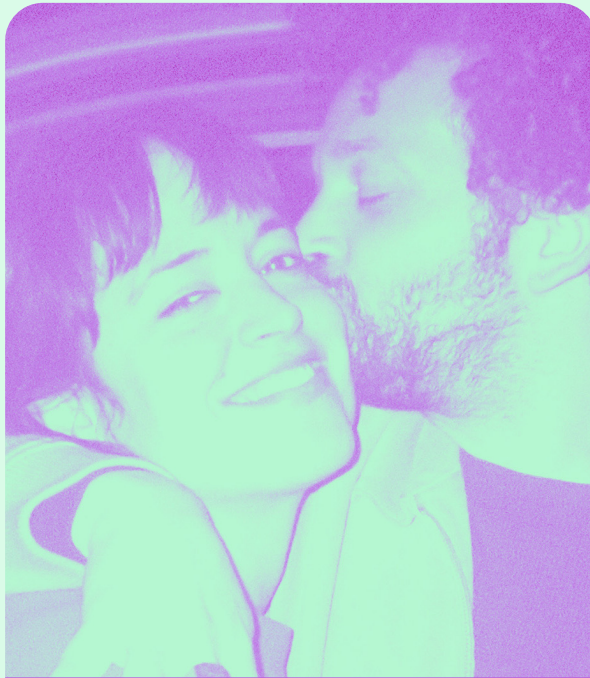


# P R E S S B O O K



## QUEEN MOM

Manele Labidi



## STAGES OF LOVE

Victor Rodenbach



## HELLO MADNESS

Judith Davis



# Performing the Personal: Three Contemporary Comedies

by Marilou Duponchel

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In *Hello Madness*, Judith Davis explores the contradictions of modern life in an open-air asylum; a community space nestled in the heart of an enchanting forest. This bucolic society serves as a stage where madness manifests in unexpected ways; bringing together, well-meaning neo-rurals, scheming capitalists and couples teetering on the verge of crisis. In her second feature, Davis continues her critique of our increasingly connected, yet dehumanised world. Supported by an ensemble cast from her trusted theatre troupe, L'Avantage du Doute, the filmmaker uses bold caricatures to bring to life a vivid gallery of characters entangled in their own paradoxes. In this exploration of life's ironies, everyone has their reason. Following the fury of her first film, *Whatever Happened To My Revolution*, Davis has opted for a more optimistic approach; envisioning a viable, collective future for her characters as they search for meaning in a fractured world.

This quest is mirrored in the journey of Nora and Henri, the central characters of Victor Rodenbach's first feature film, *Stages Of Love*. Deeply in love, Nora, a theatre director, and Henri, her muse and lead actor, find their relationship tested when Henri decides to pursue his dream of a career in cinema. His ambition pulls them in different directions, and their relationship

begins to fray. In *Stages Of Love*, Rodenbach turns the pair's break-up into an exploration of love itself: its intensity, its fragility, and the seismic ripples it leaves behind. In this 'comedy of remarriage', Rodenbach sees the group dynamic—whether a theatre ensemble or a chosen family—as a protected place where it is possible to find oneself through the connection we forge with others. In his first feature film, Rodenbach delicately and gently unravels the complexities of love to capture its minute manifestations. Above all, he offers an unflinching view of romance, eschewing the fantasy of the idealised couple, and instead suggesting that relationships should be seen as a living organism in perpetual motion.

In *Queen Mom*, Manele Labidi confronts the racism of both past and present by imagining an unlikely encounter between Mouna, a young French girl of Tunisian origin, and Charles Martel, the historical figure heralded as the saviour of Poitiers during the so-called "Arab invasion" of 732- a narrative deliberately distorted by nationalist ideologies. Through this lens, the film deconstructs legends, inviting us to question whether they are simply comforting illusions, or something more sinister. Rewriting history through the prism of the intimate, the fantastic and the fairytale, Labidi forges her own

mythology. *Queen Mom* delves into 1990s France to scrutinise our own times through the poignant story of Mouna and Amel, the Queen Mother of the title, whose perceived arrogance is in reality no more than a form of protection.

*Hello Madness*, *Stages Of Love* and *Queen Mom* engage in a rich dialogue with one another, addressing pressing social issues through an intimate lens. In all three films alienation and the search for sanctuary are central, with these filmmakers recognising how the personal and the political are inseparably intertwined. Striking a subtle balance between broad audience appeal and auteurist sophistication, these three comedies also share a deep appreciation of performance and the power of the imagination to navigate the complexities of reality and its illusions. In *Hello Madness*, characters adopt social identities as a form of performance, acting out roles to "play the good part." In *Stages Of Love*, individuals craft narratives to sustain themselves, tethered to one another through shared stories. Meanwhile, in *Queen Mom*, self-mythologising becomes a survival tactic, with characters constructing images of themselves as a buffer against the harshness of the world. The empathy and imaginative richness that radiate from these three films make them eminently relevant today.

# QUEEN MOM

Written & Directed by  
**Manele Labidi**

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2024 | COMEDY | FRANCE, BELGIUM | COLOR | 94'

**Produced by**

Kazak Productions (FR)  
Frakas Productions (BE)

**Local distributor**

Diaphana

**Local release date**

12<sup>th</sup> March 2025

**Logline**

Amel never gives up. She wants the best and only the best for her daughters. But in the 90's, just like today, equal opportunity remains as much of a fiction as her daughter's imaginary friend.

**Cast**

**Amel** · Camélia Jordana  
**Amor** · Sofiane Zermani  
**Charles Martel** · Damien Bonnard





## Interview with...

### Manele Labidi

**In *Arab Blues*, you directed Golshifteh Farahani who played Selma, a young woman who decides to leave France and set up a therapy practice in Tunis. With *Queen Mom*, the narrative moves in the opposite direction. What is the significance of these opposing journeys?**

When I started working on *QUEEN MOM*, I felt like I was writing chapter zero. In *ARAB BLUES*, the focus is on a story that doesn't get told very often: of the descendants of North African immigrants, who take the opposite route to their parents. I noticed this phenomenon after the Tunisian revolution, when a lot of my generation found themselves asking: what if I went back home and did something there? It's almost a fantasy, and like all fantasies, it's hard to make it come true. With *QUEEN MOM*, I wanted to try and see how this could come about. I said to myself that the little girl Mouna, could potentially be the Selma of *ARAB BLUES* and one day open

a psychiatrist's practice in Tunis; not just for economic reasons but symbolic ones too. This is all linked to a question of place. In France my place is at stake because I have an Arab identity that is stigmatised, but in Tunis, I'm reminded that I'm anything but Tunisian. This pendulum swings back and forth in *QUEEN MOM*. For Amor, arriving in France is a step up, because he comes from a working class background. However, for Amel, her desire to return to her homeland is because her socio-economic class has been downgraded. She wants to return to this lost paradise. We don't know the truth of her story: is she a princess or as her husband puts it, "a farmer's daughter who thinks she's the Queen of England." All we know is that she has manners and a certain cultural baggage left over from colonisation and the French protectorate in Tunisia. This question also arises for Mouna. Her place is questioned from the very start of the film. Her family is being evicted, and at school, she is the only Arab. Class is very important

in the film; it's not just the racial dimension that's important to me. I wanted to capture the complexity of what it's like to be a little Arab girl in a middle-class town in the 90's, something that still resonates today. The story takes place in the 90's, when I was 10 years old, but it is a pretext. The issues that are being discussed still apply today.

**Through Amel's character, you explore themes of dignity and self-esteem—qualities rarely associated with characters in precarious social positions.**

Absolutely. When we were looking for funding, I was often told that Amel wasn't real enough or very likeable which only reinforced my desire to tell her story. In the collective imagination, characters from marginalised backgrounds are often sanctified, portrayed as overly dignified: bending over backwards for other people, and tending to keep their mouths shut. That's not representative of reality. The immigrant





experience includes thousands of diverse stories and among them there are people like Amel who find themselves in France but who are not ready to submit to these stereotypes. The arrogance she displays is a form of protection, it's all she has left. I wanted to give her this complexity, I didn't want to make her into this figure of the courageous mother who cooks couscous for her whole family and then gets exploited by her employer. It was the same for Amor. I was also told that he wasn't a credible character. Why wasn't

he? Because he doesn't conform to toxic stereotypes of Arab masculinity we're used to seeing! Amor's character reflects the Arab men like many that I know. Defending these characters against reductive tropes was a struggle, but it felt essential.

**Did your ambition to combine auteur cinema with mainstream appeal make the funding process more challenging?**

Yes, you put your finger on it. Beyond questions of representation, form also plays

a role. I don't like being pigeonholed. I've often been asked the question: is this auteur cinema or popular comedy? Some people talk about wanting light films, but I don't think a film about racism can ever be light. For me, humour is a weapon that allows you to take power over an oppressive situation. Comedy, fantasy and playing with codes allows me to do that. I've sometimes been criticised for my lack of delicacy, for not making films that are bourgeois enough. But that's deliberate. When we were shooting, I said to



the team, “we're going to make a film with a bad attitude. We're going to try to impose our vision by hybridising different forms to make something a bit monstrous”. I've also been criticised for the black and white musical scene, but that's my legitimate right. I want to take hold of this heritage that I've been immersed in, that has been imposed on me but that I've appreciated and that I've been able to identify with. The film's unresolved ending has also raised questions; but it would have been disingenuous of me to pretend that this story has a happy ending. The more stories we tell, the less these choices will be scrutinized. I remain optimistic.

### How did the character of Charles Martel become part of the story?

It started as a bit of a joke, but Charles Martel marked a pivotal moment in my life. Just like how there's a before and after 9/11, there was a time before I learned about Martel and a time after. I look back to that history lesson where I first learned about him. It was the first time in my life that I realised I was an Arab living in France. After that I began to see racism everywhere on television; the sketches of certain comedians, Lagaf's famous song La Zoubida, the rise of the National Front, Le Pen's outbursts, the Gulf War... When I talked about it years later with my family, I realised we'd been through the

same thing. At the time, we couldn't talk about it. It was the beginning of feeling this shame of being ourselves. The arrival of my children forced me to look back on this time in my life, and the question of transmission arose. I love it when an autobiography is fuelled by fiction. I started to take an interest in Charles Martel by saying to myself: what if he became a monster that haunts this little girl? I started reading, and came across the historian, William Blanc, who specialised in Martel. When I spoke to him, I realised that I'd been taught this national narrative, of a religious war, between the bad Arabs and the Franks trying to defend their kingdom. So I found myself with two characters whose identities were imprisoned by a story. From there came the idea of turning him from an antagonist into an imaginary friend. From then on, I realised that I was going to get to play with this magical figure who emerges from the screen a bit like in Woody Allen's *THE PURPLE ROSE OF CAIRO*. It was then that I said to myself that I had my film. I was going to be able to have fun and come to the rescue of the little girl I used to be.

### Were there any particular films that influenced your writing process?

When I'm writing, I tend to just read literature and essays. On the other hand, as soon as the script is finished, I like to go back to the

films that subconsciously inspired it. In the case of *QUEEN MOM*, there are a number of disparate references. When it comes to the theme of childhood, I re-watched Steven Spielberg's *ET* and Peter Bogdanovich's *PAPER MOON*. I like the way childhood is treated in those films without mawkishness or innocence. I wanted Mouna to have that type of old soul, so I recommended these films to Rim Monfort, who plays her. Another film I shared with Camélia Jordana and Rim was Visconti's *BELLISSIMA*, starring Anna Magnani. In this film, Magnani is portrayed as a flawed, multifaceted mother who does what she can for her daughter. I haven't seen many direct representations of Arab women in my film culture, but I found a potential for identification in this Italian mother. Then there's Almodovar, whose female characters embody resilience and grandeur amidst adversity. For the couple, I wanted to go for a Hollywood couple, so I watched Mike Nichols' *WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF* again. The sensuality and complexity of the North African couple is rarely shown on screen, so I wanted the audience to feel that they are beautiful and desirable.

### Why do you see couples in crisis as ideal microcosms for exploring societal changes?

The couple is a mirror of society in which

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Amor doesn't conform to toxic stereotypes of Arab masculinity we're used to seeing!”



relationships of power and domination are reenacted. With Amor and Amel, the question of class also comes into play. She's a middle-class woman who marries a working-class man. There's also the question of gender and race. It's only a small detail in the film, but I wanted to show a mixed race couple, so Amel is Tunisian and Amor is Algerian. In 2018, I made a short film called *A ROOM TO MYSELF*, in which a young female writer is unable to write. So one night, she finds herself trapped in the toilet and decides to transform it into a bedroom of her own, unconsciously following the tenet of Virginia Woolf's book. She forbids her husband access to the toilet. From there, a war breaks out between the couple over this space, with the question arising of how can we recreate an intimate, domestic space within a patriarchal society. I think we can deal with a lot of issues through the prism of the couple without falling into a didactic discourse.

**In *Queen Mom*, life resembles a stage, with performance and imagination playing pivotal roles in shaping our perception of reality. How did you incorporate these elements into the film?**

Reality is always a starting point. I never start from a perspective that I don't know, or that

I haven't observed. Transcending reality is a way of taking a step back, of giving access to your sensibility. When I was thinking about the film, the use of anamorphic photography was an immediate choice because it distorts reality. We discussed this with the cinematographer and I was keen to use the scope format, as it allowed us to create this ambivalence.. This film is not a reflection of the reality I experienced as a child, it's a transformation of that reality; a way of paying homage to reality while at the same time twisting its neck.

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**The couple is a mirror of society in which relationships of power and domination are reenacted.**



# STAGES OF LOVE

Directed by  
Victor Rodenbach

2024 | ROMANTIC COMEDY | FRANCE | COLOR | 82'

**Produced by**  
Jonas Films (FR)  
Empreinte Cinema (FR)

**Local distributor**  
Jour2Fête

**Local release date**  
18<sup>th</sup> December 2024

## Logline

For years, Henri and Nora have shared everything: they love each other, and she directs the plays he performs in. When Henri lands his first film role, the production of their new show is threatened, and their relationship explodes. They start wondering: is it possible to love each other without belonging to one another?

## Cast

Henri • William Lebghil  
Nora • Vimala Pons  
François • Jérémie Laheurte





## Interview with... Victor Rodenbach

**You co-directed your previous short films with Hugo Benamozig, but your first feature length focuses on a break-up. Did making this film alone reflect a personal stage of separation for you?**

Not at all—it's quite the opposite. I did co-direct, but that was over a decade ago, right after Hugo and I graduated from film school. We worked on those films between 2011 and 2013. Since then, I've mainly worked as a screenwriter, which is a pretty solitary life. Returning to directing felt like reconnecting with a more collective process; mirroring the themes in the film.

**There's a real sense of community at the heart of the film; which keeps these characters moving forward. Was this always the plan?**

Absolutely. Although the film is primarily a romantic comedy, which follows the story of these two main characters, the collective is present on several levels, both socially and

professionally. It was important for me to use communal spaces to tell this story of individual fulfilment. Faced with a break-up, and the questions it raises, Henri and Nora need to regain their focus, and summon the strength required to challenge themselves. They find this through their interactions with different groups, which gives them the ability to once again enter into conversation with the world. This idea of a “conversation” is essential to the film and my relationship with cinema in general. It's a profound philosophical question for all of us—especially for someone introverted, like me. It can be a challenge to enter into conversation with others, but it's also a very important motif in romantic comedies and love stories. You fall in love when you can communicate with someone, but the relationship falters when this understanding stops. This is the structure of Henri and Nora's story.

**Your film opens with Henri and Nora falling in love, but you use the opening credits to skip past their early**

**romance. What was it about their break-up that interested you?**

I was drawn to it straight away. I'm a big fan of the ‘comedy of remarriage’ genre. When I was younger, I appreciated it for its dialogue, and for its burlesque elements. But, when I watched these films again when I was older, I found them profoundly moving in a more existential sense. I wanted to tell the story of a couple who break up and come face to face with the difficult questions hidden beneath the enchantment of the romantic comedy. A break-up is a form of mourning. When you've been together for so long and shared so much, seeing the world without the other person is a bit like seeing it without yourself. I wanted to ask the question: what really changes when we grow up, and grow old together? Are we the ones who change or is it the way we look at the things that brought us together? Personally, I think it's the way we look at things that changes, not so much us. The challenge to continue being together is to find the strength to change oneself.





The title suggests the idea of 'playing the good part' in a relationship and hints at a reversal of traditional gender dynamics. In your story, Vimala Pons' character directs William Lebghil's. Was this dynamic a deliberate choice to challenge old myths about the artist and muse?

I was aware when I assigned these roles that it wasn't a story we were used to seeing, but at no point did I intend to be transgressive. It was linked to my own reality. My partner is

a theatre director, so I already live in a world where I don't feel the need to try and reverse these roles. There was simply an intention to get it right. As far as the original title is concerned, there's the expression "avoir le beau rôle" (to have the good part), which touches on the dynamics of a couple, and the caricatures we embody when things start to go wrong. There's often the desire to play 'the good part' in a love story that goes wrong, to shift the blame onto the other person. I wanted to show the pettiness that can come

into play in this kind of relationship. Then there's the film role that instigates their breakup. There's a positive energy behind Henri's search for something new, something more beautiful; a new challenge! But I also wanted to be a bit satirical about this desire to chase after 'the good part', which can be a bit futile.

**What is it about the conflict between cinema and theatre that interests you?**

It allowed me to set up these two worlds which are neighbours, but that rarely mix.



However, you find these same dynamics of jealousy, desire and admiration in both. For me this justified moving the characters between the two worlds, putting them in danger and taking them on a journey into the unknown that seemed both stimulating and playful. It also told the story of these characters' inner lives. I tend to belong to the world of cinema, but theatre is a world I know intimately without actually being part of it, as my partner is a theatre director. Like Henri and Nora, we met when we were still at school, me at the Fémis (a prestigious cinema school in France), her at the Conservatoire. We had parallel career paths, but there was an admiration between us. Over the years, I've drawn a lot of inspiration from her theatrical world, which fascinates me. The same fascination that Henri, on the other hand, feels for the cinema. This allowed me to create a mirror image of my own experience, which was quite stimulating and allowed me to depict another world which I admire. Those actors and directors who go on stage every night and expose themselves to an audience have a relationship to life that seems exceptional to me; there's something universal about it.

**When depicting these environments, how do you avoid falling into caricature?**

It's a risk I identified early on so I relied on sincerity to navigate it. The desire to tell this

story comes from my love for these worlds. I tried to adopt an amused perspective but I realised quite early on that I also wanted my film to be gentle. However, I wanted this gentleness to have an edge - to be powerful, yet rough at times - and to not hesitate to make people laugh through ridiculous moments. This back and forth between gentleness and passion, between the ridiculous and the beautiful, is intimately linked to these people who take what they do so seriously, which is funny, mesmerizing and which I always find very touching. To capture this world accurately, the casting director, Judith Chaliier, and I sought out actors with theatre experience. I wanted to represent that world as accurately as possible. Their experiences enriched the film and made it both funny but authentic. I also had the idea of building characters without any antagonism. I often think of James L. Brooks and his belief in every character's ability to grow, change, and improve. This informed both the writing and directing process, and helped things from becoming too one-sided or too close to caricature. The character of François is a good example; he is both generous and selfish.

**Would you say this gentleness is what makes your film feel relevant, even generational?**

To be honest, I didn't think about it while

making the film. But when hiring the actors - Vimala and William - something quite magical happened. I've known William for ten years, and we've made a short film together, but there was an unexpected harmony between the three of us that infused the film. I was talking about the dialogue between gentleness and passion; and William has both; he is very gentle but at the same time he's inhabited by a very strong passion. Vimala, at first glance, seems like the opposite: she has this very passionate relationship with life, with creation, with commitment, which can be a bit jarring, but as you get to know her, you realise that she's also very gentle. Their dynamic created a kind of "mirror meeting" between passion and tenderness, which feels very contemporary. While everyone interprets the word "contemporary" differently, I do think Vimala and William represent their time beautifully.

**Why is the couple, particularly a couple in crisis, such a compelling space for exploring contemporary themes?**

I think of the couple as the innermost layer of Russian dolls. They're part of a group, but when that core cracks—like when Henri longs to break free—it mirrors a need in all couples for movement and evolution. A couple enters into crisis when it stagnates. For Henri and

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The explosion of the couple at its core forces us to question its foundations.



Nora, it's less about social critique and more about the comfort zones they've fallen into, repeating the same patterns. At this point, the couple can become an image of our relationship with society, our relationship with others and the need to get moving again in order to function and be open to change. The explosion of the couple at its core forces us to question its foundations, and to break down the walls one's built to keep feeling safe and warm. Ultimately forcing us to question the rules and to invent new ones.

### Is the setting of theatre and cinema meant to symbolize how performance is a necessity for growth?

Absolutely. The spark between Nora and Henri comes through the games they play as part of loving each other. They ignite passion in one another, but when Henri starts performing for someone else, it makes their love impossible. In the end, they can only come back to each other by performing for each other again, but in a different way; with a new perspective that allows them to fully appreciate each other and what they have become. Acting is everywhere in the film. There are quite a few directing and writing choices that play on the boundary between performance and reality, so much so that sometimes it's hard to know what's real and what's fake.

### What's it like making a comedy in 2024?

It's really difficult, there's always this ambiguity between auteur films and comedies. A lot of people associate comedy with commercial cinema. At the CNC, they say "that's good, but we don't need you". It's difficult with a comedy that doesn't have any overt signs of radicalism or transgression. Meanwhile the subject of theatre and cinema can be an obstacle at the commercial box office. You find yourself caught in the middle of the river, struggling to get to the other side.





# HELLO MADNESS

Directed by  
Judith Davis

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2024 | COMEDY | FRANCE | COLOR | 107'

**Produced by**

Agat Films  
Apsara Films

**Local distributor**

UFO Distribution

**Local release date**

26<sup>th</sup> February 2025

**Logline**

Jeanne visits her best friend Elisa in the countryside and discovers an abandoned castle turned into a community space. Full of social and collective initiatives, the place is threatened by business plans. How long will it resist?

**Cast**

Elisa · Claire Dumas  
Amaury · Nadir Legrand  
Jeanne · Judith Davis





## Interview with...

### Judith Davis

**I read that in your theatre work, you often start by asking yourself what makes you angry. Does this same approach apply to your film writing?**

I don't base my work on a single emotion, but on what is going through my mind at the time. But yes, anger is often at the forefront. We live in an absurd, mortifying and dehumanising world that embodies market values that are not my own. There's despair, anger and sometimes laughter, but it's a laughter born out of survival. People are being crushed by the infernal pursuit of profitability. Anger was the driving force behind the main character in my first film [*WHATEVER HAPPENED TO MY REVOLUTION?*, 2019], who I played. I exaggerated this feeling to create these grotesque situations that bring out the humour of these moments. For *HELLO MADNESS*, I wanted to go beyond that emotion and ask the question: "What can we do?" For my first film, I was often criticised for this when seeking funding: people told

me that an angry young woman was a problem for them. For my second film, I tried to approach this anger in a more plural way; with appeasement, and with an alternative outlook which I embodied with the HP ('psychiatric hospital'), a place of reflection, care and experimentation.

**Have you always felt that comedy was the best way to channel this anger?**

Yes, for many reasons. In my personal life, I laugh a lot but I also take things very much to heart. I'm revolted by the social violence against which we feel powerless, and this feeling is multiplied by the possibility of being informed of everything that's happening in the world in real time. There's something very overwhelming about it. Laughing keeps me going, and I apply this to the way I create. It's also what I want for others: to be reinvigorated, to be cared for, to be given a helping hand. I fear the possibility of sinking, of being too overwhelmed by all the facts. I try to mix emotions and offer humour on

a human scale, not humour that mocks but that appeals to people's intelligence. This is the second aspect of my relationship with comedy: I think that self-mockery, and of putting our contradictions into play in a film and laughing about them collectively in a cinema, unites and liberates us. It enables us to be stronger when looking at the seriousness of the world. I try to have tenderness for each of my characters, whatever side they're on. In the film, I take a character who is my political enemy and make them into my main character.

**What challenges come with making a comedy in 2024?**

I've had to create my own model because nobody trusted my first project except UFO, the French distributor. The CNC turned it down two or three times. My first film was practically self-funded, I had to be resourceful – it was my Mum who ran our canteen on set! Luckily, Patrick Sobelman from Agat Films supported me and secured

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I'm interested in using caricature as a starting point, because we're all caricatures in someone else's eyes.”





the shoot. Marine Arrighi of Apsara Films took care of executive production and then line production. **WHATEVER HAPPENED TO MY REVOLUTION?**, proved it was possible to make a film without big stars, and to have your central character be an angry young girl while also using comedy to tackle serious subjects. This mix of tones reflects the highs and lows of everyday life. I also come from the theatre and didn't go to the Fémis (a prestigious cinema school in France) so there's nothing in my background to reassure anyone. However,

my second film was easier to put together. We got the CNC thanks to my first film and the strength of the script. But the TV channels are still a bit hesitant about my projects, as I'm still not that well known. The same film with a well-known cast, immediately reassures TV networks. There's a deliberately mainstream dimension to what I do, and that's important to me. I'm not interested in preaching to an audience that's already convinced. I want to be as popular as possible while keeping true to my beliefs - it's a wager that hangs by a thread.

**Can you explain your decision to create the "administrative theme tune" in the film?**

I wanted us to dive into what I call administrative torture. I think the glorification of digital technology dehumanizes us all. During the COVID subsidies period, I found myself crying over the impossibility of navigating those bureaucratic processes. We all experience this kind of alienation, yet we face it alone. Everything is rushing at us, everything is speeding up. I wanted to



get to the heart of this matter, and to bring people together around these issues. Even I find myself caught up in these contemporary contradictions, I wanted everything to happen fast and I can see that viewers are becoming more impatient, especially with TV series. In order to sum up, the urban horror, we designed this voice over: half AI and half hold music, like the ones which are always screaming orders at us on the bus or on the underground. Together with Anaïs Mak, who created the credits, we devised a way to plunge viewers into this administrative hell from the start. In my opinion, this administrative form overload is designed to demoralize us.

**In the film, we really feel connected to the characters because they are so relatable. How do you balance creating these characters without slipping into caricature?**

It's a complicated slalom during the writing process. I often start with something common, even stereotypical. I talk about it a lot with the performers, who help me to figure out the right balance. The form, the dramaturgy, the writing of the characters and the staging of the film all help me do this. I'm interested in using caricature as a starting point, because we're all caricatures in someone else's eyes. For this film, I chose to have multiple points of view.

There's something disconcerting when you start following Amaury in his car and he says to his wife about Elisa and Bastien "oh the caricatures!" We were convinced that we were on the side of the activists, who are themselves going to judge these entrepreneurs. I'm very interested in that, it allows me to shift the judgements we make. I wanted to show what is a source of domination and exploitation and not point the finger at people as being responsible for all the misery in the world. Victoire and Bastien are mirror images, one based on the exploitation of women, the other on the exploitation of poverty. We have access to this distinction between the individual and the dominant class they represent. Thanks to the tools of cinema, we can experience their psyche and deconstruct this façade.

**The theme of appearances and masks plays a big role in your work. Why is this?**

People in masks aren't necessarily who you think they are. Carnival is all about role reversal. Standardisation and uniformity are demeaning. The film is effectively about appearances through a principle of reversibility. The HP ("psychiatric hospital") community works like a mirror that reveals false appearances. I liked the idea that Amaury uses his appearance as a way to





showcase his fear of not being accepted in the world. He even goes so far as to destroy his own face with this absurd array of false teeth.

### Why is the couple, particularly a couple in crisis, such a resonant setting for contemporary stories?

I wanted to talk about the contradictions that hurt us because we no longer know where to look without feeling guilty. We no longer know how to dress, how to feed ourselves, how to throw out our rubbish. I'm trying to defuse

this guilt through shared laughter. The couple embody these contradictions: even if we're together, thinking things through together, the bourgeois domestic dream is limited. There's a certain violence in imagining that the world can stop at the front door of the house. The family comedy is played out in the living room, while the women weep with exhaustion in the kitchen. There's something very disturbing about the domestic economy. The couple interests me as a setting, in the strongest sense of the word, because of the contradictions

contained within it. Maxence Tual's character is committed to solving ecological issues, but he subjects his wife to a form of domination at home. There's something wrong there. This lack of correlation between what happens outside and inside the home reveals a hierarchy of exploitation that's unbearable.

### Performance and imagination are important in your film. How did you explore these ideas?

Yes, performance and imagination is very





much embodied by the character of Cindy. A lot of people said of the first scenario that it was too theatrical, as if that was somehow a fault with it. I think the fluidity of the staging is made possible by the fact that we are all actors who are used to playing together. With the cinematographer Tom Harari, we thought a lot about all these long and travelling shots. The actors are capable of setting the pace in very long takes, and this comes from my relationship with the theatre. Then, as time went on, I discovered that acting is the key to

our ability to grasp the world. When you look at children playing, they're acting daily life. Play-pretend gives meaning and spirituality back to human activity. I also wanted to show that the open-air asylum in which we live is also a stage: the appointment with the banker for example, is staged. I wanted Cindy's character to have a wisdom, like an additional knowledge about the world which is not psychologically told. You can tell she's lived many lives and has this calm attitude that I don't have. She's got that smile that

shows it's all a game, that you have to outwit the staging of the social order and have fun; and perhaps most importantly; take that fun seriously.





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