



POTTER'S

Avant-garde filmmaker
SALLY POTTER
battled insurmountable odds before
her beautiful epic fantasy, 'Orlando,'
finally reached the screen

YIELD



Potter (left) with Swinton during a break.

DIRECTOR SALLY POTTER knew a film version of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* would be a hard sell. A story about an Elizabethan nobleman whose life spans 400 years and who switches gender mid-stream? Plus she wanted an epic fantasy with lavish costumes and superb set design—all for \$4 million.

Potter needed visual aids. She put her lead actress, Tilda Swinton, in period costume, took her out to one of Britain's great houses, and photographed her against its sumptuous background. "No one had ever seen a development package like that before," says producer Christopher Sheppard, who pulled together a coproduction that spread the risk among four partners in France, Italy, the Netherlands, and Russia. "They thought the film was finished."

"I wasn't fully aware of the task I was setting myself in adapting this book," says Potter, who was able to achieve her lush visual style by shooting the real film on location in St. Petersburg and Uzbekistan. "But I could see it running like a film in my mind's eye."

Potter, 44, knew when she was 14 that she wanted to make movies. After directing *Thriller*, a short 1979 film that became an avant-garde hit, Potter made her first feature, *The Gold Diggers*, with Julie Christie. Five years later, she came upon *Orlando*, a story inspired by the experience of Woolf's lover who was disinherited from her family's palatial estate because she was a woman.

"Sally was utterly true to her vision," says Sheppard, explaining Potter's difficulty in persuading her backers there was an audience for a film based on an offbeat 1928 literary novel. "People wanted her to compromise in every way—they even wanted her to change the name. But she resisted, and clearly she's been vindicated." **JENNINE LANOUILLE**