

# PHANTOMS & BEASTS

**AN INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL FAWCETT & CLARA PAIS  
ABOUT THEIR UPCOMING FILM *ALL MY HEART'S DESIRES***



**They are Daniel Fawcett and Clara Pais. Don't know their names? Don't worry, you will. Among the essential experimenters of the independent film vanguard, they are founders of the Underground Film Studio and directors of the psychedelic feature masterpiece *Savage Witches* (which was subjected to an embarrassingly gushy review by this very writer. See the film and you'll know what I mean). Their next feature, *All My Heart's Desires - A Feminine Film Concerning Phantoms & Beasts*, promises as much kaleidoscopic engagement, lyrical characters and a universe that will turn your mind inside out. I caught up with Daniel and Clara as they navigate scripts and funding, or, rather, taming the phantoms and beasts.**

**Well if it isn't the best filmmaking duo since Powell and Pressburger! How goes pre-production?**

**DANIEL:** Pre-production has been going a little slow, we are having some trouble raising the money we need to be able to get started but it's moving along, we have been designing the film and have cast a few of the roles but we can't get properly started until we have raised a bit of money. In the meantime we are keeping busy, I have been working on a 60 minute twin screen film called *Splendor Solis* that is compiled from my huge archive of footage which I have shot over the last 16 years. It started as a sort of tidying up loose ends but I have been editing now for about 5 weeks and it has become a work of deep personal exploration and many new creative avenues have opened up to me. The footage is a mixture of home movies, unfinished films, video experiments and behind the scenes footage from my other films. There is a lot of material shot on everything from Hi8, VHS, Super8, DV and HD so the film is a real collage of formats, styles and textures. I wasn't sure if this would be something that I would release at first but as I get towards the end of the edit I feel that this is something I'd like to show when it's done. With any luck by the time I have finished this there will have been some progress with raising some pennies for *All My Heart's Desires* so we can get stuck into that!



Still from *Splendor Solis* (2015). For more stills see here: <http://theundergroundfilmstudio.co.uk/blog/splendor-solis/>

**This film is going to be made with a shoestring budget, just like *Savage Witches*. What would you say are the most important creative lessons low-budget filmmaking can teach you?**

**CLARA:** When you can't simply throw money at an obstacle you have to open yourself up as much as you can to all the possibilities, and see that everything around you is in potential something that can be used. Often we find that when we encounter an obstacle – and a low budget gives you plenty of obstacles – it is actually an opportunity, a chance to rethink things and more often than not to take things to a whole other level creatively. So one of the lessons of not having much money is that obstacles are really opportunities, and this can be applied to anything in life beyond just filmmaking.

**The screenplay defines itself as “a map made from words... the ship on which we will join together and set sail”. Not being chained to what's written was an ideology you applied to the production of *Savage Witches*, and filmmakers like Robert Altman and Drake Doremus have also worked this way. What are the rewards of such a process? Does it allow for another type of creativity?**

**CLARA:** A script is only one of the first stages of a film, its purpose is different in each project but generally it is a way to convey to other people who get involved what we have in mind, and to give us all something tangible to start to work with. But there is a world of difference between writing a scene and dialogue on paper and having it played out by people in a space. Every person who becomes involved brings so much into the film, consciously and unconsciously, that the project has to evolve in response, or it will become lifeless.

**DANIEL:** For us cinema is not illustrative, the purpose of our films is not to make statements but to explore, to learn and to discover what we can about our selves, others and the world around us. With our films we attempt to create an arena where unconscious expressions can break through, where some truth unknown to us can be revealed and an experience can be shared. It was while making *Savage Witches* that we found that for us it was essential to use the script only as a starting point to a creative exploration rather than a blueprint for a fixed product. That's not to say that we completely abandon the script once we start filming, we do follow it, and the shoots are organised using the script, but the written scenes serve as instigators of actions and words to explore through performance. Filmmaking is most exciting when the process is about going creatively to unknown places, when it is a living experience, a journey of discovery. Each film I have made has been a process of exploration, healing and transformation, this is the purpose of creativity, it is the drive to spiritual, physical and psychological health.

**The screenplay also specifies a number of identities for different characters; including genders both trans and cis, ages, races, and body types. Is this type of representation important to you? Do you think it's important to the film industry?**

**DANIEL:** The film industry is just a microcosm of all industry, which is a dominating force in our society. I don't believe it has much true value and causes much harm where in potential it could be doing so much good. We live in a society obsessed with bodies and we have a terrible system of judgement that says some are good and some are

bad. Why are we doing this to ourselves? It's baffling! I think it is important that we see different representations of gender, race and body types in cinema because there are so many variations on the human form and the ones we see in the media so abundantly only represent a small fraction of the great beauty of our species.

But having said all that, the reasons there are characters of all genders, ages, races and body types in the film are not political but because these are the characters that have emerged from my dreams and I identify with all of these characters, they are all a part of me. I appear to be a 32 year old white male but more and more this feels like only a mask, I feel just as much that I am a fifty year old woman, or a young black boy, or a hermaphrodite or anyone. I am not really my name, I am not my really my body, these are just temporal things.



*Still from Savage Witches (2012)*

**CLARA:** Also, having all different types of characters in this film is a way to learn from them. The different characteristics of each character are expressing different types of experience, different perspectives and realities, each has something unique to teach. If we restrict ourselves to using a conformity of body type, age, race, gender, even species in our characters, whatever that is, we limit our own range of experience. This gives way to fear, anger, sorrow, prejudice... We need to allow ourselves to experience all of these different realities and also to go beyond them. It's very important not just to the film industry but to humankind in general.

**The film's main character, Sherry, is a housewife. The story concerns the unravelling of her inner world and exploration of her psyche. That could be seen as deconstructing the archetype and image of the housewife. Is messing with traditions and tropes in this way something you are interested in pursuing?**

**DANIEL:** One of the main things I am wanting to explore with this film is the images of masculinity and femininity that exist within me and if I find they are damaged images, that they are negative in some way and not being given full expression then I want to begin to understand why and try to heal and transform them. This image of the oppressed woman exists within me, but it is also around us in our culture. By transforming and understanding her potential as a personal image, I also begin to transform it beyond myself. The same goes for the masculine characters in the film, they too are in need of transformation. In fact it's all connected, if you heal one then you heal the other.

**CLARA:** I think the housewife as a symbolic image is actually a distorted Earth mother, it is a nurturing feminine that has had her connection to the earth severed, her voice quietened and passions subdued, we need to revitalised this symbol.

**Not to give too much away, but the film's scope of places, actions, symbols, characters, desires and emotions is incredible. It's a labyrinth of murder, escape, grandeur, monsters, transformation and phantasmagoria; all triggered by Sherry's psychological state of buried trauma and suppressed expression. It all spins out at once. We could say anything about it, but I suppose a doctor would say PTSD and psychosis. Were you thinking of mental illness like that in particular while writing? Have you any experience with it that you wished to explore with this picture?**

**CLARA:** In many cultures, mental illness is seen as a spiritual crisis, a calling for transformation that needs to be answered, it's embraced rather than repressed and the person who goes through it often becomes a healer themselves, someone who is in a deeper spiritual relationship with the world. They describe their experiences like journeys to the world of spirits or the time of their ancestors, and speak of them as visions and revelations that teach them something that is necessary to share with the community. In our society we are so afraid of losing our grip

on reality that we close ourselves off to any possible experience beyond a narrow idea of normality, we see mental disorders as problems to be fixed and try to make them go away as quickly and as effortlessly as possible. But the reality that we are clinging on to is completely mad: we see ourselves as separate from the earth and other living beings and keep destroying the planet, we see our own body as a separate thing, a machine that is either working or failing, and as a society we have impossible expectations of people and offer nothing but superficial desires and existences in return. I think we desperately need to change our attitudes.

**DANIEL:** What we need to start to do is see that illnesses can have a positive purpose, trying to draw our attention to something that is being ignored or neglected. The difficulty is that we need to learn how to listen, we live so much in our intellects that we don't know how to communicate in other languages, the language of the body, of nature. For me art is a way of learning to listen, it helps me work with the intellect, which is a powerful tool, but it allows me to find ways to let the other parts speak. This is how we can start healing, healing is about expanding vision, eliminating boundaries and being in some kind of harmony.

### **Which folk tales and myths were most inspiring for the writing of this film?**

**CLARA:** As *All My Heart's Desires* was developed from a series of dreams Daniel had last year, it was not so much that particular stories inspired it but that we found many echoes of the dreams in tales and myths, which helped us explore the symbols and investigate our own relationship to them. I've always been fascinated by myths and folk tales, but in the last couple of years I've had this interest completely reinvigorated by our experience of making *Savage Witches*, and having come across the work of Joseph Campbell and Jungian analysts Marie Louise von Franz and Marion Woodman, which opened my eyes to how folk tales, myths, art and dreams all share the same language, a language of symbols that is explorative, expressive, poetic and spiritual. Myths, folk tales, art and dreams are like guides to live wisely and heal the soul, they're about about arousing wonder, opening doors and creating a balance and a sense of connectedness, like a bridge between our own experiences and the experiences of all human beings and all life.

**DANIEL:** You'll find some similarities with tales like Beauty and the Beast, Wassilissa the Wise, The Handless Maiden, Allerleirauh and Bluebeard, these are wonderful stories of feminine journeys, encounters with nature and magical physical and inner transformations.

### **What is it about sorcery and the occult that appeal to you so greatly?**

**CLARA:** If you look at the history of sorcery, alchemy and the occult in our western culture you will probably have a history of the attempts to integrate certain aspects of life that were not allowed expression, like the instinctual, emotional, sexual and spiritual dimensions of life, some attempts being better than others. As an element in storytelling and filmmaking, what really appeals about magic is that it allows for the stories to exist beyond the surface of reality, in mythical and psychological dimensions. Magic is the way that doesn't follow the straight lines of the rational mind, it follows the order of that is irrational, instinctual and creative in us and in nature. This unconscious ground is the most fertile, it's where all rules melt away, all constructions crumble and rot, it's where the seeds for transformation lie and creativity takes root.

### **The film is also inspired by dreams. Besides the metaphysical world of the subconscious in general, are there any specific dreams you have had personally that have influenced *All My Heart's Desires*?**

**DANIEL:** The dreams I had which shaped this film all took place over about a month last year. We had both got into a habit of writing down our dreams every morning and would spend the first couple of hours each day discussing them. At this point I was having very lengthy dreams and I was remembering them in great detail, at the same time I was writing notes for the original version of *All My Heart's Desires* which was quite different to what we have now. It was much more rooted in reality and the script was structured around five acts, each of which explored a different feminine archetype. But the material of my dreams was so rich and exciting that as I was writing I kept finding that it was seeping in so in the end I just went for it and threw out the original draft and shaped the film around these images. The film isn't intended to be an exact recreation of my dreams, as I was writing, the dream characters would not stay still and would wish to engage in actions and situations quite different from the original dreams but many images have remained intact such as the black servant who ritualistically touches the hands of all the guests, Sherry's journey into the woods and seeing the women catching for giant fish, the war that is raging in the background out of sight, and many more.

**The film is to be ‘a colourful fantasy and a visually striking work of cinema’. Which other filmmakers, photographers or fine artists have been most inspiring and influential for the way you envisage the world of this film?**

**DANIEL:** As you know we are big fans of Věra Chytilová’s films and many of the other Czech new wave films have been a great inspiration to us. My first great love and maybe the reason I became a filmmaker was Derek Jarman’s films, especially *The Garden* and his Super8 films, his work has been a constant guiding light for me. More specifically, I think maybe this film will exist in a similar world to Raul Ruiz’s *City of Pirates*, Chytilová’s *Fruits of Paradise* or even Rivette’s *Celine and Julie Go Boating*. Sergei Parajanov’s incredible films have also helped us find a way to approach exploring characters and situations in an archetypal rather than ‘realist’ way. On the other hand, we also love 1950’s technicolor melodramas and 40’s and 50’s British war films and quota quickies, which seem to be a part of the world of the film too.

**CLARA:** Beyond cinema much has seeped in, the writings of Carl Jung, the music of the Incredible String Band and Richard Wagner. Also we should mention painting, so much time has been spent pouring over paintings while working on the script, mostly European religious paintings and alchemical illustrations such as the ones found in the illuminated manuscript *Splendor Solis*.

**I’ve been lucky enough to read this film’s screenplay, and as usual the words hang together so beautifully. They’re universal enough to sound ancient and tangled enough to sound completely fresh, like nothing you’ve ever heard. Which writers or writing styles were you thinking about while composing the script?**

**DANIEL:** The truth is I wasn’t thinking about any other writers at all but I am sure some must have seeped in, there are a few phrases in the film that were inspired by alchemical texts such as “You are the rose that gives the bees their honey” but other than that there aren’t any conscious references. The dialogue was written very quickly and wasn’t revised very much, I have tried not to over-analyse it and just let it exist with whatever truths or contradictions it contains. I like it very much and when I read it somehow I don’t feel as if it came from me, I know it came through me but its source seems to be outside of me somewhere, some mysterious place that I momentarily made contact with.

**Your films always invite every sense to dance, so I know the score will be something special, especially considering there are songs written in to the film even now. What style of score and soundscape is the film going to have?**

**DANIEL:** This is something very hard to say exactly, it must be music that comes from deep within the hearts and bellies of the musicians. It has to be earthy, like the sound of woodlice burrowing away in a rotting tree, but it must also have hums, creaks, screeches and hollers, the sound of ancient forces springing back to life. There will be moments of theatricality and almost operatic artifice married with moments of deeply emotional, heart-wrenching beauty... how this is all going to sound I don’t know yet!

**Here’s the silly question: With your experimental films already such an intense viewing experience, I keep thinking of other kinds of multisensory experiences that could add to *All My Heart’s Desires* and flesh that out. It’s happened already in cinematic history, from John Waters’ smell-o-vision scratch cards to a *Life of Pi* screening that had the audience sitting in boats in a pool of water while watching. So if you had unlimited money, people and resources, what would be the perfect viewing environment you would create for a screening of this film?**

**DANIEL:** Well I don’t know about this film but we are currently working on plans for several live cine-ritual performances which will feature multiple projections, live music, poetry and live performers extending the scenes seen on screen. This is also something we would like to do with *Savage Witches* at some point, we have been writing an outline for a live version, it wouldn’t be to recreate the film, it would be more to extend the world of the film, explore other dimensions of it and continue the story into new places. We are really excited about the possibilities and hopefully we’ll be doing the first experiments with this sometime in the new year.

***All My Heart’s Desires* is subtitled ‘a feminine film concerning phantoms and beasts’, placing it firmly in the categories of both the magical and woman-centered, some would say feminist. Your last picture, *Savage Witches*, was the same, being about a pair of wildly mystical young girls. What is the cinematic appeal of the supernatural and the feminine to you? Are the two connected in your mind?**

**DANIEL:** I think the two are connected, we live in a society that values masculinity and masculine virtues much more than feminine ones, this why we are destroying the planet, this is why we neglect our bodies, and have such a drive towards work and success. I believe on a whole we need to reconnect with our spiritual selves and find a balance, and this is greatly about reconnecting with the feminine.

**CLARA:** We probably should make it clear that when we say feminine and masculine we are speaking of two different types of energy or different modes of experiencing, it's not about actual men and women nor is it necessarily about sexuality. We're talking about psychological archetypes, both always present in individual men, women and whole cultures. At this point we are very interested in exploring these feminine characters and journeys, but at the same time we are also writing other films which focus on masculine characters and journeys. In both I think we are looking at what they really mean and how to fulfil what both the masculine and feminine need so there can be a healthy relationship and a truthful exchange between both.

**Savage Witches made the unusual choice of letting the production of the film permeate the film itself; including actor interviews from Christina and Victoria and on-set footage. It was a pretty serious way of exploring reality and metafiction. Is that something you can see happening for this film?**

**DANIEL:** I don't know at this stage how this might manifest in *All My Heart's Desires* but after the experience of making *Savage Witches* the boundaries between the story and the production, or documentary and fiction, have completely disintegrated. I now just see it as one experience that is the creation of the film, and what ends up on the screen has to be a truthful expression of that experience. This may mean it is necessary to show the process of us making the film or it might not but either way the most important thing is that the film is true to the journey.

**I have written before about the subverted reality of experimental and surrealistic films; in that their stylistic oddness perfectly reflects the strange and unique perspective inside all of our heads; in essence, turning the world inside out. I read Sherry's story as being that. Do you think this is the ultimate strength of experimental film? What are its other strengths?**

**DANIEL:** When we are talking of true experimental film we are talking about cinema as an art form and art is without limits, we have limits as humans but with art as a tool we can transcend them. For me cinema is a tool for transcendence, I listen to the creative spirit and it tells me which direction I should go, I follow. I don't really think about it being experimental or art while I am doing it, it's a very natural thing, it's very pure and very real. The labels come later when I am talking about it, trying to help people understand what I have made and encourage them to engage with it.

**CLARA:** I think all works of art are in potential an experience of momentous change, turning our world upside down, revealing and connecting us with some mysterious quality of life, the universe, or something inside us, whatever it is, it will be different for every person in every moment. It also only works at the moment you are ready to receive it, and the best ones are the ones you can go back to all the time, even over the years, and learn a little more every time. Sometimes it's just like receiving a spark of energy which then slowly ripples to affect every part of yourself, and later you realise you're not the same person any more. As a creator, you really go through a transformation when you're creating something, you shed old skins and are reborn at each step. It's terrifying at times but wonderful.

**And lastly, what would your ideal review of this film say?**

**DANIEL:** Maybe it would say something like 'doors were opened and we entered'. That would be nice, it would mean that the film has been a useful experience to someone, art should be useful.

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