

## Artist in Residence

*"You can be a wife and mother or a great artist. Choose one."*  
A film about a legendary artist and the conundrum of having it all.

Yolanda Sonnabend wakes up, lights a cigarette and begins to paint, sculpt, sew, draw, construct, smoke and drink coffee.

In her 70's, Yolanda is intense, tiny and bird-like in her movements. Her extreme hair is still long, black and always tangled. She hardly remembers to eat, laughs unexpectedly, competes with women, knows everybody, speaks her mind and flirts remorselessly with the young male art students who line up to assist her. She is vivacious, rebellious, unfettered and unrestrained.

She is a renowned portraitist, painter, costume and stage designer. As a young woman her father recognized her talent and advised her to choose between marriage and art. 'You cannot do justice to both.' he said.

Free of the constraints of domesticity, immersed utterly in her creativity, Yolanda lives in fallen Havishamian splendor in St Johns Wood, in the last un-renovated house in London.

There is no work/life balance in Yolanda's life, not even a nod to convenience as she inhabits an ever diminishing space, surrounded by over a half century of paintings, sculpture, stacks of frames, sumptuous fabrics, books, archeologia and the ephemeras of her frenzied imagination. She is utterly removed from the concept of the modern 'commercial' artist.



Yolanda's House by Tom Burstyn



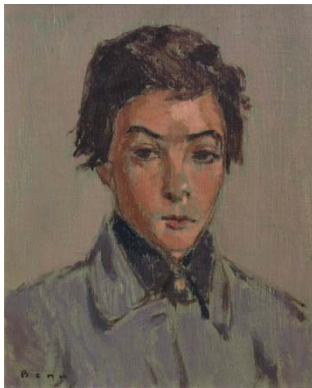
But Yolanda's life is changing. After a lifetime apart, Yolanda's brother Joseph has just moved from New York to live with her.

Joseph is crusty, difficult and brilliant, a dark curmudgeon to her desperate firecracker. A distinguished physician, scientist and AIDS researcher, he has devoted his life to AIDS awareness after being one of the first physicians to recognize HIV in the 1970's.

Mired in controversy for much of his career, alternately reviled and revisited by scientists, Joseph is credited with inventing the concept of safe sex and was the first to promote the use of condoms.

Known as the doctor of lost causes, Joseph was awarded the prestigious US Red Ribbon Leadership Award in 2005 for his outstanding leadership in fighting the spread of HIV/AIDS.

After a career committed only to his patients, Joseph is now retiring, returning to a country he has little affection for, to live with Yolanda, his only relative. He must squeeze his two concert grand pianos' into Yolanda's crammed house and find a way of living a life in conjunction with another human being.



Yolanda as a teenager by Polish / French artist Bension (BENN) RABINOWICZ 1905–1989

## Perspective

At the heart of this film is the universal story of the choices women must make to fulfill themselves and the consequences of those choices. It is the poignant story of why there are so few great women artists in history.

Yolanda was a firebrand, breaking every convention of her time. But no matter her success Yolanda is full of regret for the womanly things she gave up. Every woman understands the life she now faces: childlessness, the financial struggle of the single woman and loneliness in old age. And it is this universal human experience that we can all understand and empathize with.

While this film's primary focus is Yolanda, her interaction with Joseph, who stands in for all the family she has lost, will provide the narrative backdrop.



Set design for the final scene of 'Swan Lake', showing the boat in which the souls of Odette and Siegfried rise up out of the lake.

## Structure

This film will be structured around the creation of a portrait as Yolanda paints British film director John Irvin.

Irvin is himself a complex man. Unfailingly polite, occasionally verbose, an incorrigible flirt, charming, secretive and proud, Irvin has long desired a portrait to rival those hung in his Club.

Yolanda is notoriously camera shy. But with the privilege of intimacy that family brings (she is director, Tom Burstyn's great aunt) the film will be shot over several weeks as she paints Mr. Irvin in formal sessions in the overflowing front room of her house. We will watch as she sketches and seduces, cajoling and eliciting from him and from herself the magic that is required to make a 'true likeness.'



But it will be in the after hours - the meals prepared in the tiny, filthy kitchen, the dinners shared in the spaces cleared on the table, the on-going arguments with her neighbour (a posh lawyer), Yolanda's bleak and often self-deprecating humour when she cracks jokes about the burglars who broke in seven years ago and beat her senseless, or her tales of sleeping with everyone from the dustman to the duke.

As Joseph plays his beloved pianos at all hours and Yolanda ceaselessly paints and creates we will discover how to live a life without gaps, we will unravel the irascible relationship between these two ageing, brilliant, difficult, often rude, selfish and ultimately lonely people, trying finally, in their 70's to find some semblance of family connection.

With footage of her most famous ballets, archival images of a young and hopeful Yolanda, we will unravel the mechanisms of her creativity and reveal the secret hidden in her most personal paintings. And as we finally reveal the portrait Yolanda has been making we learn it may be her last, as the cancer she has denied can no longer be ignored.

## Visual Style and Content Focus

Shot in the intimate cinema verité style of THIS WAY OF LIFE, the film will be intense and close. Using mainly natural light is Tom Burstyn's known forte and he will be creating evocative images to complement the shadowed, rare and beautiful world Yolanda and Joseph occupy.

Rather than the superior approach of films such as Grey Gardens Yolanda's Portrait will be created with respect for the artist, her work and her life journey. While there is easy humour to be made from her fraught relationship with her brother, the filmmakers will treat them with empathy.

## Audience

Yolanda is a film for mature audiences. But it does not treat that audience with kid gloves. Yolanda's life is raw, the very opposite of rarefied and she has difficulty making nice for the sake of it. The film will be compelling and unexpected, engaging audience in the journey of making a portrait, in the life of truly eccentric people who actually have something relevant to say about the world.

PRIMARY: 40 up general mature women drawn to the universality of a woman choosing a very different life path, will empathize with the consequences of that choice and the reality of not being able to 'have it all'

SECONDARY PRIMARY: 45 – 65, mature art-house audience with skew to art, opera and ballet lovers.

SECONDARY: 18 and up art student, especially female.

Internationally the film is destined for the top end festival circuit from where it will play on discerning documentary and arts broadcasts. The setting of an intense personal story against the wider political and historical backdrop of the choices all women must make and the consequences of those choices – specifically debunking the 20<sup>th</sup> century idea that women can and should have it all will give this film a unique appeal that will transcend the culture cognoscenti.

## Conclusion:

Not just a portrait of an artist, this film is about a woman who has eschewed every convention as she swims against the tide. For 50 years she has paid little mind to the whims of the market, the expectations of society or the dictates of fashion. Is she mad? Many people think so. And if she is, does it matter? She is

a woman unlike any other in this world. And she is the Director's great aunt, the last vestige of a family decimated by the Holocaust.

On the surface *Artist in Residence* is a biography of an eccentric artist but it also asks and answers the question of why there are so few great women artists throughout history.

Tchaikovsky was said to have used the composition of *Swan Lake* to express one of the most poignant quotes in the history of literature and the overwhelming central theme of his own life - from Dante's *Divine Comedy*:

*"There is no greater sorrow than to be mindful of the happiness in misery".*

He could have been speaking for Yolanda.

Six of Yolanda's portraits hang in the National Portrait Gallery, including Steven Berkoff, Stephen Hawking and Sir Kenneth Macmillan.

Yolanda's work features in many public collections, including the British Museum, the Theatre Museum and the V&A Museum. She has had numerous exhibitions and has lectured extensively at the Slade.

As a set and costume designer for the Royal Ballet her *Swan Lake* has been performed more than 884 times. She works regularly with Sir Kenneth MacMillan, Anthony Dowell and Michael Corder. Her designs have been commissioned by ballet companies as far afield as Japan and Norway, and seen at Covent Garden, Sadlers Wells, Stuttgart, Bonn Opera House, La Scala, and Lisbon.

