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# a thousand pictures

**I**N 1994, DOROTHY PORTER'S VERSE NOVEL, *THE MONKEY'S MASK*, WAS RELEASED. THE BOOK WAS A SURPRISE SUCCESS, PROMPTLY ENTERING THE BEST SELLERS' LIST, WINNING *THE AGE* POETRY BOOK OF THE YEAR AND RECEIVING THE NATIONAL COUNCIL 'BANJO' FOR POETRY. WHEN *THE MONKEY'S MASK* WAS RELEASED OVERSEAS, IT WAS MET WITH THE SAME ENTHUSIASM, EVEN NOMINATED BY *THE TIMES* AS ONE OF THE BOOKS OF THE YEAR (1997). *THE MONKEY'S MASK* HAS BEEN SEEN AS A KIND OF SAVIOUR OF AUSTRALIAN POETRY, GENERATING NEW INTEREST IN THE MEDIUM FROM THE PUBLIC. THIS CROSS-GENRE DETECTIVE-LESBIAN-THRILLER AMAZED ALL WITH ITS COMMERCIAL SUCCESS.



PHOTOS: *THE MONKEY'S MASK*—R. DETECTIVE JILL FITZPATRICK (SUSIE PORTER), NICK MAITLAND (MARTIN CSORIK), PROFESSOR DIANA MAITLAND (NELLY TIGHELLI), LOU (DEBORAH MALLMAN) TOP LEFT: MICKEY MORRIS (ABBIE CORNISH) TOP RIGHT: DIANA AND JILL



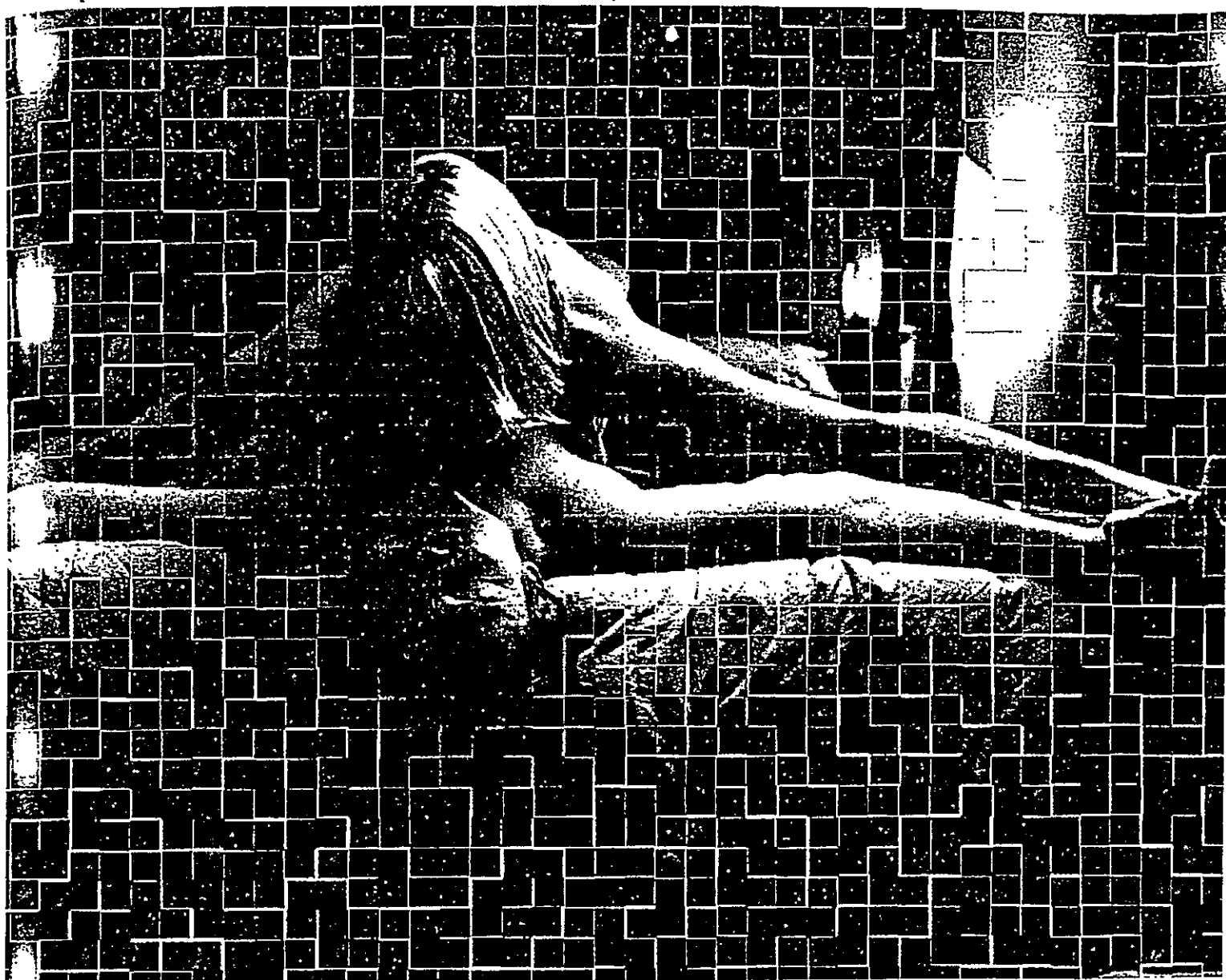
## LUCIEN SIMON INTERVIEWS DOROTHY PORTER AND ANNE KENNEDY



NO ONE WAS MORE SURPRISED BY the book's reception than the author herself. Its success has led to adaptations of the book into a play and now into a film directed by Samantha Lang. Dorothy Porter has taken an interesting journey, watching her work grow and metamorphose. On a typically cold and dark Hobart afternoon, I took advantage of the speakerphones at work to make

contact with Porter, intending to discuss her book and its transformation into film. The woman who greeted me was warm and generous—just what I needed, as I had been unusually nervous about doing this interview. I still don't know why I was nervous, maybe the book had something to do with it.

*The Monkey's Mask* takes us into private detective Jill Fitzpatrick's head as she wrestles with the various demons attached to murdered student/poet Mickey. The greatest of these demons is embodied in the object of her desire, poet and Mickey's lecturer, Diana Maitland. What ensues is an intimate tale of sexual obsession within a Chanderlesque detective scenario. This is



the kind of book that lovers read to each other; it is the kind of book that inspires the erotic. Porter evokes the infinite abandon of obsession so effectively through the first person narrative of our heroine, Jill. There is murder, there is mystery, but more than this, there is sexuality, real sexuality. 'The heterosexual relationships echo the lesbian ones in that they're about sexual relationships between unequals and the catastrophe

and pain that can result from that', says Porter. Often the book has been seen to be *about* lesbians, but Porter is at pains to point out she hasn't taken 'sides'. 'It's very much a book about sexual obsession, but it's sexual obsession period, not just lesbian sexual obsession'.

Recently Alexander Pushkin's verse novel, *Eugene Onegin*, was made into a film, *Onegin*. The release of *Onegin* pre-

ceded *The Monkey's Mask* and as Porter notes,

*Ralph Feinnes and his sister [Martha, who directed the film] talk of their great respect for this wonderful verse novel which they've adapted, but they don't use any of the poetry. Consequently, in my opinion, they end up with a pallid version of Dr. Zhivago. They miss the point by not using the poetry. I thought*

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*that was one of the great strengths of the film [The Monkey's Mask]. One of the bravest things about the film is not so much the sex scenes but that the poetry was used.*

Though Porter wasn't involved in the script adaptation or the production of the film, I was interested in the relationship she had with scriptwriter Anne Kennedy and Samantha Lang. I imagine that it is a somewhat daunting task to take a popular and successful work and drag it into another medium, particularly when the original creator is around to watch the outcome. I wonder how different the 'Fiennes family' version of *Onegin* would have been if Alexander Pushkin was alive. The producers of *The Monkey's Mask*, to their credit, created a healthy relationship with Porter and involved her in the project's development:

*As far as Sam [Lang] was concerned, we had a number of informal breakfasts and drinks and meetings where we discussed various things about the film and about who the characters were and what the themes were, how I used music when I wrote it ... As far as the work I did with Anne Kennedy is concerned, the producers, and I feel very generously, let me look at some of Anne's drafts and make comments on them. I think what I was most delighted*

*about was how much of my poetry they used. Anne had it in her script and it eventually made it into the film. I wasn't expecting that at all.*

During pre-production of

**For me, the poetry was always there. I couldn't**

the film I was chatting with one of the producers, Robert Connolly, about the risk they were taking in bringing poetry to the film. The stage adaptation of *The Monkey's Mask* (performed by Maryanne Bryant, directed by Pete Nettel) was instrumental in their decision to integrate the poetry into the script. Dorothy was with the producers and Sam at the opening night of the play (Belvoir St Theatre, 1998):

*They were incredibly impressed with how the poetry actually worked and the performance and so on. To my great delight, they decided to have a go at it. I was quite prepared, even so, for them to drop the idea. All along I have been quite philosophical about the direction that the film would take and I knew that it might not necessarily take the direction that I wanted, that it might not use the poetry.*

After talking with Porter and watching the film adaptation against the usual array of John Huston/Bogart film noir masterpieces (*The Big Sleep*, *The Maltese Falcon*, etc.), I was keen to chat with *Monkey's Mask* scriptwriter, Anne Kennedy. With Kennedy based in New Zealand, and myself sentenced to hard labour in Tasmania, I tracked down another speakerphone, if only to give the interviews their own environmental uniqueness. As Kennedy puts it:

*For me, the poetry was always there. I couldn't countenance making or writing a script of that book without the poetry being there. The poetry is what makes it different from other detective films. It is what makes it into a cross-genre film. The poetry is the reason for the film. If Dorothy had written a straight telling of*

*the story then maybe it would have been made into a film, but it is her words, her poetry, that made it lift off the page into a film.*

There is, I believe, an extraordinary subconscious complicity

between Kennedy and Porter. Due to the tyranny of distance they had little contact, yet they shared parallel goals, best defined by the inclusion of the poetry in the film. Undoubtedly the script is Kennedy's far more so than a film like *Crush*, which she wrote with director Alison McLean. Nonetheless, 'We were all a bit nervous about what she [Porter] was going to think. We wanted her to like it and we were so delighted that she did. It was the best award that it could get, that Dorothy liked it'

A lot of the dialogue from the film is lifted straight from the book. The actors, in a sense, speaking poetry. Kennedy used the book as a real base and found tremendous value in the text:

*I tried to use what I could, it is such wonderful dialogue. Dorothy can create this alchemy between the lyrical and the colloquial. She does that again and again, all through the book. It's very easy to use that on the screen. That was what leapt out at me to start with, that there was this great dialogue that could be used and that the poetry wasn't left behind. You could take the bones of the story and leave the poetry and you'd have a different film. But what made *The Monkey's Mask* wonderful was the poetry, the voice and the dialogue.*



PHOTOS LEFT & THIS PAGE: JILL FITZPATRICK (SUSIE PORTER), PROFESSOR DIANA MATTIARD (BILLY MCGILLIS)

It is easy to make comparisons between Raymond Chandler's crime fiction and the book *The Monkey's Mask*. It is also easy to accept the poetic dialogue of *The Monkey's Mask* as one of the hallmarks of this genre. Chandler's dialogue is also incredibly poetic. This rhythm survived the transition from novel to film and characterises the delivery of Bogart, Bacall et al. When I mention this to Porter, she reminds me that Chandler was a failed poet (though luckier than Mickey!) and that Chandler's novels are exquisite in their poetic values in terms of tone, sensibility, imagery, succinctness, brevity, and rhythm. I think that his poetry was in crime novels.

The film *The Monkey's Mask* has a somewhat convoluted relationship with the crime film genre. Kennedy points out why the book was such a cinematic

template: "there's this kind of reflective business going on: the book finds the detective film genre, it's already there and then it's kind of being translated back into film, or reinvented back into film, all over again. I find intrinsic interest in this complicated relationship. There is a tight link between the crime fiction novel and film. The influence of film more generally upon Porter's work is undeniable, this is, after all, a poet who freely admits that once she decided to be a writer at the age of fourteen, she was inspired by '60s rock and roll, not Wordsworth."

*I think that it is inevitable of someone from my generation to be informed by film and television, even if it is utterly unconscious. Last year, I was at the London International Poetry Festival and was privileged to hear Michael Ondaatje talk about film and poetry and the relationship between*



DOROTHY PORTER  
(PHOTO: MIKE STACKER)



*the two. It was an amazingly illuminating talk about how one informs the other... [Through this] I realised how I have been influenced by film and how I have cut my poems like film.*

Dorothy points out that 'The Wasteland' by T.S. Eliot was influenced by the work of Russian film-maker, Sergei Eisenstein. It is interesting to note that Eisenstein acquired his unique vision and rhythm through studying Biomechanics (a precise physical acting technique based around the mastering of physical études) with Meyerhold. He was the star pupil and slated as Meyerhold's successor. So we have word inspired by the crafting of light (moving pictures), which is in turn inspired by the precise motions of the body. Porter says:

*If you look at 'The Wasteland' as a filmic kind of poem, as a poem that has been influenced by early cinematography, it makes more sense. Film and poetry rely on imagery and economy of language, whether that language is filmic language or verbal language is neither here nor there. I think in some ways, poetry and film have more in common than poetry and prose.*

Kennedy reiterates the relationship between the crime film genre and poetry:

*In crime fiction, it's dialogue boiled down. Those characters, from which Jill is extrapolated, are pithy, they don't waste words. Poetry is like that; actually, it's been my observation that poetry can go in two directions: it can be either boiled down, where you have just the essence of something, or it can just give you everything. Dorothy is the kind of poet that gives you the essence, and that is perfect for cinema.*

The way that Porter has written Mickey's poetry, filled with teen angst and lacking subtlety, reminds me of Stavrogin's speech to the Bishop Tihon in Dostoyevsky's novel; *The Possessed*. Dostoyevsky deliberately wrote outside of the accepted forms of the Russian novel so as to create the experience of Stavrogin's clunky confession, which is embroiled in his own arrogance and nihilism and resembles a political pamphlet more than an honest revelation. Dostoyevsky is able to capture a sense of the stunted spirituality that defines the Russian youth.

In *The Monkey's Mask*, both book and film, I am impressed with the distorted words of Mickey, the pain that the character embodies:

*The poem that the film ends with incorporates a song lyric; it is quite a nice little poem. I remember writing Mickey's poems and lifting praises for the parodies and satire of the particularly dreadful and excruciating adolescent poetry. They weren't written that way, I wrote them very quickly. I accessed the howling 14-year-old in myself with amazing ease.*

One of the most powerful relationships in the book and the film is that between Jill and Mickey's ghost. Mickey, the *Monkey*, inspires the contempt of the power broker's represented by the poetry elite, who also happen to make up the long list of her lovers. They have contempt for her body and for her work as a poet. Jill finds the clarity to take on the case and confront her relationship with Diana when she realises that she and Mickey are alike. As Porter explains:

*One thing that I really like about the film is how they've created Mickey as a character, how they've woven the poems throughout the film. There is a key poem 'Love is a Torture', which as a poem is rather dreadful, but as a sentiment or an emotional event, it's crucial to the book and what's happening to Mickey and what's happening to Jill. The other*

*great theme of the book, apart from sexual obsession, is the nature of poetry itself: why people need it and why people write it. It's not necessarily just to create great works of art that are studied at University. It is also a vent for extreme emotional pain and the extreme emotional situation. One of the reasons why Mickey's poems are very much part of the book—when in many ways they are dreadful poetry, they are not great works of art—is that they are *cris de coeur* and that's often the essence of where poetry comes from. Whether it's great poetry or utter drivel, it often comes from the same source, the heart in pain.*

This year at the Melbourne International Arts Festival, Dorothy Porter will release a new collection of poetry entitled *Other Worlds*. Porter will also work with composer Jonathon Mills in the future, collaborating on another chamber opera as a follow-up to their incredibly successful *Ghost Wife* (an adaptation of the short story, 'Chosen Vessel' by 19<sup>th</sup> century Australian writer, Barbara Baynton). Her work continues to make the journey from page to stage and screen, with her last verse novel, *What A Piece of Work*, produced for stage and optioned for the screen. I wonder if Porter has any thoughts of writing for stage or screen or even adapting her own work. Her answer is clear and uncomplicated:

*What I want to concentrate on, to be honest, is writing books... at the moment I'm very happy for other people to option them and take them away and play with them and show me what they're doing and get on with it. I'm not ruling out doing something more in the future... Jonathon [Mills] and I may adapt *What A Piece of Work*, my last verse novel, for an opera and I would want to do the libretto myself for that. But in the meantime, I am fascinated and intrigued by what other people are doing with my work. Probably at this stage, other people would do a better job at adapting my work than I would.*



PHOTOS: PROFESSOR DIANA MAITLAND (KELLY MCGILLIS); JILL FITZPATRICK (SUSIE PORTER)

It's an amazing talent to be able to let go and allow one's work to travel through other people's minds; it is also the essential ingredient required to create great work in collaborative art forms such as film and stage. Porter is a writer, a performer of her poetry and a collaborator in opera. Essentially, however, she is a writer, a fundamentally solitary artist who understands the process of collaboration and embraces it:

*I think that I'd be a mug if I didn't. I can't see why you wouldn't let go, because it can be so exciting to see what other people do. I enjoy theatre a lot and I'm an absolute movie addict, but I don't really understand how theatre works and I'm not a film-maker, so I'm happy to let people who know more than I do get on with it. I feel very, very lucky so*

*far in the people who have chosen to do my work, in that they have treated the work with respect, not reverence, not stultifying paralysing reverence, but with respect. They have consulted me and they have listened to me, not always, but when it has counted.*

There are many reasons why adapting this book into a film is a brave act; not least among these is the difficulty of effectively taking a verse novel and putting it on the screen. *The Monkey's Mask* began its life as a book, a popular book, with a loyal and passionate fol-

lowing. In the end, it will be the experience of the film and how it relates to the experience of the book that viewers will judge the film upon. Is this not always the case? ■