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PRESENTS

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D'ONCIEU

PAULINE
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a love story

A FILM BY ALEXIS MICHALIK

1H30 – FRANCE – 2022 – 5.1

INTERNATIONAL SALES

Le Pacte

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SYNOPSIS

Katia's life is a mess when she meets Justine who has never dated a woman. It is love at first sight. They begin a beautiful, strong relationship and decide to have a child together. Sadly, Justine leaves her without a backward glance when Katia is carrying their daughter. Twelve years later, after Katia has raised Jeanne alone, she is told she has only a few months left to live. To find a guardian for Jeanne, her only option is her brother, William, a cynical, disillusioned writer.



INTERVIEW WITH ALEXIS MICHALIK

DIRECTOR

After EDMOND, this is the second time you have adapted one of your plays for the cinema. Does this transition from the stage to the screen rise specific questions for you in terms of directing?

Alexis Michalik - I ask myself the questions that everyone should ask themselves when making a film, namely: how to tell my story. In the theater you tell, in the cinema you show. Theater is an art form where the word is at the center of everything, where the actors tell a story; in cinema, it is the camera that films a story. There are a thousand differences between the two arts, but also similarities. In the cinema, the process is going to be more fragmented, with a large quantity of sets... but my theatrical writing is already very cinematic. For A LOVE STORY, I tried to explore new creative ways that I was not able to explore in the theater: using more sets, following a slightly different chronology, keeping the essential while telling it in a slightly different way. In the theater, for example, two people talking for five minutes goes by quickly, whereas in the cinema, it seems like a long scene of dialogue. The approach to dialogues is not the same.

Why did you choose A LOVE STORY specifically among all your plays? Is it closer to the autobiographical idea?

Not really. It could have been another of my plays, or even a film that had nothing to do with my plays. When I was putting this play together, all the movie industry told me «You have to make a movie out of this». I didn't anticipate this at all, but with the insistence of the people around me, I ended up asking myself if

this play wouldn't make a good movie. Then the lockdown came, the theaters closed, and I decided to try to adapt this play into a screenplay to see if it would work. I wrote two or three versions, sent them to producers, who responded quite well. We started looking for financing and from there, since everyone seemed to believe in it, I believed in it too and I launched into the adventure. But the choice to adapt this play did not come from its intimate content, rather from a reflection on what would be the best possible choice for a film. I also thought that it would not be a film in costumes like Edmond, that the budget would be lower and that it would be an opportunity to make the film with Juliette Delacroix, Marica Soyer, Pauline Bression and Léontine d'Oncieu, the actresses who created the play. These actresses were one of my motivations for making this film.

The beginning of the film, which tells the story of Katia and Justine's love encounter, goes very quickly. It looks like a fairy tale, everything is fluid, fast, almost unrealistic. Did you push this idealized aspect to better mark a contrast with what will follow, which will be less rose-tinted?

The love story had to go well for them to commit to having a child. In the editing, we tightened up this part a lot. In the play, Katia never stops explaining why she is afraid of committing to this relationship. In the film, this explanation would have been too written, too explanatory. We reduced these moments of Katia's anxiety, so we kept the prologue which shows the early death of her mother. This tightening reinforces the ideal tone of their love relationship.

How would you define Katia and Justine, especially in their relationship with love and the couple?

Justine is very open, she had a happy childhood, everything is going well in her life, she hasn't encountered any big problems, she has had many long relationships with men... Then she meets Katia, who is a relationship freak, who lost her parents at a young age, who is a lesbian but never had a serious long-term relationship in her life. Katia fears love because her family models are not ideal. These two women will meet, Justine will give confidence to Katia and they will form this couple a little miraculous. Katia is full of anxieties and neuroses while being very strong, while Justine lives in a world a little bit like a bear but will have to face the reality of things, the breakups and the suffering of making people suffer.

Between Katia and Justine, there is William, Katia's brother. This character that you play is both sympathetic (he is the one who pushes Katia to get involved with Justine, who presides over their union...) and unsympathetic: he has a frigid, snide, self-confident approach. Did you load him up a bit at the beginning to better underline the evolution of the character in the rest of the film?

Beyond that, I wanted to show a brother-sister relationship. We know that between a brother and a sister, there can be conflicts, arguments, and yet there is still love. If William was only nice, we wouldn't care. It's true that William can seem arrogant, peremptory, sardonic, but in the end, he is always there for her: he helps Katia to find love, he helps her to have a child, he «marries» Katia and Justine. This film is also a love story between brother and sister and each of them knows that there is always someone they can count on. William and Katia have a sense of humor after losing their parents at an early age: in the face of suffering, they always have a joke that fades it.

A Love Story mixes the codes of romantic comedy and melodrama by replacing the usual heterosexual couple with a female couple. Did you want to modernize the romcom and the melodrama, or rather normalize sapphic love?

I don't practice militant cinema or theater. I tell stories that touch me. It turns out that a couple of women was needed to make this story work, if only so that one could leave without having to answer to the pregnant one. If Justine had been a man, the father of the unborn child, the law would not have made it so easy for her to leave because the biological father is supposed to take care of the child. Here, Justine had no legal obligation. Then, yes, a couple of women is a normal thing for me, I did not want to put a progressive spin on it even if I am aware that this type of story is popular nowadays.

In the tone of the film, you mix comedy and drama, as in its story you mix early death and rebirth, the blossoming. Do you like to deal with the extreme emotions of life?

The question the film asks is: when there is no more love, after a bereavement, a separation, does love still survive, despite everything? The answer is perhaps in the budding relationship between William and Jeanne, in the second part of the film. We realize that all the love William feels for his sister Katia, he has in common with Jeanne, his niece, Katia's daughter. They're going to be easy other support to manage to survive and face the continuation. I remembered Just a Kiss by Gabriele Muccino where this kind of questioning on love and the brevity of life. This twirling, even humorous way of dealing with very dramatic things is particularly touching to me: isn't this life as we want to live it, deeply passionate, not just dreadry and flat?

The way you link the two parts of the film is quite daring in terms of writing and structure: you take the risk of «abandoning» the two main characters (Katia and Justine, who are reunited at the end) and replace them with two hitherto secondary characters, William and Jeanne.

My obsession is not to bore the audience. To do this, I try to continually surprise, so that the viewer never thinks «well, this is going to happen». They have to be surprised all the time by the storyline. In this case, William is secondary in the first part, but we got to know him, and when we find him in the foreground of the second part, we understand him a little better, we know what he went through. The empathy for him has already begun because even if he is sometimes unbearable, we have already seen him marrying Katia and Justine, we have already seen him helping his sister, we have seen him being present at key moments for Katia. In the second part, Katia asks him to be present in the strongest possible way and the question is: will William be there?

William hesitates to take care of Jeanne, Katia's teenage daughter, then does so more or less forced. What is beautiful is that Jeanne supports William as much as the other way around.

In the play, William says to Jeanne «it is not me who will take care of you, it is you who will take care of me». For the film, we cut these dialogues, but yes, the goal was to show this taking in charge of the adult by the child. Jeanne is already quite mature, she is passionate about literature, she is clever and will tame William rather than the other way around.

Early death is very present: death of the couple, death of Katia and William's mother, death of Katia, like a deterministic reproduction of the curse. Will Jeanne break this cycle?

In the corridor of the hospital, Jeanne says to William «I will love». She is not afraid to love, unlike Katia. This is what justifies this story and its title. When she loses her mother, Katia says to herself «what's the use of loving since I'm going to die?» And Jeanne says to herself «it is precisely because we are going to die that I will love». That's the whole question of the film: what's the point of loving when there's a rupture, a death? I wrote this play after a break-up and this theme is underlying in each of the characters. It is Jeanne who best answers this question. By her very existence, Jeanne embodies the love that Katia and Justine felt. Certainly, Jeanne never knew Justine. She is angry with her for that, she is also angry with her for having made her mother unhappy. Nevertheless, the love of Katia and Justine existed and led to a birth, Jeanne's.

Through William or Jeanne, through the bookstore where several scenes of the film take place, did you also want to pay tribute to texts, to literature, to books, to men and women of the written word?

Yes, but this is a constant habit in all my shows, where there is always a poet, an artist, a man of the theater. In my stories, there is always a place for an artistic universe. Edmond was talking about Edmond Rostand. In this case, in A Love Story, William is a writer, Katia is a journalist, Jeanne reads a lot and writes – she is even a better writer than William!

Can you talk about your choice to keep Juliette Delacroix, Marica Soyer, Pauline Bression and Léontine d'Oncieu, the actresses in the play?

We initiated the project with my partners Benjamin Bellecour and Camille Torre through Acmé, our company. I didn't particularly need the cinema and its big names, the play existed, it has been very successful, it continues to be; it has been performed 400 times. I told myself that it would be nice to make the film with the actresses of the play and to make this adventure last, that amused me more than going to look for 7 or 8 million euros and movie stars. For this to happen, we needed partners to accompany us and finally, Le Pacte, France 2 and Canal followed us. From then on, we knew that we would make the film with this cast.

Was it easier to direct actresses who already knew the play?

These actresses are also my friends. Afterwards, I changed the text of the play quite a bit in the film, I added some scenes, I cut others, etc. So, we worked a lot together and rehearsed the film as if it were a play, that is to say in length. We could have shot this film in one take. When we arrived on the set, we were totally ready. It was also a question of rhythm, because we were shooting in 54 sets in 30 days. I wanted to shoot in a lots of different settings so that we would have the impression of sweeping through fifteen years of their lives.

You play William yourself. Is it easier or more difficult to wear the double-hat of director and actor?

It's more complicated in the cinema than in the theater because the relationship to time is not the same. It's difficult to act and direct when you don't have time to review the take. Our schedule was tight, and I didn't have the luxury of seeing what was done, I relied on the feedback from the technical team. If we had ten more days, I would have lived this double role in a more serene way. Overall, I enjoyed it, but in certain scenes, especially emotional ones, the actor needs to be in a little bubble before acting. There, the bubble did not exist.

William has his horrendous sides, and you embody this character. Did you want to confront your least likable traits through this role?

In theater, there is an exercise that consists in searching for your clown. I would say that William is my clown, a tenfold version of yourself. Like William, I work in writing, and I was coming out of a break-up, but unlike him, I am not depressed, nor alcoholic, nor as bitter as him... If I loose my wife in an accident, I would start drinking and wouldn't write for five years, maybe I would be more like him. There is a bit of me in William but also in Katia, in Justine, in Claire, in Jeanne... When you write, you put yourself in all the characters. I never said to myself «William is a little bit me», but I rather would say «William is a character that I would be able to play».

How was your collaboration with Marie Spencer, your chief operator?

I'm the kind of person who knows what he wants. We had a little debate at the beginning because I have a passion for the steadycam, and she doesn't! We compromised to 50/50, I used the steadycam and I accepted that she put some shots on rails. When we meet a chief operator, it's like with an actor, we try to meet each other halfway, it's a dialogue. Each shot was the fruit of the time allotted. The steadycam allows us to work faster than the rails, except... if there is wind, if this or that obstacle makes it more complicated. But yes, the steadycam is a lighter tool than the traveling rail. Overall, it was an easier shooting than on Edmond where there were big crane movements.

The editing seems rather fast, nervous. How did you work with Julie Tribout and Sophie Fourdrinoy, the editors?

The editing is generally quite tight for the reasons I mentioned at the beginning. The first version of the film was 1 hour and 47 minutes long, and has been tightening it up even more, we ended up with a film that lasts 1 hour and 26 minutes. The funny thing is that this is the exact length of the play! This shows we have respected the major scenes and movements of the play. By different ways, we found the rhythm of the play in the cinema.

Can you talk about the music of Romain Trouillet, which seemed to me rather lyrical, kind of melodramatic?

Yes, the music is emotional. With Romain, we went back and forth a lot, did a lot of testing and changing. At the beginning, in the play, the soundtrack is a playlist of songs. In the cinema, the rights are too expensive. We gradually moved towards fewer songs and more original compositions. Romain and I composed three songs: one when they make love and two for the wedding. Romain is a great composer, he is on the ball, he reacts quickly. Music is very important to me, as much as in theater as in films. I tend to tell a story based on the music rather than the other way around, and I think that the editing must match the music. There is a song by Aznavour at the end: in the play, all five of us sing it. We had recorded this version to try it in the film and in the end, I preferred to hear Aznavour's version.

ALEXIS MICHALIK

FILMOGRAPHY

DIRECTOR

- 2022** A LOVE STORY
- 2019** EDMOND
- 2016** FRIDAY NIGHT (Short film)
- 2014** AU SOL (Short film)
PIM-POUM LE PETIT PANDA (Short film)

PLAY

- 2021** THE PRODUCEURS
- 2020** A LOVE STORY
- 2017** INTRA-MUROS
- 2016** EDMOND
- 2014** THE ILLUSIONNISTES CERCLE / LE CERCLE DES ILLUSIONNISTES
- 2013** THE STORY MAKER / LE PORTEUR D'HISTOIRE
- 2010** R & J (ROMEO & JULIETTE)
- 2009** THE ALMOSTTAMED VIXEN / LA MÉGÈRE A PEU PRÈS APPRIVOISÉE

CAST

Juliette Delacroix	Katia
Marica Soyer	Justine
Alexis Michalik	William
Pauline Bression	Claire
Léontine D'Oncieu De La Batie	Jeanne

CREW

Screenwriter & director	Alexis Michalik
Photography	Marie Spencer
Editing	Sophie Fourdrinoy
Sound	Marianne Roussy
Costumes	Marion Rebmann
Make-up	Véronique Clochepin Lassalle
Settings	Julie Wassef
1st director assistant	Laëtitia Martinoni
Executive producer	Jean-Marie Antonini
Production Director	Arnaud Kaiser
Music	Romain Trouillet
Production companies	Acmé Films Full Dawa Films
French Distribution	Le Pacte