

TOOTSIE

Directed by Sydney Pollack
Produced by Sydney Pollack and Dick Richards
Distributed by Columbia Pictures
Released in 1982

Instead of blurring the lines between sexes, as '70s feminists were wont to do, *Tootsie* is the first major post-feminist film; it anticipated the impact of Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus by some ten years. *Tootsie* distinguishes the sexes and applauds the abilities and roles inimitable to each sex, calling for an end to mutual hostility in favor of mutual respect. Our protagonist, actor Michael Dorsey, goes from a man who treats all of life as a stage to a man who finally can relate to himself for who he is, not what he does. Initially, in his incarnation as Dorothy Michaels he convinces himself that he has something he can share with women, given his many years of rejection and being bossed around. But by film's end he realizes that he was the one with lessons to learn.

Still, he had justified his hubris—considering what he'd accomplished, it's hard to imagine a better actor. But Michael Dorsey now understands that acting is not the most important thing in the world.

The film begins with a montage of Michael's auditions and rehearsals. While much of this is an entertaining backdrop for the narrative-swallowing titles, Michael's character is deftly sketched. He conducts workshops in acting and improvisation, his students hanging on every word.

But elsewhere Michael is taken for granted. His dedication to the craft, and his unwillingness to compromise (exemplified by his impatience with rude and unimaginative directors) have put his career on the ropes. The montage concludes with Michael exhorting his class that this is a tough business and "you've got to find ways to work." Thus, the ironic dichotomy: an actor must fight for the role, but if he cannot play the role honestly, it's better to quit! What was that about having to work? To quote Julie out of context, Michael survives "not happily, but honestly" by waiting tables.

He and his roommate head home, discussing Jeff's play and Michael's birthday, Michael betraying a frustration that he tries to pin on 'the necktie scene,' not his advancing age, proclaiming: "I'm a character actor—age has no effect on me."

Once inside, Michael is welcomed by a host of friends ready to celebrate. Four important matters come to light at the party: First, Michael is on the prowl (hitting on a variety of women under the pretext of being interested in their acting, getting the skivvy on the bevy from an older woman while he plays piano); Second, in a discussion with one actress, he lies to avoid admitting he's not been paying attention to what she's said; Third, he's eager to stage Jeff's new play, with the overwrought Sandy as his co-star; and Fourth, Sandy, we can tell, is in love with him, even telling his friends, when Michael wants nothing to do with a baby they're canoodling, that "he loves children, he really does."

When the party's over, 'Miss Right' leaves, and so does Sandy's date. Are these two supposed to be together? Any hint of romance is dispelled once talk turns to Sandy's looming audition. She laments that she's not going to get it, that she's totally wrong for it. "What kind of a part is it?"

"A *woman!*"

And as they practice it's apparent that Sandy is wrong for the part, but Michael, trying to show her how to play it, has some good ideas. This, of course, is the role for which Michael, as Dorothy Michaels, will soon garner fame. Even though Sandy is the same sex as the character, she is wrong for the character. Perhaps Emily Kimberly requires someone forceful and independent, traditional male qualities, to bring her to life. What's strange is that the "Southwest General" brain trust has this supposedly tough, mannish woman kissing Dr. Brewster on the first day, a decision that the show's producer, Rita Marshall, implicitly admits to botching many months later, remarking, "You are the first woman character who is her own person, who can assert her own personality without robbing someone of theirs."

Michael meets Julie Nichols, who introduces herself as the "hospital slut," conflating her ideas about herself (letting men use her) and her limited understanding of what women can be (i.e., if you're pretty, you're a slut). Julie soon learns from Dorothy's example, and begins to assert herself, first through her character and then in her break-up with Ron. So, it could be argued, it takes a man to show a woman how to be liberated. (The most explicit example of this is when Michael improvises in a scene where Emily is supposed to tell a domestic-violence victim to get therapy; Michael's preferred message is, *Forget your feelings and meet force with force—bash his head in with whatever you can find*. The producer and her assistant, brimming with a surge of feminine empowerment, nod to each other in the control room.) But even if that's so, even if women need to learn from men how to be liberated from men, before too long, Michael, having lived for months as a woman, learns what a truly deficient man he is.

His wrongs are multitudinous. The day he gets the role, Michael resigns himself to sleeping with Sandy, so to preserve his alter ego. As intimated before, this is probably what Sandy has secretly hoped for. But she, being a neurotic pessimist, knows this decision will have unforeseeable consequences for their friendship.

Once Julie enters the picture, Michael finds himself torn between two women, only one of whom knows he's a man. As the film progresses, Sandy struggles to understand why Michael is so cavalier about their relationship while, at the same time, still treating her with kindness. Michael struggles to explain his behavior, but his convoluted lies are soon outmatched by an ever more bizarre reality.

This confusion culminates in the best line in a movie loaded with great lines: "Michael, are you gay?...."

"In what sense?"

So, why all this trouble with Sandy? First, remember that Michael lied and said he inherited the money to do Jeff's play, so that he wouldn't have to tell her that he won the role that she'd auditioned for. Second, to keep her from, again, finding out that he got the role (he could have chosen an alternative lie by saying he was a cross-dresser), he feigns a desire for sex. The lesson here is that Michael exercised the traditional male prerogative of protection. He didn't want her to get hurt, but he just made things a lot worse in the end. To protect a woman

is a noble goal, but when sex and love are in play, sacrificing truth, especially for selfish reasons, just makes the inevitable pain that much more heartrending and unnecessary.

Michael lies a lot. His whole shtick as Dorothy is a huge lie. But he has also, as Michael Dorsey, been disappointing others for a long time. The critical scene that helps him realize this is when Dorothy confronts Ron, just before Ron and Julie go out to dinner. Ron observes that she doesn't like him, and that it's the rare woman that he can't make like him. Dorothy explains that she doesn't like his lying, his deception, his duplicity; he's hurting Julie. Ron says that he knows he's made some bad decisions, but that women come on to him all the time; he reciprocates, and they trap him with the shackles of a relationship. It would be too painful for Julie if Ron were to admit that he doesn't want what she wants. So he lies to Julie to keep from hurting her. Dorothy is incredulous, but then admits, "I understand you a lot better than you think I do."

So Michael realizes that what Ron is doing to Julie he has done to Sandy. Having seen what he could become, Michael opts to make a major change in his life, but Ron, ironically, never learns anything. Once he realizes that Dorothy Michaels is Michael Dorsey he exclaims, "I knew there was a reason she didn't like me," oblivious to his wrongs and baffled as to why he should change as long as he can make it with the ladies.

On the same night as Dorothy's confrontation with Ron, Michael wakes up George Fields and tells him these are good people that he doesn't want to hurt. This is a drastic change from their first scene in George's office, when Michael protested that he busts his ass to get a part right, to which George rejoins, "yeah, and you bust everyone else's ass, too!" The first indication of a change in Michael is on his first day of work. After he's walloped John Van Horn on the head and then delivered a pro forma apology to Ron, Michael tells Jeff that night that "if I didn't have the dress on I would have kicked his arrogant ass in." What this probably means is that Michael would have risked his job just to make an artistic statement (just like the Tolstoy play in the opening montage). Of course, here the artistic innovation, as is common, grew out of necessity, namely Michael's fervent hope to avoid kissing another man. This split-second decision rescued the character of Emily Kimberly. But in relating the account to Jeff he leaves out the threat of the kiss and reconstitutes the whole matter as an artistic disagreement.

Because Dorothy Michaels is a woman, Michael either thinks (being a character actor) that Dorothy can't be tough (just as he says Dorothy doesn't live with any one else as it would be "wrong for her"), or he thinks that a tough woman won't be accepted and he'll blow his disguise. The upshot is that Dorothy forces Michael to be more patient and kind. Dorothy gives Michael the benefit of a new identity, and she forestalls his typical ego-fueled self-destruction. But he brings to her, and Julie, and millions of other women, a capacity for strength and self-esteem that they'd heretofore lacked.

The film is farcical but not a farce. It doesn't task our suspension of disbelief any more than is necessary. Consider: Dorothy's neck is always covered (usually by turtleneck or scarf), which shields any view of the Adam's Apple (a dead give-away of masculinity). Also, Dustin Hoffman is a slightly short man, so he's the perfect height as a woman, slightly tall, but not incongruously so. The creators introduce the idea of the makeup allergy so no one can get a good look at her. And the necessity of heavy makeup (along with the incomprehensible interest

in Dorothy shown by Les and John Van Horn) is covered with a great joke: "I have a little mustache problem...just too many male hormones or something," to which Julie replies, "Well, some men find that attractive." And while Dustin Hoffman has never been considered attractive in the leading-man style, makeup technicians Dorothy Pearl and George Masters did a remarkable, unprecedented job of making Dustin Hoffman a pleasant-looking woman. And consider the director Ron and the producer Rita. Ron has a bad feeling about Dorothy, but he can't put his finger on the issue. Rita is very excited about the audition, and immediately offers a contract. Remember what Ron had said? "What's idiotic about power making a woman masculine?" It makes sense that he has reservations—he's a sexist who only relates to women on a superficial level. Here he only noticed her face and her accent. And Rita, being a successful, not-so-attractive, wealthy, dominating woman, saw nothing wrong. This actress was a reflection of herself.

In a film loaded with comic characters, the most poignant must be the affable Les. We have here a man who's falling in love with another man, thinking it's a woman. Given that he's so decent and because he's kind of old, his short speech of uncommon wisdom in the middle of the film provides the mission statement of the film:

Don't get me wrong. I'm all for this equal business. I think women ought to be entitled to have everything at all, etc. Except, sometimes I think what they really want is to be entitled to be men. Like men are all equal in the first place, which we're not. [...] You know, I can remember years ago there was none of this talk about what a woman was, what a man was; you just were what you were. And now they have all this stuff about how much you should be like the other sex so you can be all more the same. Well, I'm sorry, we're just not, you know? Not on a farm, anyway. Bulls are bulls...and roosters don't try to lay eggs.

The great twist is that Michael always saw his life as a series of roles—waiter, roommate, teacher, client, actor-in-character, actor-out-of-character; but at film's end he is unified. Either he found something in himself, or he adopted new characteristics suitable to Dorothy until they became second nature. That's the hidden meaning when Julie wistfully admits, "I miss Dorothy."

Michael realizes, "You don't have to. She's right here; and she misses you." He no longer has to call on the Dorothy persona. It's always been, as he says in the live telecast, "the best part of my manhood—the best part of myself."

What was once a character for Michael is now him. When he tells her that Dorothy is still around, he's saying that loving Dorothy requires loving Michael. And as Dorothy saved Michael from himself and Dorothy is Michael, Michael saved himself. But it took the benefit of seeing himself as a woman to make him realize what he lacked as a man.