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Rosie Gaunt-Mathieson and Hayley Morris on Being Seen

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An ordinary job interview takes an unexpected turn in Rosie Gaunt-Mathieson's A TAIL, when a woman discovers she has grown a mermaid's tail. In an exclusive conversation, we speak with the director and lead actress Hayley Morris about humour, the female experience and an unconventional ending.

There is never a particularly convenient moment to grow a mermaid's tail, but having one appear on the day of an important job interview is perhaps especially unfortunate. In A TAIL, Gemma finds herself in precisely that situation, attempting to navigate an ordinary working day while dealing with something that makes it rather difficult for anyone around her to treat her as ordinary.

It is an unusual premise, and one that could easily have been approached as a straightforward piece of fantasy. But what makes the film interesting is how little interest it has in the fantastical for its own sake. Gemma still has responsibilities, expectations to meet and a job interview to get through. The tail is simply another complication in a life that was already proving difficult.

When I asked Rosie Gaunt-Mathieson what first attracted her to the script, she recalled growing up with The Little Mermaid and Splash, both of which offered their own versions of mermaids entering the human world. Finola's writing, however, approached the idea from a rather different direction. There was no romanticising Gemma's circumstances, nor any attempt to make her transformation particularly glamorous.

"Gemma's life is hard, she is struggling, and the tail turning up makes everything harder," Rosie explains. What she particularly loved was the script's "acerbic and innate wry Britishness", the sense that, however ridiculous the circumstances might become, there is little choice but to get on with things. It is this matter-of-fact attitude that gives the film much of its character. As Rosie puts it, "It is so normalised yet so ludicrous, but also it's normal for Gemma and her sister to have to work around it."

For Hayley, approaching Gemma meant looking beyond the transformation altogether. Around 80 per cent of her preparation before filming was spent establishing who Gemma was, what had brought her to the interview and what the opportunity meant to her. It was important that the character existed as a person before the audience began reacting to the tail.
She also had a fairly clear understanding of how Gemma would respond to the people around her. Rather than someone who would immediately challenge authority or stand up for herself, she saw a woman who

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was already inclined to make herself smaller. The circumstances only intensified that instinct.

Interestingly, when discussing what the tail represented to her personally, Hayley offered an interpretation that brings the film considerably closer to everyday life. Although its meaning is deliberately left open, she approached it as an analogy for the menstrual cycle.
"I was treating the tail in the same way I'd treat getting my period," she says. "It wasn't a big scary shock, but more of a massive inconvenience, especially because it was such an important day for her."

It is a rather fitting way of approaching a film in which the body seems to have its own agenda, regardless of what the day might have in store. Rosie, however, was keen not to attach the story to one particular experience. She describes it as more of a fable or allegory for the female experience, as well as for people who find themselves held back by the way others respond to their visible differences.

That openness has allowed audiences to find their own connections. Rosie mentions conversations with viewers who have related the film to endometriosis, disability and trans experiences. These were not necessarily interpretations the filmmakers had anticipated, but they are precisely the kind of personal responses she hoped the story might invite.
"We didn't want to prescribe what people were to take from it," she says. "I guess that is the beauty of storytelling."

What interested Rosie was not simply the fact that Gemma looks different, but the variety of reactions that follow. Some people are intrigued, others overstep boundaries, while others respond with disgust or an uncomfortable fascination. Even a seemingly innocent question such as whether someone can touch her tail becomes another reminder that Gemma's body has suddenly become something people feel entitled to comment on.
When discussing the different forms of judgement depicted in the film, Rosie also pointed towards a particularly recognisable kind of behaviour: the treatment women can receive from other women when entering male-dominated professional spaces.

The job interview scene is perhaps the most direct example. The two women interviewing Gemma might initially appear to be in a position to understand her, but their apparent encouragement gradually reveals something rather less supportive. Rosie was deliberate about the language they use and what she describes as their "faux celebration" of Gemma.It is a scene that Hayley also identifies as a turning point for her character. Before arriving at the interview, Gemma has a certain level of acceptance towards her situation. Once she enters the room, however, she is stared at, alienated and made increasingly conscious of her difference. The fact that this comes from two women makes the experience particularly disappointing.

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There is something quite affecting about the difference between what Gemma expresses and what she is actually feeling. Hayley describes the defeat and disappointment visible in her face, but explains that, internally, she understood Gemma to be experiencing anger. She is not simply embarrassed by the situation; she feels let down by people who, more than anyone, should have understood.
I was also interested in how Hayley approached the moments when Gemma does not necessarily say what she feels. Rather than judging her for not standing up for herself, she found the character's behaviour quite familiar.

"I have been like Gemma in situations like the interview scene and probably acted similarly," she admits. "I think the person I am now, I'd like to say I'd have stood up for myself, but in that moment, with the stakes what they are, it can be a bit hard to speak up."
It is this understanding that keeps the character from becoming a simple vehicle for the film's message. Gemma is not always able to articulate her frustration, and there is no expectation that she should suddenly become someone entirely different because the circumstances demand it.

The film's humour works in much the same way. Despite the obvious comic possibilities of its premise, Rosie was careful about how far to take them. She wanted the world to remain believable, allowing the comedy to emerge from the dramatic absurdity of what was happening rather than turning the film into something closer to a sitcom.
Some of the funniest moments, as it turned out, were not necessarily written into the script. Rosie particularly remembers Hayley's physicality, including her tendency to throw herself onto the floor and move in and out of scenes. It brought an additional layer to Gemma, while her interactions with Letty also developed a physical comedy that Rosie was delighted to see.

Hayley, meanwhile, did not spend much time thinking about how an audience might respond to her performance. She knew the tail would probably attract attention, but deliberately avoided approaching the role with the expectation of making people laugh. Instead, she concentrated on Gemma's experience and trusted the director's instincts.
Without wanting to overthink it, she says, she simply immersed herself in the character. "I really let go of any idea of the outcome or audience, because I really trust Rosie and her vision."

That trust seems particularly important in a film that moves between comedy and more uncomfortable emotional territory. Rosie speaks about the relationship between comedy and tragedy, describing humour as something that can relieve tension while making audiences more receptive to the drama underneath. For her, though, it was essential that Gemma's vulnerability remained present throughout.
When we turned to the film's ending, Rosie was quite clear that she had never wanted to offer a particularly reassuring resolution. Without giving anything away, the intention was to leave Gemma's circumstances

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unresolved, reflecting the sense of fatigue that comes from repeatedly having to confront the same obstacles.

There was, she recalls, never an alternative ending on the page. However, some of the takes initially suggested a slightly more relieved reaction from the characters. Those were eventually discarded in favour of something more resigned.
"We opted to bin them off and show our leads as more resigned and battle-worn," she says. "Such is life."
Hayley was equally happy with the decision. For her, the ending reflects the way women can minimise their feelings and responses, often because they are expected to carry on regardless. There is an understandable desire for a story to conclude happily, but she felt that would have made the outcome misleading rather than truthful.

The decision is particularly interesting considering how much the film leaves to its audience. Rather than explaining exactly what Gemma's situation is supposed to represent, Rosie has allowed the story to develop a life of its own through the people who watch it.
Finola's writing, she explains, draws on familiar experiences surrounding the body, pregnancy and work. These are specific experiences, but they can also resonate in ways that extend well beyond their original context.

Having spent five years discussing and developing the project before it was finally made, Rosie describes herself as having become something of its midwife. Although she did not write the script herself, she had been closely involved with the story for a considerable time. The response to the finished film has only reinforced her belief in how deeply filmmaking can connect with people.

When I asked whether making A TAIL had changed the way she thought about the issues it explores, her answer was less about a change in perspective than a confirmation of how relevant those issues remain. The conversations surrounding the film have made her feel that its subject matter has, if anything, become more prevalent.
And she is certainly not interested in making its ending any more comfortable.
"Women still have a shit deal," she says, "and as long as they do, I will brave an uncomfortable ending."

It is a fitting sentiment for a film that begins with such an unlikely predicament but finds much of its substance in experiences that are far more familiar. Gemma's tail may be impossible to overlook, but the expectations placed upon her are not. Sometimes the difficulty is not simply being different, but having to navigate everyone else's reaction to it while still trying to get on with your day.

Perhaps that is what makes A TAIL linger a little longer than its premise might initially suggest. It does not

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promise that Gemma will find an easy way through her circumstances, nor does it insist that everything must eventually fall into place. Instead, it leaves her where many people will recognise themselves: still figuring things out, still having to get on with it.

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