



Actor Isabella Rossellini takes on the role of Charles Darwin in her film *Animals Distract Me*.

## Q&A Isabella Rossellini

# Animal distractions

Isabella Rossellini, star of films including *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Big Night* (1996), has made a series of short films on the mating rituals of insects and sea creatures. As her latest humorous biopic debuts in the United States, Rossellini explains why she is fascinated by animals.

### Why have you made films about animals?

I have wanted to make funny films about animal behaviour since I was a teenager. The first short films that I made on this topic were a web series called *Green Porno* for the Sundance Channel in 2008. I did 18 episodes about how animals reproduce. Then I did ten episodes called *Seduce Me*, about all the different courtship strategies, from birdsong to colourful plumage to rape. And then the Discovery Channel commissioned a one-hour special, *Animals Distract Me*, which had its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival this year and will be broadcast in the United States on 23 April.

### What's in the new film?

The two-minute format of my previous films didn't work for the Discovery Channel. I had to think of an hour-long story, but I wanted to have little episodes to convey curiosities about animals. The device we chose was a day in my life, where I get up, go to work as a model, have lunch in an elegant restaurant, study my script and go to bed. But I'm constantly distracted by animals, whether it is a pigeon in the street, a cockroach on my table, the meat on the menu or the guide dog that I'm raising. It is the way it has always been with me.

### You also play Charles Darwin, in a series of surreal asides on evolution. Why?

When I started getting older and working less, I decided to go back to university and study animal behaviour. I'm still finishing my undergraduate degree in the history of science and environmental studies at New York University. I took several courses on Darwin. He was one of the first scientists to understand the importance of photography in scientific research. One of his books that fascinated me is *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872). Darwin asked himself the same question an actor asks: why are some gestures understood internationally, others only in one culture? He imagined that squinting began as a way to reduce glare and then became attached to the process of thinking. He had ideas that were fascinating; almost naive, but genius too.

### Did the film have a scientific adviser?

Yes, John Bohannon, a visiting researcher at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts, who writes for *Science*. When I tried to work with other scientists, it was too complicated. Film has to be visual, fast and simple. John makes sure I don't use a word that is too mistaken. I want to be scientifically correct, but sometimes there are nuances that cannot

be used. When I did a little poem for *Green Porno* about animals that change sex, I used the word transsexual. It wasn't the scientific term, but John thought it was okay.

### How have your films been received among scientists?

I thought somebody was going to scold me for *Green Porno*. But it has been quite well received by the scientific community. It is now part of the *Sexual Nature* exhibition at London's Natural History Museum. John organized a fan club at Harvard, a group of eight scientists who came to the Toronto Film Festival dressed in homemade hats shaped like animal penises. Comedy hasn't been used much in films about biology or the environment. It comes naturally to me. Animals make me laugh. I wanted to capture not only the wonder of nature, the awe and intimidation, but the joy and humour too.

### Why use humour to convey science?

Everybody knows that some animals are hermaphrodites, but it is said in such heavy terms that people assume it is boring. The gloom and doom of the environmental message, which has worked well for fund raising, has conquered the maximum audience that can be reached with that language. Now there is a wall. Maybe if we can talk with humour and lightness, we can recruit more people to listen to the variety of nature.

### Is it a challenge to convey the complexities of science on screen?

When theorists debate, the public is cut out because they don't know the shorthand. I recently read a book by E. O. Wilson. He has to invent words to explain what he has observed in ants, but I cannot use the word superorganism in a film. It becomes complicated unless I find something physical that can explain it visually. When I'm studying something complex, I draw. That's how my films come about. The scripts are a series of drawings.

### What's your next project?

I would like to make a film about motherhood. I'm about to do an independent study on a series of women biologists who looked at maternal instinct, hoping that out of that will come a little film. I'm still looking for financing. If I was younger, I would have liked to make field documentaries about animals. But they are already excellently made, and at my age I can't imagine doing it better than David Attenborough. So I'll tell you a story the way I would like to tell it. ■

INTERVIEW BY JASCHA HOFFMAN

### *Animals Distract Me*

ISABELLA ROSSELLINI

On the Discovery Channel at 10 p.m. (EDT) on 23 April.