiness of *Spring Breakers*, *Oz* might almost be Ozu. Let Disney collect its billion, I say.