LOGLINE

Set in the Belle Époque, a bright, rebellious British girl escapes the religious fervor of her oppressive school by transferring to a French finishing school. There she thrives, both intellectually and emotionally, only to end up in a deadly love triangle with her beguiling headmistresses.
SYNOPSIS

OLIVIA is the coming of age tale of a spirited seventeen year old British girl, who falls in love with her French headmistress. The object of Olivia’s desire, the charismatic Mademoiselle Julie has been in a longtime, secret relationship with the other headmistress of the school, Mademoiselle Cara, who suffers from a mysterious ailment.

Their relationship is already somewhat fractured when Olivia enters the picture but it is Frau Riesener, Mademoiselle Cara’s caregiver, who takes advantage of the growing rift to gain control of the school, leaving death in her wake.
OLIVIA
The novel by Dorothy Strachey Bussy

OLIVIA is the loosely autobiographical work of Dorothy Strachey Bussy. It is based on her experiences as a British girl attending a French finishing school run by the charismatic Marie Souvestre, whose students included Natalie Barney and Eleanor Roosevelt.

It was Bussy's first and only novel, written at the age of 84 and published anonymously in 1949 due to its lesbian content, by Virginia Wolf's husband's Hogarth Press.

A film version was attempted in 1951 by Jacqueline Audry, where the lesbian elements were severely toned down. It is my intention to expose, rather than bury, the lesbian underpinnings of this provocative, erotically charged, coming of age story. I want to fearlessly explore the passion, repression, and heartache of forbidden love. Unlike the original novel and the 1951 adaptation my film will unravel this web of seduction and denial through the lens of an ever-constricting murder investigation.
My two films to date, TANNER HALL (TIFF 2009, Rooney Mara and Brie Larson) and THE TRUTH ABOUT EMANUEL (SUNDANCE 2013, Kaya Scodelario, Jessica Biel and Alfred Molina), have both been coming of age stories. I find this to be fertile ground to mine because transition, by its very nature, is vulnerable, volatile and perilous. For my third film, OLIVIA, based on Dorothy Strachey Bussy’s Belle Époque novel, I am returning to this landscape to tell a daring, erotic and ultimately deadly tale of forbidden love.

I found many things captivating about Bussy’s novel; the sexiness of this mysterious school in the woods, the complicated and compelling characters that populate it and the convoluted relationships that bring it to its knees. What really appealed to me was the opportunity to take her fascinating world of women shackled by secret longings and pry it open, unleashing the passion, courage and treachery boiling just below the surface.

Thematically what drew me to this material is the underlying struggle between fear and acceptance. A hurdle we all face, privately and socially, even in this age of tolerance. To me, this story is like a flare sent into the night sky... something of great beauty and brilliance but serving equally as a warning of the real consequences of living a life that is anything less than truthful. For the choices we make build the path upon which we walk that lead us to our destiny.
In the visual telling of this tale, I intend to push the boundaries even further by not shackling myself to the standard way of depicting a period piece. To me the only truth that matters is the emotional truth of the characters and their journey, the rest is free game and I intend on taking liberties; both ones I have clearly delineated in the script such as fantasy and time-lapse sequences, but also tonally imbuing the film with a feeling of heightened reality and taking occasional forays into magical realism. I intend to achieve this timeless quality, this balance between period piece and contemporary edginess by telling this 20th century story through 21st century eyes. Using music from different decades, costumes inspired by the Belle Époque but not of the Belle Époque, sets designed with the color and flair of that era, and a fluid and intimate cinematographic style. At times the elements will be in harmony, at times in dissonance, but always in service of the same melody.

On a more personal level, what attracted me to this book was the relationship between the two lead characters, the headmistress Mademoiselle Julie and her pupil Olivia. When I was a child I went to Sacred Heart, a school at the top of the Spanish Steps, in Rome. The Mother Superior there took a particular shine to me. I became her pet pupil; perhaps because I was the youngest at the school, or because I was clever, or because my mother was an American actress often away on set so she felt someone must take me under their wing.
Whatever the case, all I know for certain is that we shared a deep, special bond. I was at that school for only two years, but the connection that I shared with her was transformative and played a very profound and positive role in the shaping of my life. I was then of a pre-sexual age, so my “love affair” was not like Olivia’s, but I can still relate to those feelings… that awe that I felt when I was around her, that feeling that she was special in a way that I could not define and had never experienced before. And, in being her favored student, that somehow meant I was special too. In the case of Olivia and Mademoiselle Julie the scenario is more complex and the stakes higher because desire comes into play, enflaming the power dynamic between the two, threatening the delicate equilibrium of the school and ultimately revealing the culture of denial and seduction that has taken hold.

OLIVIA was written anonymously, because of its gay sexual content. We have come a long way in terms of tolerance, but all of our own personal battles with self-acceptance and expression wage on. As a gay, female, filmmaker with a decidedly European sensibility and a propensity for work that both scrutinizes and celebrates our flawed human nature, I feel especially suited to bring OLIVIA to the screen. The rich and cloistered world, inhabited by these complex women, is something that I feel very confident in materializing in both a dramatically evocative and visually engaging way. I have a deep, heartfelt understanding of the emotional core of this story and a proven track record for finding and working with talented young actresses. To say that I was destined to bring this story to the screen may sound dramatic and grandiose, but after all, I am a director.
OLIVIA

A bright, spirited, nonconformist British girl who falls in love with her alluring French finishing school headmistress, Mademoiselle. Julie.
MADEMOISELLE JULIE
The vibrant, brilliant and charismatic headmistress of Les Avon. Whose affections for Olivia cross the line causing irreparable damage to her and the school.
MADEMOISELLE CARA
The other headmistress of Les Avon. She’s the frail and jealous long time companion to Mademoiselle Julie. Cara succumbs to her mysterious malaise under questionable circumstances.
FRAU RIESENER
The capable, dominant and seemingly devoted lady attendant to Mademoiselle Cara. Frau takes advantage of the growing rift between the headmistresses to take control of Les Avon, and leaves death in her wake.
SIGNORINA BAIETTO
Street smart and intuitive she is the passionately devoted lady attendant to Mademoiselle Julie. She befriends Olivia and tries to protect Julie and the school.
THE CLEVER ONES

MIMI
The confident, perky, Belgian girl. The 'leader' of the Clever Ones.

GEORGIE
The French girl, who oozes mystery and mischief. She falls for Olivia.

NINA
The warm hearted, charming Irish girl.
POLICE COMMISSIONER

Called in to investigate the death of Cara. He becomes more preoccupied with the rumored impropriety between the women.
OLIVIA is set in a world more than a time.

It is about capturing the sexiness of films like Lolita, Blue is the Warmest Color and Fifty Shades of Grey, the stylized flair of films like The Virgin Suicides and The Great Gatsby, the gravitas and suspense of Notes on a Scandal, The Hours and The Reader as well as the magic and passion of Heavenly Creatures and Dangerous Liaisons.
Raised in Rome, Los Angeles, and the English countryside, Francesca brings a worldly, passionate and unique sensibility to her filmmaking. Her character-driven films are visceral and darkly humorous, stylistically bold, with undertones of the magical and surreal.

A Brown University graduate with a Theater Arts major, Francesca sold scripts to both HBO and Paramount before co-helming her directorial debut “Tanner Hall” with Tatiana Von Furstenberg. The film marked the screen debut of Rooney Mara in a lead role. Rooney alongside Brie Larson and Georgina King play a trio of boarding school girls entering their senior year. This coming of age drama focuses on the girls flirting with adulthood and the consequences that brings. The film was an official selection at the Toronto Film Festival (2009).

Francesca next wrote and directed “The Truth About Emanuel”, which stars Jessica Biel, Kaya Scodelario and Alfred Molina. The film tells the story of Emanuel a troubled girl who becomes preoccupied with her mysterious new neighbor who bears a striking resemblance to the girl's dead mother. It premiered in the US Dramatic Competition at Sundance (2013) and is being distributed by Tribeca Films domestically, and Myriad Pictures abroad.

In addition to film, Francesca has been courted by the world of fashion. In 2011 she was asked to co-direct the DVF Fall Campaign (shot in China) and more recently, she completed the Jigsaw 2014 Fall Campaign (shot in London). Her experience working across various mediums give her advertising work a distinctive and cinematic feel.

Summer 2016 Francesca will be directing two episodes for the second season of the hit British-American science fiction series, HUMANS produced by AMC, Channel 4 and Kudos. The eight-episode second season is scheduled to air in the UK late 2016 and in the United States in 2017.

In the Fall/Winter 2016 Francesca is attached to direct SOPHISTICATED, the untold story of Dorothy Arzner. Dorothy set out against all odds in Hollywood's Golden Age to become its singular female director. This all but unknown icon directed Paramount's first talking picture, made stars of Katherine Hepburn, Lucille Ball and Joan Crawford and directed more feature films in the studio system than any other woman to this day, all while kicking up plenty of scandal along the way and managing to find true love.