SEGER NOTES #7: Tootsie

Story by Don McGuire and Larry Gelbart

Screenplay by Larry Gelbart and Murray Schisgal
(uncredited rewrite by Elaine May)

Directed by Sydney Pollack

Academy Award nominations, Best Director, Best Original Screenplay

When *Tootsie* was released in 1982, I had no interest in seeing it because I didn't find men dressing in women's clothes interesting. A friend said to me, "But it's about far more than that and I think you'll like it." I didn't just like it—I loved it! It is one of my top five favorite comedies.

Tootsie and *Some Like It Hot* (Seger Note #6) have a number of elements in common, but a very different sensibility. *Tootsie* is a product of its time, when consciousness of gender issues was rising. The feminist movement which had taken hold in the 1960s and 1970s affected the consciousness of the audience, as well as the consciousness of the writers and actors, who brought their own thoughts to the screenplay. Dustin Hoffman joined the project early on and raised questions about how the need to "sell" the false character of Dorothy Michaels would affect the character he played, Michael Dorsey. He researched how the physicality of a woman would influence the way he played her character. He thought about the difference in the vocal cords of men and women, and even the fact that women tend to have longer teeth than men. He developed an inner sense of when a scene, or a line, or the path he was going down in playing her, was simply wrong.

The production focused on the truth of the psychology of the characters. The writers, the actors, and the director discussed how their approach would be different from

that of *Some Like It Hot*. Hoffman was determined he would not use a falsetto voice, as Tony Curtis and Jack Lemmon did in the earlier movie. *Tootsie* was never intended to be just a film about men in drag.

Comparing *Tootsie* to *Some Like It Hot*

On the surface, there are similarities between the two films. Both deal with a man or men who need employment and impersonate women; both have the man fall in love, which complicates everything. Both deal with the threat of the man or men being found out. Both involve a friendship developing between a woman and a man impersonating a woman. Both deal with vulnerable women who recognize their flaws. Both deal with the arts: in *Some Like It Hot* the men are musicians, while in *Tootsie* the man is an actor in a television soap opera.

Some Like It Hot is a farce. *Tootsie* is a comedy. The director of *Some Like It Hot*, Billy Wilder, directed a wide range of films: from intense dramas such as *Sunset Boulevard* and *Witness for the Prosecution* to farces, such as *Some Like It Hot* and *The Front Page*. His career also encompassed a number of other not-so-broad comedies, such as *Irma La Douce* and *The Apartment*.

When Sydney Pollack agreed to direct *Tootsie*, he had not directed any comedies. He was known for dramas, some of which were very serious, such as *Three Days of the Condor*, *Absence of Malice,* and *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* The central situation of *Tootsie* was comedic and the obvious need for Michael to have to unmask at some point was comedic, but Pollack preferred to go for truth rather than comic effect.

Pollack cast actors who were not known for comedy. Dustin Hoffman had starred in *The Graduate*, but he was more known for dramas including *Midnight Cowboy*, *Marathon Man*, and *Kramer vs. Kramer*. Jessica Lange had played serious roles in *Frances*, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, and *All that Jazz* (although she did start out in the rather campy version of *King Kong*). She wasn't even sure she could play comedy, but Pollock told her to simply be real—and she ended up with an Academy Award for the role.

The supporting cast—Teri Garr, Dabney Coleman, Charles Durning, and Bill Murray—had backgrounds in comedy, but they had also done serious work. Their sense of comic timing enabled them to walk the fine line between realism and bringing out the comedic potential of a situation.

In both cases, the writers had to create an engine for the story: something that would push these men into doing something they ordinarily would not do. In *Some Like It Hot*, writer–director Billy Wilder used the St. Valentines' Day massacre, machine guns a-blazing, as the push. The writers of *Tootsie* actually asked themselves the question, "Where's the machine gun?" Their answer was to close all doors to employment, so the only way Michael could get a job would be by not being himself.

The Set-Up of *Tootsie* has to prove that, for Michael, getting employment as an actor is impossible. We see that Michael is a good actor who knows his art and his craft. The opening montage proves his range, including his ability to be tall or short or "different." He reminds his agent about the time he played a tomato—a big, juicy beefsteak tomato—and it was truly one of his great roles. Michael has integrity (even when playing a tomato) and he doesn't compromise the work.

He even teaches acting, and is able to get the best out of others. He coaches his friend Sandy for a role in a soap opera, encouraging her bring out her passion and even a bit of anger, and she tells him, "I can't do it as good as you."

There's a further engine motivating Michael to get a job: he really wants to do his roommate's play, *Return to Love Canal*. They have a theater; he and Sandy would star. All he needs is $8,000 and they can shine. He will take any job to make that money. But there's a problem: his integrity. As his agent explains, "You are a wonderful actor, but you're too much trouble. Get some therapy." As his agent explains, putting "the machine gun" into words, "No one will hire you!" Not in New York, not in Hollywood. All doors are closed to Michael Dorsey. But he knows of one job that's available: the role in the soap opera that Sandy auditioned for.

Exploring the Context of the Period

I entered the film industry in 1979 and worked for Norman Lear's company for about nine months, from December 1980 until August 1981. I started my script consulting business in September 1981. There were two questions that women asked themselves, and others asked about women, at that time. The first was, "Can a woman do anything a man can do?" Could we be firefighters? Could we be policewomen, leaping over walls and wrestling bad guys? Could we be just as rough and just as tough? Could we be as authoritative as men? The second question was: "Can we do things differently than men do them, and still be effective?" Do we have to be so tough—and if we are, do we become bitchy? How do we be both authoritative and feminine? Many of us wondered seriously, "Do we really have to watch football to be an insider?"

Tootsie was ahead of its time because it explored questions and issues that women were just beginning to explore. And it explored them with nuance and depth and insight. True, we can trace the beginning of the feminist movement to *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan, published in 1963. But even though consciousness was building throughout the 1960s and 1970s, its appearances in mass media were few and far between. There were, of course, a few breakthrough shows featuring more empowered women, such as *The Avengers* in the 1960s and *Police Woman* and *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* in the 1970s. But very few.

Dustin Hoffman looked for moments in the film that encapsulated these questions. Dorothy Michaels has to decide when to punch back, when to apologize, when to back down and when to be forceful. Michael goes through a transformation as Dorothy learns these boundaries and how to negotiate them, just as women in the 1980s who were entering into careers had to figure out answers to these questions.

Some Like It Hot, made in the 1950s, played out the complications of being a man in drag, but it did not explore the psychology of how becoming a woman changes a man. In *Tootsie*, the need to impersonate a woman makes Michael Dorsey become a better man. Again, the writers aren't afraid to state it straight out: at the end, Michael says to Julie, "I was a better man . . . with you . . . as a woman . . . with you . . . than ever I was as a man . . . with a woman. I just have to learn to do it without the dress."

Playing the Insight

Throughout preproduction and production, the writers, actors, and director looked for ways to shade these boundaries. Sometimes Dustin Hoffman would say to Pollack, "Give me a freebie and roll the camera, because I want to try something." When Michael first becomes Dorothy, he discovers that women can be invisible, and they don't have the power to get their way. Dorothy hails a taxi, and a man pushes in front of her to steal it. Michael might be dressed as Dorothy but underneath he's still Michael, so he grabs the guy, throws him out of the taxi, and gets in with all his shopping bags.

In that moment, Michael had the choice of going back to his more powerful and authoritative male side. But he also discovers that there are ways women can get what they want by being smart. When acting the part of Emily, he doesn't want to use the stereotypical female methods of dealing with problems. The character of Emily begins to transform as Michael begins to see and feel life from the woman's point of view. As he becomes more insightful and conscious about the woman's not-quite-so-equal experience, he begins to strengthen Dorothy. When the script calls for Emily to kiss John, Dorothy hits John with her papers instead, and then explains why she did it: "It was my instinct."

Later, Michael/Dorothy/Emily refuses to play along with the culturally accepted idea that a battered woman should take the blame for her abuse. Instead, she goes off script and encourages the battered woman patient to do something about her situation. In explaining to Ron, the director of the soap opera, why she changed the lines, she clarifies the female point of view: "I wouldn't tell her that. Would you?"

Michael begins to suspect that "Dorothy is smarter than me." He also recognizes, and laments, that a woman is judged by her attractiveness; it's a bittersweet moment when he expresses how many women of the period wished they "looked prettier . . . Maybe if I give her a softer hair style . . ." A story is told about how difficult it was to find the right look for Dorothy: Hoffman said at one point that he wished he were prettier and he was told, "Dustin, this is as pretty as you can get." Hoffman gave this moment of understanding to his character, Michael, who begins to recognize the layers that women have to deal with.

The 1980s was also a time of women finding their power. Women of this period had long discussions about whether we were seeking power as men might seek it, for our own sake, or whether we were seeking to be empowered and could therefore empower others. The film explores this same dynamic. Julie is just as confused by women in the 1980s as she expects Dorothy is: "All this role-playing . . . Everyone seems so screwed up about who they are."

Dorothy not only becomes more empowered as the story develops, she empowers Julie.

The film also explores how women put up with abusive relationships because "you had to get a man." You had to be careful about getting too uppity or too aggressive, because that would turn a man off—and you must never do that!

Julie represents the kind of woman who always chooses the wrong guys. She chooses men who treat her badly, and then drinks too much to deal with it. But Dorothy sees something else in Julie and wonders why she keeps doing this. As Dorothy helps Julie with her lines, she helps her to be stronger within her character and within herself. She influences Julie through their friendship, encouraging her to break up with Ron. Michael has figured Ron out because he has a bit of Ron inside himself. By the end of the movie that will also be transformed.

Michael also learns that, yes, men and women can be friends, which is proven through his relationships with Sandy and Julie. At the Second Turning Point of the movie, he explains to Sandy that she should not be jealous of Dorothy, and that he and Sandy were never meant to be in a romantic relationship. At the end, he expresses a similar idea to Julie: "The hard part is over. We were already friends." He realizes that as a result of being Dorothy he has integrated Dorothy's female insight. He lets Julie know that she doesn't have to be lonesome for Dorothy because "Dorothy is right here."

This line reflects another idea that was current in the 1980s: were women meant to be androgynous, with equal parts male and female? There was a lot of discussion about how men should integrate their anima (their female side) and women should integrate their animus (their male side)—often with years of therapy. Many of us became so confused that one of my friends said in a moment of exasperation, "I'm an

androgynous cripple." Michael seems to have gotten it right by the end of the movie. He's all of one piece: both Dorothy and Michael are right there.

The woman's perspective allows Michael to recognize male behavior that needs to be confronted. He begins to be more sensitive to this kind of behavior and how it affects others, and this sensitivity is a good part of his transformation. In Act One, at his birthday party, he uses the same pickup line with several women: "You have a pretty face." But he doesn't score, perhaps because these women have seen it all and have already had a bit of consciousness-raising of their own. He sees that Ron is two-timing Julie with April and he doesn't like it. He sees Julie going along with abuse and he doesn't like it. He sees how Sandy allows herself to be a doormat. But just as Michael and Dorothy start influencing others, Michael is also influenced.

Sandy tells him that the character he plays, Emily, is not strong. She's a wimp. Sandy clarifies that Emily allows people to walk all over her, and maybe he should start changing her lines. Although Sandy struggles with her journey into empowerment, she can certainly recognize the problem in others. And Michael immediately integrates her ideas into his character. In the next scene, he integrates her ideas into the character of Emily. Emily is supposed to tell the battered woman patient to get some therapy. Instead, he has Emily say, "You know what I'd do, if somebody did that to me? . . . I'd pick up the biggest thing I could find, and bash their brains in." When director Ron complains, she says that she wouldn't tell a battered woman to get therapy—"would you?"

As Michael's consciousness is raised and he becomes more empowered by creating a stronger character, the soap opera's audience also becomes empowered. They love Emily. The stronger she gets, the more they love her. Thousands of letters arrive. She's on the cover of magazines. And Michael wants to empower Dorothy! He realizes she's a terrific person, and she deserves the best. He tells his agent to start getting him more roles for Dorothy—maybe Medea or Lady Macbeth! Michael thinks he has something to say to women because "I've been an unemployed actor for twenty years—I know what it's like to feel oppressed, to sit by the phone, waiting for it to ring, and everybody else makes the decisions in your life." The sky's the limit for her career. His agent has to remind him that "there are no other women like you. You're a man!"

Michael knows that Dorothy is a brilliant actor because he's a brilliant actor—after all, he's gotten away with playing Dorothy. Why can't his agent help Dorothy soar to the heights she's capable of?

Michael's transformation moves him from being insensitive to caring about the feelings of others. The word "hurt" is repeated several times. Michael says, "I can't stand hurting anybody anymore!" George, the agent, is surprised by this change and asks him, "Since when do you care about everybody else's feelings?" At the end, Michael tells Julie, "I didn't mean to hurt anybody, especially you."

Rita, the producer, reinforces the changes in Michael, which she sees through his character on the soap: "You're the first woman character who is her own person and can assert her own personality without robbing someone of theirs."

Playing the Complications

Almost all gender-bending stories have the same need: at some point, the disguise has to be discovered. And we in the audience anticipate that. In *Some Like It Hot*, the reveal comes in the threatening form of the gangsters realizing these girls are the guys they're after. In *Tootsie*, it's Michael's integrity that pushes the need for the reveal. We saw in the Set-Up that his professional integrity worked to his detriment as an employable actor; as Dorothy, his personal integrity leads him to realize that his deception is hurting other people. But we in the audience understand that revealing himself causes problems and not revealing himself causes problems. Michael is in a real bind, and the pressure builds all through Act Two.

The push to reveal himself begins in the second half of Act Two, right after the Midpoint, when he goes to the farm for Thanksgiving and wants to reveal who he is to Julie's father, Les, and also to Julie, but keeps being interrupted. He continues to try, wanting to let Julie know that the feelings they have for each other are "normal." Forgetting that he's dressed as Dorothy, he attempts to kiss her, which leads Julie to believe that Dorothy is a lesbian. Julie is torn—she loves Dorothy, but not that way. She decides she doesn't want to see Dorothy anymore.

Michael also realizes that he's putting his friendship with Sandy in danger as a result of being deceptive. It's difficult to explain that the woman she's seen at his house is Michael himself. Meanwhile, Brewster, the doctor in the soap opera, has fallen in love with Dorothy and is becoming quite pushy. Les has also fallen in love with Dorothy, and even proposes to her.

Stories like this, which have to do with misinterpretation and revelation, are almost always dependent on having a number of subplots to complicate the story. We might say that the directional plot, which I call the "A" storyline, is the story of Michael playing Emily in a soap opera for a season. He gets the job in Act One; in Act Two, he becomes famous as Emily; and the season finale comes at the end of Act Three. But it's the subplots that transform Michael from the difficult, self-centered person he is in Act One to a woman who is "the best part of my manhood, the best part of myself." There are seven subplots: the Michael/Julie subplot, the Michael/Dorothy transformational subplot, the Michael/Sandy subplot, the Dorothy/Les subplot, the Dorothy/Brewster subplot, the Julie/Ron sublot, and the subplot about Jeff's play. Each of these subplots has a beginning, a middle, and a climax, and each one carries the theme: that being sensitive to the other sex brings out the best in us. They all come to a head around the Second Turning Point, forcing Michael to make a decision and resolve the issue of his real identity in Act Three.

Most of the screen time is spent on the subplots, but without the directional story of the soap opera, the subplots would only be free-floating relationship stories with nothing to hang on to. In one way or another, they all relate to the soap opera story. Nothing is arbitrary. The soap opera changes because of the subplots, and the subplots change because of Michael's deception in the soap opera story.

What are the problems that come to a head at the Second Turning Point? In the "A" story, Michael's contract is coming up for renewal. Ordinarily, this would be a good thing, but the subplots have complicated it. Les has proposed to Dorothy and wants a decision. Julie has broken off her friendship with Dorothy, and Michael wants to get friendship back as well as love; plus, she's breaking up with Ron, which means she's free to have a relationship with Michael if only Michael could be Michael again. Brewster is coming on way too strong to Dorothy and isn't

going to stop without some clarification. Sandy is jealous of Dorothy and Michael is feeling the need to be truthful with her. In fact, he's feeling bad about deceiving everybody. At this point, he would prefer to be Michael the actor rather than Dorothy the actor.

This is the fun of a comedy that depends on a reveal. I mentioned earlier that *Tootsie* is one of my favorite comedies. Several of my other favorites deal with this same idea: of having to take off a disguise and reveal the truth. These include *The Birdcage*, *Charley's Aunt* (which is better known as a play than a film), and *The Play That Goes Wrong*, a farce about uncovering and discovering that truly is the funniest play I've ever seen. Several of Shakespeare's plays, such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, also deal with issues of identity and misinterpretation.

Great comedies explore the different dimensions of identity in a theatrical and cinematic way. We probably will not see these kinds of stories in real life, but they are such fun to see in the theater or on screen. Comedy allows themes and character and story to be deep and delicious. *Tootsie* is one of the great ones. And it's universal because the themes and insights about gender are not just relevant to the 1980s, but continue to be relevant. Identity themes, at the richest, keep exploring the layers of who we are and who we can become.

Study Questions

1. Look at other plays or movies that deal with disguise and play around with gender. As I did in this Seger Note, comparing *Tootsie* with *Some Like It Hot*, see if you can identify similarities and differences.

2. Have you had a transformation of understanding, attitudes, or actions relating to male and female roles? Can you map out some of the story beats that were part of your own personal transformation?

3. Break down the "A" plot and subplots of *Tootsie* into their three-act structure and identify the places where a subplot influences Michael's (and Dorothy's) transformation.

4. List the transformational beats in this film. You might find it helpful to read chapter 9, about the transformational arc, in my book *Advanced Screenwriting*.

5. How would you explain the theme of this movie in one sentence? How would you discuss this theme with a friend, bringing in specific quotes and scenes from the movie, as well as from your own experience?

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