

I'VE HEARD THE MERMAIDS SINGING

[Dir. Patricia Rozema, 1987 – 81 mins]

By Adam Nayman

Early on in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing*, aspiring photographer Polly (Sheila McCarthy) drifts into a grey-scale daydream in which she imagines herself clinging to a skyscraper in downtown Toronto, conquering its height inch by hard-fought inch. When her suction cups fail, she begins to plummet to the ground only to straighten out in mid-air and soar above the city. It's an intimate glimpse at one woman's headspace, symbolizing a would-be artist's ambitions and insecurities. But a small detail in the costuming hints at a larger metaphor. Polly is outfitted for her expedition in a toque bearing the maple-leaf insignia. The image is in black and white, but she's still (literally) flying the colours of the Canadian flag.

As the first independently-produced Toronto feature of the 1980s to achieve true lift-off – a jury prize and six-minute standing ovation at Cannes, followed by a robust commercial run and several Genie Awards – *Mermaids* has been safely canonized in Canada; it's credited with helping to crest the so-called "Toronto New Wave" (whose fellow surfers included Atom Egoyan, Bruce McDonald, Petter Mettler and Ron Mann) and no list of the country's keynote features is complete without it (including TIFF's 2015 top-ten-Canadian-movies-of-all-time list). The narrative that saw Rozema go from working as an A.D. to David Cronenberg on *The Fly* to a fully-fledged auteur tackling themes of self-actualization and queer sexuality has been well-rehearsed in essays and articles. In a 2014 monograph, author Julia Mendenhall argues that the film's central love triangle, which places Polly between her pretentious, powerful gallery boss Gabrielle (Paule Baillargeon) and Gabrielle's brilliant, bohemian girlfriend Mary Joseph (Anne Marie McDonald) is reflective of the filmmaker's self-exploration, which each woman representing a side of Rozema's creative personality.

Polly is a benign klutz, prone to accidents and malapropisms; she's infatuated and intimidated by Gabrielle, an elegant, put-together French-Canadian beauty whose nickname – The Curator – speaks to her supposedly binding judgments. Cozily entrenched in the city's art scene, Gabrielle looks down on Polly's form of everyday portraiture. But she also longs to make art of her own – no less than Polly, she fears that she's on the wrong end of the siren's song. Mary Joseph, meanwhile, turns out to be a brilliant artist, and yet she's as self-effacing as Polly, willing to let her partner take the credit for her brilliance, a carefully prepared but predictable revelation that provides this slender, quick-paced comedy with its only real plot point.

Rozema doesn't really try to be a storyteller here; everything in *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* is scare-quoted self-reflexive, starting with Polly's videotaped "confessional," which brackets the narrative (and anticipates Steven Soderbergh's *Sex, Lies and Videotape* a few years later). The director attempts and alternates visual strategies with virtuosic brio, toggling between low-fi realism, classically-scored dream sequences, in-crowd satire (including an awkward sushi dinner and several shots across the bow of the critical community) and wildly stylized sets and props, including a Greek statue with a camera for a head that could be a former collaborator's nod to Cronenberg's *Videodrome*.

In his four-star review of the film, Roger Ebert speculated on the significance of the title, which alludes to T.S. Elliot's poem 'The Love Song of Alfred J. Prufrock': "Polly does not think ... the mermaids will sing to her." The allusion is on point, and yet *I've Heard the Mermaids Singing* captures the yearning of Elliot's alienated male narrator with little of his depressive heaviness. It offers up a complex meditation on art, appropriation and desire in a featherweight package. By the end, it's not a question of whether or not Polly can hear the mermaids singing – or even if they're singing to her – so much as that she learns she's capable of making a joyful noise of her own.