



Presents

A Mandarin Cinema production

CHOCOLAT

A film by Roschdy **ZEM**

Screenplay by Cyril **GELY**

Adaptation
Roschdy **ZEM** and Olivier **GORCE**

Produced by Eric & Nicolas **ALTMAYER**

With Omar **SY**, James **THIERREE**
Clotilde **HESME**, Olivier **GOURMET**, Frédéric **PIERROT**, Noémie **LVOVSKY**

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SYNOPSIS

From circus to theater, from anonymity to fame, the incredible destiny of Chocolat the clown (Omar Sy), the first black stage performer in France.

The unprecedented duo he forms with Footit (James Thierrée) is very popular in Belle Epoque Paris, until easy money, gambling and discrimination take their toll on their friendship and Chocolat's career.

The singular story of an exceptional artist.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ROSCHDY ZEM

Did you already know the story of Footit and Chocolat?

No, I discovered it when reading the screenplay. When Nicolas and Eric Altmayer offered me the project, they already had an advanced version of the script, with all the characters and a compelling subject. It is just as rare to find an original idea in France as it is elsewhere. All the credit goes to Eric and Nicolas.

Was that the source of your enthusiasm, which Omar describes as being contagious?

In fact, it was the convergence of several factors: on the one hand, the prospect of filming turn-of-the-century Paris and all its pomp. On the other hand, telling the story of a close friendship between two men. And then there was the character of Chocolat: an Epicurean who lives life to the fullest. Not to forget his former life as a slave. He takes advantage of the opportunities that come his way to become a big star. With that kind of positive character, it became possible to treat the subject without glossing over our colonialist past, but while also avoiding any pathos. That was essential for me.

How did you work on adapting the screenplay with Cyril Gély?

In order to appropriate it, I would somehow have to adapt it with another screenwriter. In this case, with Olivier Gorce, the screenwriter with whom I co-wrote OMAR KILLED ME. We both focused on Footit and Chocolat's relationship in the ring, but even more so when they were away from the big top.

This is your first period film. How did you prepare for the shoot?

Our department heads - first assistant, director of photography, production designer, costume designer – were all available six months before the first day of principal photography, so we could start preparing very early on. There was a lot of research to be done. But with a period film, the real difficulty is in logistics. We chose to shoot in Paris, rather than in a studio in Prague or elsewhere. And when you're on location for a film that takes place a century ago, you can set up all the decors you want, there will always be a crane sticking up like a sore thumb somewhere in the distance. For those scenes, we decided on our camera angles as soon as we did our breakdown, and we created a story board with special effects in mind.

How did you determine the aesthetics of the film? Did you have a film of reference?

There were in fact several. Pascaline Chavanne, our costume designer, Jérémie Duchier, our set designer, Thomas Letellier, our director of photography, and I looked at some films. Several sequences from LA VIE EN ROSE (by Olivier Dahan) inspired my direction. BARRY LYNDON (by Stanley Kubrick) was a point of reference for how we would treat images. Aesthetics are crucial to this kind of film. As for the choice of colors and fabrics, we relied

on documents, paintings, and then checked how they would look on film. Because in digital, some colors don't come across at all - no matter how magnificent they look to the naked eye. Once you have picked them out, you need to harmonize them. Even the clowns' make up had to be right. Which is the why I didn't want any of the department heads to work in isolation. So we designed the lighting on the basis of the costumes, the costumes according to the sets, for the men's clothes we kept in mind the women's costumes; and those of the main characters had to match the extras'. Because the eye does not like to be interfered with, and a touch of garish color in the background can ruin an entire emotional scene.

Omar was already part of the adventure when you received the project. When did you think of James Thierrée for the role of Footit?

One might have thought it would be best to pair Omar with someone else familiar to the public. But for this role we needed an insider. And James is not only an actor, he creates his own shows. When his name came up, the enthusiasm was unanimous. Omar Sy with James Thierrée... that rocks! And it's unique. Just given their intrinsic qualities, I knew that the combination would produce something explosive. And I wasn't disappointed...

James Thierrée says that you calmed his fears about the treatment of the circus scenes. How did you approach them?

James does everything for his own shows: direction, sets, writing the sketches, the acting. It seemed obvious to me to let him come up with his own acts. Who could choreograph them better than James? I gave him carte blanche, I just asked him to inject a few modern touches. Once we were shooting, I encouraged Omar and him to feel unfettered in their movements: "If you're having fun, we'll have fun". It was then my responsibility to pick and choose the best. During the edit, I had too much good stuff. Because all of their acts were funny, inventive. But I could use only two to three minutes of each ten-minute act. Cinema is not video recording. I wanted to keep everything, but that just wasn't possible.

What was your approach to Omar and James when they played together?

I immediately understood that they had a real relationship. James was the more experienced of the two in the circus universe. He was very demanding during rehearsals – with himself, more than anyone else. James was at times authoritarian. When during our film tests I saw the smiles on the technicians' faces, I knew we had something. Omar had been in training, but then he suddenly let himself go. His posture and his voice changed. It was the result of all that previous work. As for James, I could sense his madness, his way of being in perpetual search. My only fear was that the magic disappear. And that never happened.

How did the rest of the casting take place?

All the actors we approached accepted. I at times had some refusals for my earlier films, and there were some actors I dared not approach for 5 or 6 days of work. For this film, actors used to taking main roles not only accepted, they were quick about it. Bruno and Denis Podalydès who play the Lumière Brothers signed on immediately, even though they only had one day of shooting. We got the same enthusiasm from Olivier Gourmet, Noémie Lvovski,

Clotilde Hesme, Frédéric Pierrot... Aside from their enthusiasm about the screenplay, I could tell that they loved the idea of working with Omar. As a general rule, I believe in personal meetings more than in tests.

James and Omar talk about the involvement and power of the supporting roles...

People often say that the director is the barometer on a film, but the actors are too. James and Omar's energy truly lit up the set. Every day for twelve days, their extraordinary vitality inspired the crew, and helped me a lot. In fact, the supporting roles felt that they were being shown to advantage, because the exchange was so stimulating.

Did the fact that you are an actor influence the way you direct?

Of course! I proceed as I would like others to do with me: patient and gentle. I don't believe in conflictual relations. Besides, I would rather not use the term 'direct'. Actors know how to act. It's more a question of getting them to vary their emotions, to give me some choice during the edit. Besides, what matters to me is achieving the right tone. Because truth has its own pitch. My goal is to assist the actor until I hear it, helping him when he needs me to find the right key. Sometimes it happens immediately, sometimes not. It takes two to tango.

How did you deal with Omar's apprehensions concerning the scenes from Othello ?

Omar thought he was treading on sacred ground. We all had Orson Welles' version in mind. But I told him: "Forget about all that! Playing Othello means going with your gut, and you know how to do that".

Which were the most complicated sequences to shoot?

Not the scenes of violence. The one in which Omar is tortured in prison is powerful, because the situation is so eloquent. But I wanted to achieve that same kind of power in scenes that were theoretically banal. Like those in which passersby look back as he walks by. Because the worst violence is the violence that Chocolat suffers on an everyday basis. Then there are the scenes for which there are no sets yet, such as when Chocolat visits the Exposition Universelle. Filming against a set that will first be created during post production was new for me. And disorienting. Otherwise, for the circus acts, James needed a lot of freedom of movement in the ring, and he trained Omar for that. We had to adapt, and especially since they never played an act the same way twice. Which is also what makes them so amazing.

What did you learn from this film?

To dare! The financial constraints, the time I have available, I try not to have any regrets. On my first film, I was not very daring. I began on the second, and continued with the third. On this shoot, it became a leitmotif. Every morning I asked myself: "What can I bring to today's sequence? What added value? How can I surpass the screenplay?" But I also learned a lot as an actor, about how to approach a role. Like Frédéric Pierrot. Like the other supporting roles, he was always involved, even when the film didn't rely on him. Without even mentioning James and Omar. They were permanently focused and

dissatisfied. Even when the camera was off, they remained in character, with a constant desire to outdo themselves.

What kind of memories will you keep of this shoot?

The memory of a long and wonderful adventure. My most wonderful professional experience to date. I will never be able to thank Nicolas and Eric Altmayer enough. It was a fascinating period, made up of extraordinary encounters, and of my discovery of the world of the circus, the work and sacrifices it requires. I will never again see a circus act in the same way. I will also remember the last day of the shoot. When you work on a film, you live in a bubble. You live in a bubble because of the three months that you spend on it and because of the atmosphere there. This time the bubble took up a lot more space. Coming out of it was difficult. The euphoria was over. You are suddenly alone at an editing table. I was sad that the shoot was over, but at the same time happy to have got through it. Because the projects you bring to fruition make up barely 10 % of the projects you launch.

Finally, with this film, what do you want to tell the public?

The story of a couple that meets, creates something together, and is then separated by life. But it is also about the emancipation of one man – Chocolat – who discovers life, becomes a thoughtful, less candid, and therefore less subservient adult. With that story, we are talking about France. With no culpability or accusations Chocolat marked his times, and then was forgotten. He isn't the only one. Talking about him helps us to know our past better. And I have always thought that that was essential for living better in the present today.

What moved you about his fate?

The analogy between Chocolat's journey, Omar's and mine. We laughed, saying: "In fact... we're imposters!" Omar is a great and generous actor. He deserves everything that is happening to him. But our generation grew up without ever seeing an immigrant's child share top billing with a star. And so, finding yourself on set with actors you have always admired... For almost 20 years, I wondered when someone would wake up and say: "Hey! What are you doing there? You don't belong here." Besides, I would have given in: "Sorry, they told me I could. But I'm leaving." Today that sense of imposture has faded away. But to discover that one century ago an artist 'of 'color' had such success... moves me. And at the same time it saddens me. Because there is nothing left of it! Maybe this film will change things. But it makes you think about your own journey. What will remain of what we've done?

AN INTERVIEW WITH OMAR SY

Were you aware of the existence of Chocolat before working on this project?

No! I discovered him in 2011. I was filming *THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TRACKS* (by David Charhon) for Mandarin Cinema, when one evening Nicolas Altmayer, one of the producers, entered my dressing room. He told me about his wanting to produce a film based on the life of Chocolat. He didn't have a screenplay yet, just a few notes. But they whetted my curiosity. That is how I learned that Chocolat was the first black artist in France to have any success. That he formed a duo with George Footit at the beginning of the last century. And that their act inspired the idea of the white clown and the 'auguste'. I knew the French expression 'être chocolat' ('be screwed'), without knowing that it originated with his clown persona. After reading the book by Gérard Noiriel (*Chocolat clown nègre*), my motivation went up a level. Six months later, I was reading a first draft of Cyril Gély's screenplay.

What attracted you to this project?

Chocolat's story touched me. Being born a slave, escaping and becoming a stage artist is an unbelievable trajectory. I can only imagine the amount of work and courage it took to make it that far. I found the story of his rise and fall equally interesting. Chocolat made people laugh with stereotypes about blacks. As society evolved, and people began to think a little more highly of them, they no longer wanted to laugh at them. That was a good thing for victims of racism, but a bad thing for him, because he sank into oblivion. Chocolat was an artist. I wanted his story, his work and talent to be recognized. Finally, period films with roles for black actors are rather rare.

Why is it interesting to play in a period film?

I tested the future with *X-MEN DAYS OF FUTURE PAST* (by Bryan Singer), but delving into the past, into an epoch that actually did exist, is a lot like time travel. It was fun. And it won't happen to me again soon. When I found out that I would have to devote at least one day to trying on costumes, I freaked out, but I realized that that would bring me closer to the character. Each fitting was like a new encounter with Chocolat, even before getting to the shoot. Whenever I tried on a costume, my posture changed. Pascaline Chavanne and her crew did meticulous, sublime work. During the first weeks, we shot Chocolat's glory days, during which time he was always well-dressed. When I wore a contemporary suit one night, I realized that something was missing: the waistcoat, and all those details that make up the charm of turn-of-the-century suits. And suddenly, even though the suit was well-tailored, I almost felt like I was wearing a track suit.

Behind the clown Chocolat, there is a man: Rafaël Padilla. How do you see him?

Like a grownup child who needs to have fun. Being born the son of a slave, having been a slave too, must be a heavy burden to carry. Even if you're not a slave, you don't always feel free. So when it is for real, as it was for Chocolat,.. I wonder how you can grow, how you can ever feel fulfilled. And still, he managed it. That is a sign of great strength. He found freedom in acting, in laughing, in pleasure. Aside from that, he had to make a place for himself where he was supposed to be. The moments of glory must have been the hardest to take for him. I picture a life in the shape of a roller coaster: extraordinary moments, followed by episodes of solitude. If you ask me, I think that if he ended up in the streets, it may have also been because unconsciously he wanted it somewhat.

In what way does he resemble you?

I never look for points of resemblance with my characters, because I have a hard time defining myself, because I always keep on evolving. I think that it is complicated to know who you really are. On the other hand, I begin by trying to understand them. In some ways, I feel close to Chocolat, even though we don't live in the same time period. Compared to him, I never had any real difficulties, but I can understand an artist who has to prove himself so much. I can also only guess at the guilt he must have felt about his success. I experience that a little, although on a different scale. When I compare my situation with that of other people like me, I ask myself: "Do I really deserve this? Why me? Why is it so hard for the others?" Except that for Chocolat, the contrast between his life and the daily lives of other blacks was enormous.

Chocolat had to prove that he was not only a comedian, but an actor as well. Have you experienced that too?

No! Being an actor in a comedy or in a drama is the same job. However, I was always attracted to dramatic roles. But I didn't go for it all at once. It was more like little by little. I like to test my limits, to try to exceed my limits. But still, that doesn't have anything to do with proving to others that I am an actor. It's more of a personal challenge. I want to see how far I can go as an actor.

Exactly, for the first time you have a role in which you evolve from a young adult to old age, in a film that explores many registers. Was that a challenge?

Yes. For an actor, this character is a true gift, because the life of Chocolat is full of ups and downs. This was an opportunity to play scenes of comedy, and drama. There are circus scenes, love scenes, fight scenes, and the euphoria that comes with success. And then his decline with alcohol and drugs. To keep the chronology straight when shooting out of order, I had to do some technical work. I never had to do that before. And then there are the scenes of classic theater. Another challenge. That is one of the sequences that I feared the most. I never played in the theater, I never took any courses. So I was so afraid of looking ridiculous. I said to myself: "If I mess up, it's a shame for me, but worse yet, I'm involving Chocolat, who never asked for any of this." Because at that moment in the film, Chocolat has to prove that he can play the role of Othello. To do him justice, I had to play it the best I could. There was immense pressure on me. To help me, I had to desacralize theater, Shakespeare. Everything! I went for it, and I played this scene like any other.

But today, the pressure is still there. I don't have any experience in that domain. No bearings. It's hard for me to evaluate my work.

How much time did you need to prepare the role?

Other than discussions with Roschdy (Zem) and Gérard Noiriél, I needed to do some research to assimilate the social and political context of the times. On the other hand, the circus was virgin territory. Luckily for us, James Thierrée who plays Footit, knows that universe inside out. We rehearsed for four weeks. I practiced with Fred Testot. We are in some ways the descendants of clowns. But James taught me the particularities of clown mechanics, the rhythm, body movements. I had to learn to use my body differently. James showed me how a clown moves. But that was his clown. I had to become my own clown. We practiced a lot, we searched. It was exhausting, but I like to prepare. That makes up for my lack of technique and allows me to play more freely... even if once we're on set, I need a few days to fine tune my character. Discussion after discussion, scene after scene, I am finally able to strike a balance between my vision and the director's.

James Thierrée comes from show business. A different world from yours. How were you able to find common ground?

It wasn't easy. We each arrived with our own personality, our own universe. We needed to get to know each other and find the same kind of complicity that existed between our characters. I know how to work with a partner. I come from a double act. James doesn't. We had rows, we argued. And then we're both guys... It turned into a cock fight. It was intense, but useful. Being together when we were feeling good, when we were tired, in a good or a bad mood, created a complicity that was not only due to work. We carried that experience with us on set, and we had become a real duo. And James is an extraordinary encounter. He can have great self-confidence, but it can sometimes degenerate into absolute doubt. That is what is touching about him. And then he has such a passion for his profession. I like to sit down and think between two scenes, in peace and quiet. He can't do that. He's hyperactive and always looking for a new idea. He's a little crazy. It makes me laugh. But ultimately, if our acts are so poetic, it is thanks to his inspiration, and to his work. I learned a lot by working with him.

What did he bring to you?

He helped me grow. The better your partner, the better you become. It's like tennis. He sends you good shots. You have to rise to his level to send it back right. James likes to push back limits. I do too. But not to the same extent. With his desire to explore, he led me places I would never have got to myself in this universe. I owe that to him. He likes to rehearse. I don't. I always do things nice and easy, because I like to conserve some freshness for the actual shoot. But by imitating him, I saw that you can do rehearsal after rehearsal, without your acting ever becoming mechanical.

How do you see the relationship between Footit and Chocolat ?

Like mine with Fred. Each in his own bubble. A double act is a little like a love story. Even if it occurs on an artistic level. It begins with a kind of love at first sight. You meet someone who corresponds to you, with whom you can share things and evolve. I had that with Fred. We had a blast. I had that with James,

but in a more condensed way. To imagine relations between Footit and Chocolat, I drew on my own past. I know that relations can be fabulous on stage, and more complicated in real life. Because they are two separate worlds. Footit and Chocolat occupied different places in society. They grew together, but to carry on a friendship, you need to be on an equal footing. Footit considered Chocolat his equal. Unfortunately, once they were out of the big top, that was no longer the case.

This is the first time you were directed by Roschdy Zem...

When the producers brought up his name, I was surprised at first. Even though I admire his work a lot, I hadn't thought of him. But as soon as Roschdy talked to me about the film, I realized why it was such an excellent idea, and why he was so enthusiastic. He and I have a common base. We are the sons of immigrants, we're both from the suburbs. But Roschdy started out in the mid-80s, so it was more complicated for him to make a place for himself than it was for me. When I started out, he and others had already leveled the playing field. I understood that, with his experience, he would bring an interesting approach to the film.

What was it like to work with him?

Roschdy has one quality that facilitates relations: he's frank. In this profession, you often have to read between the lines. I've only had equally simple and rapid communications with Eric Toledano and Olivier Nakache. The fact that he's an actor too also facilitates the give and take. Roschdy knows how to formulate a request, because he knows the state you're in. I have a lot of esteem for his work. So I didn't want to disappoint him... another thing that makes you raise the level of your acting.

This is also the first time you've worked with actors who come from the theater and auteur cinema...

Roschdy's other strength was to choose each actor to fit a role, and not for reasons of prestige. For the casting, he deserves an A+: Clotilde Hesmes, Olivier Gourmet, Alex Descas, Olivier Raboutin, Frédéric Pierrot, Noémie Lvovsky... All of them were top-notch partners. I still consider myself a beginner, so it was very gratifying. They became their characters, and arrived on set with as much energy and involvement as we did. When I have only a small role, I don't invest myself as fully as that. Maybe they always work that way. But I'd like to think that they did it for the film. When you see the beauty of the sets and costumes, you can tell that no one took their job lightly. We all shared the ambition of making a beautiful film about these two clowns, and about Chocolat's career.

Talk to us about Marie. What role does she play in Chocolat's life?

An important role. The real Marie divorced for Chocolat. When you think of what divorce meant back in those days, and especially to set up house with a black, you can only imagine the courage that took. Her love for him touches me. When Chocolat has to go back to living in a trailer, Marie goes with him.

Clotilde Hesme was able to embody that limitless love. There is such intensity in her look, that it becomes easy to play a man in love with her. You may think that Chocolat made a mess of his life. On the contrary, I think that he made a success of it. He wanted to be a man like anyone else. In the eyes of Marie... that is what he was.

How is this film a turning point in your career?

It was a unique experience. An encounter with a character and a profession. And then there were all those other wonderful encounters: James, Roschdy, Clotilde... I was lucky enough to watch excellent actors work according to different methods. I like to watch actors work. I like to pick up something from each of them. I'm a bit of a thief. Normally I am not jealous of technical actors. I am actually quite happy to play by instinct. But when I watched Clotilde at work, I realized that her technique did not keep her from feeling free. That made me want to acquire some technique too.

Among the similarities between your respective lives, you are, like Chocolat, married to a white woman, and both of you work with sick children. Isn't that a little strange?

My wife has in fact been involved for ten years now with an association for sick children, and I visit hospitals to entertain them. So yes... I got goose bumps when I discovered that Marie and Chocolat did the same thing, That is another reason why this story touches me so particularly. I was not born a slave. I am a free man, considered a man just like any other. Which is very different from Chocolat. But I can imagine what went on in his head. Besides, by trying to understand him, I understood things about me.

What would you like audiences to retain about Chocolat and his fate?

I would be happy if they're curious enough to discover him. Because being an artist means leaving a trace behind. And Chocolat's has been erased. I would like it to reappear. That he didn't go all that way for nothing. And then again, as an artist, Chocolat would have liked to be considered the equal of Footit, for whom there is a lot archive material. I hope that that will be the case, and that he will like the film, wherever he is... that he will any case feel all the love that we put into it. To finish, I have a more personal wish. When UNTOUCHABLES had such a resounding success, and I received a César for it, I often heard that I was the first black artist in France to attain such fame. To put things back in perspective, I would like for people to remember from now on that before me ... there was Chocolat.

AN INTERVIEW WITH JAMES THIERREE

Had you already heard of Footit and Chocolat ?

No! And even though I grew up in that universe. My parents put on shows that are today called 'The New Circus'. I rubbed shoulders with traditional circus families when I was a kid. My parents own some beautiful clown posters of Totor, Dudule, or the Fratellini Brothers. But until Roschdy told me their story, I didn't know anything about Footit and Chocolat.

You have acted in fifteen films without ever playing the role of a clown...

It was almost taboo. For my parents and me, whatever had to do with traditional circus was the other side. Like theirs, my artistic approach looks forward. The red nose is the opposite of what I do in the theater. When I was offered the role, there was at first some fear, a feeling of incompatibility. I asked myself: "What are they going to do with the circus acts? Are they going to just tell a human story, or do we impinge on their artistic relations?" I quickly confronted Roschdy with those questions. Then I brought up the disastrous look of circus sequences in the cinema. I said that what can be done under the big top does not necessarily work on a big screen. Roschdy told me that the essential thing in the film is the relationship between George (Footit) and Rafaël (Chocolat). I was worried that Omar and I would play the acts like marionettes, without their having any reality, any real punch. My origins told me that we had to tread carefully. Nevertheless, the character of George Footit attracted me totally. I would have been an imbecile to turn my nose up at it.

What is so appealing about the character of Footit?

George is peculiar: harsh, withdrawn, a bundle of fragile emotions. In the ring, he seems to be in osmosis with Chocolat. But once he gets back to his dressing room, it's all over. When he realizes that he feels attached to his partner, he wishes he could say: "I love you. You are my best friend." But he can't. And then he has that inescapable anxiety about poverty. At the time, you either had top billing, or you were in the gutter. There was no middle ground. Footit drowns his angst in work. He is obsessed with accomplishment, high standards. That is the beauty of the role. But I am not manic about

defending their characters at any price. Footit's lack of comprehension for what Chocolat goes through is inexcusable. But that's just human. And things are not always mushy and sentimental. When he runs into him, Footit announces right off the bat: "I am not looking for a Negro, I am looking for a clown". All right, that is his artistic vision. But where others see only a black man, he perceives Chocolat's comic potential. Audiences soon acclaim them, ask for more. When the duo splits up, George sees it as an injustice. It was important for me that the Footit/Chocolat relationship exist, and that we grieve over their separation.

What do you have in common with your character?

I grew up in the theater. The circus for George, like the theater for me, was a temple, a church, an arena. There is something existential and sublime in the confrontation between one human being and an assembly. And then there is faith. George is a believer. He is convinced that he can keep on riding higher. I also live through my work. In the extreme! I have to learn not to just work. It is tempting to remain inside a temple. But you also have to confront the world, make friends, and look for answers.

How did you prepare the character of Footit in the ring, and what he is like in real life?

There is an unbelievable contrast between the two. A little like Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde. Outside the big top, George is unsociable, always tensed up. He looks like a man shrunk inside a dark suit worthy of a notary public's clerk. It is hard to imagine that he is a clown. In the ring, he's another man. He is many-colored. Like a fan, or a kaleidoscope of invention. As for his make-up, Nathalie Tissier and I agreed about the evolution of the mask behind which George is hiding; the mouth ends up dragging down, it nibbles away at his lust for life. A little like the portrait of Dorian Gray. And for his hair, we remained faithful to Footit's historical personality, with a cowlick sticking up over his forehead that makes him look like a punk. I also talked a lot with Pascaline Chavanne about the costumes. I had to accept going for a character who looked like a big fat bonbon. That got me used to the costume, to envisage how I could move. The hours of being made up and the number of costumes added to the fatigue of the shoot, but I often said to myself: "In what other film would you get to play such a chameleon?"

You had some demands concerning the circus acts. How did you prepare them?

Double acts have left few traces, but there are enough to define a color, a level of energy. On the other hand, Omar and I are not Footit and Chocolat. Without going so far as to try for the exact opposite, we had to find our own comic style and incorporate it into Roschdy's vision. We holed up for four weeks. Omar is already a clown, he acted like one, and he has worked on stage. All we needed to do was to work on the primal, physical, aspect. Omar said to me "For me, it all depends on the words." I replied: "And for me, on the body,". We each made an effort. I got used to using my voice. He used his body. A double act is complicated, but by dint of rehearsing, things fall into place naturally. The only thing we didn't get was a trial run. You usually tweak a sketch based on audience reaction. In the cinema,

impossible! Omar and I showed up in front of the camera hoping that the magic would work. And that the editor would use whatever came out best.

How did you go about getting on the same wavelength as Omar?

It was a challenge! We had to get to know each other and then learn to communicate in order to reach a kind of fusion. We yelled at each other: "Who the hell do you think you are? I'm not like you, okay! Now what do we do?" Once we got that off our chests, we went back to work. And we ended up having fun like kids. Omar and I could have kept our distances. It's good to be a pro. But I think that the camera can tell whether things are true to life or not. If on film, you sense only one iota of the complicity that we felt, then we've won.

What did he bring to you?

In times of doubt, Omar was like a pillar for me. He has a kind of energy, intelligence, instinct... And he is unbelievably laid back. I am labored, I'm a thinker. I could rely on him. This was a complicated film, with lots of logistics, technical constraints, marks on the ground. I'm more used to the stage, where you are much free. Omar whirls around within those constraints. He has a kind of focused nonchalance. I stole his secret tricks.

What kind of relations do you have with cinema?

I feel like a visitor. I have been on stage for almost 20 years, and I play in a movie every now and then. Cinema has a lot to bring me. When, like me, you have your own universe, your own company, you do everything yourself, and you acquire know-how that can soon become a trap. In the cinema, I have to work on what I have inside of me: subtlety, detail, life... you are constantly reassessing yourself.

How do you let yourself be directed, when you yourself are a director?

I am acutely aware of the importance of an actor's keeping an open mind. I could never embark on a project like this and take the wrong tack. I would be a stumbling block, where you have to be an instrument. This is one of the most wonderful professions. I have a great desire to be an actor who can correspond to someone's vision.

What kind of actor's director is Roschdy Zem?

At first he threw me off balance. He has a kind of trust in you that I took for dissatisfaction. I said to myself: "Okay, this is the point of no return. What is happening?" Then I understood that once he has chosen his actors, Roschdy gives them free rein: "I have entrusted you with a mission, Carry it out well. I'll worry about capturing it." You are given immense responsibility. That is sometimes thrilling, sometimes nerve-racking. It can be dizzying. But I finally surrendered and gave myself up thanks to my acting. On the other hand, this is not the kind of movie where the director follows his actors with a camera on his shoulder, waiting to see what will happen next. There is no room for improvisation here. This is an epic film, made by an army of people. Everything is regimented. You need to find your own freedom between two marks on the ground, and inject them with life. It's a bloody challenge!

Tell us about filming with your other partners.

It's nice to work with great actors. You become better. Besides Omar and I in our universe, there are two circus families. The first one in the provinces, run by the Delveaux. We became attached to the troupe, with Frédéric Pierrot as the MC, Noémie Lvovsky as his wife, the dwarf Marval, the giant... We were thrilled to share our pretty rough day-to-day lives on the shoot with them for three weeks, tramping through the mud. It was cold and wet, but that fit with the world of the story. For someone like me who appreciates total immersion, it was ideal. Then there is the new circus in Paris directed by Olivier Gourmet. They are all consummate actors.

Which memories will you keep of this shoot?

Of a long haul! My original worries disappeared. I didn't want the circus scenes to be treated like simple aesthetic information, and I wanted people to sense that Footit and Chocolat's relationship was evolving. I realize that Omar was feeling the same things. Despite the fatigue that built up during the three months of filming, it would have been a pleasure to prolong the experience with him. We filmed a compelling story. It was a great adventure. And we made it through together.

What would you like audiences to retain about the relationship between Footit and Chocolat?

We follow their inexorable fall, but there is a kind of redemption, because it seems obvious that they were linked by a profound affection, that their hearts never ceased to beat in unison, even when the going got tough. What united them was stronger than what drove them apart.

AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIC & NICOLAS ALTMAYER

How did you discover the existence of Chocolat?

NA: Absolutely by chance! It was 2009, and I was flipping through the cultural pages of the French magazine Express when an article caught my attention. It talked about a show directed by Marcel Bozonnet, based on a text by Gérard Noiriel. It was a conference-performance about the life of the clown Chocolat. I suddenly discovered that the first black artist on the French stage was a clown, and that he was a big star at the beginning of the last century... Like many, I thought that Joséphine Baker was the first. I immediately did some research on line, and then watched the film by the Lumière Brothers that the article talked about: a film of the double-act Chocolat and Footit. The idea for a film had begun to germinate in my mind.

What made you think that the life of Chocolat could be the subject of a film?

EA: His unbelievable destiny: born a slave in Cuba, he became a big star in Paris, for almost 15 years, but then died in poverty and fell into oblivion. The only thing that remains, by the way, is the rather old-fashioned French expression that means you've been hoodwinked: 'être chocolat' (to be chocolate). An extraordinary, but forgotten destiny... it is a compelling subject. I had the feeling that there was something breathtaking in this story. But still, given its cost– a period film is expensive – it seemed complicated to finance. We needed to be supported by the notoriety of an actor to obtain financing. And in 2009, no black actor was sufficiently famous. So we decided to shelve the idea.

Finally, the project came together just when Omar Sy's career was taking off...

NA: Yes, in 2011, the success of THE INTOUCHABLES fast-tracked Omar's career. He already had the talent. He now had the notoriety to carry a big budget film. The first step was to find Gérard Noiriél, the author of the play. He was then writing a book about Chocolat's life. We offered to take out an option on the rights.

EA: Moreover, as chance would have it, we had just recently met playwright Cyril Gél. His first play THE OTHER DUMAS had been adapted for the cinema. He invited us to come see the second: DIPLOMACY. Knowing his liking for historical subjects, I told him the story of Chocolat, which was also a way to gauge the interest it could awaken in an author. Cyril Gély had not yet written for the cinema, but was fascinated by the story. He wanted us to give him the chance to write the screenplay.

How did Omar Sy react when you spoke to him about Chocolat for the first time?

NA: His eyes immediately lit up. It was during the winter of 2011. We were producing ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TRACKS (by David Charhon), a movie in which Omar had one of the two main roles. One night, while the crew was setting up a stunt, I entered Omar's trailer. It must have been two o'clock in the morning. All the conditions were united to tell a story. I asked him if he had ever heard of Chocolat. He hadn't. I told him about his career. Omar immediately seemed to be enthusiastic about the idea and the character. But before agreeing, he wanted to read a screenplay. Eric and I had decided to take the risk of developing a script with Cyril Gély, without knowing if Omar would be interested in the role. While waiting for a first draft for him to read, I gave him a dossier.

What was in that dossier?

EA: A few bibliographical notes based on Gérard Noiriél's work; some photographic documents, such as the ads for which Chocolat had lent his image, but also some photos of the clown duo he formed with Footit. Elements that proved his existence, and illustrated the great popularity of the artist. That short five or six-page presentation no doubt anchored the idea in Omar's mind, until he could read a screenplay. The correspondences between his past and Chocolat's were such that it really made us want him to do it.

What do Omar and Chocolat share?

EA: The same enthusiastic nature focused on laughter and pleasure. Later, we realized that there were other resonances. Omar is certainly the first black to be a big film star in France.

Like Chocolat, he has opened a breach. Like him, he lives in a biracial couple. He started out as a double act with Fred. Chocolat with Footit. And both artists share the same involvement in hospitals, making sick children laugh. We never imagined we would find an actor who was so much like Chocolat, or that James Thierrée would make such a true-to-life Footit. That was part of the magic of this project.

How is James Thierrée so close to Footit?

NA: With his knowledge of the circus, mime and body language. Like Footit with Chocolat. Besides, he is tortured, preoccupied, always focused.

Chocolat was more playful and carefree. When Omar and James first met in our offices, we felt like we had the couple Footit and Chocolat there in front of us. The two actors had a similar relationship as in the film. They got to know each other, argued, made peace, and finally ended up in a harmonious relationship.

The film is not a biopic, it is a fictional film inspired by Gérard Noiriel's book about the life of Chocolat...

NA: Gérard Noiriel did not see anything wrong with us taking some liberties with historical reality. The important thing was not to betray its spirit, and for the events to remain plausible. As for the historical context, we had researchers, and Cyril made sure to stay true to the reality of the era.

How did you work with Cyril Gély?

EA: Cyril provided us with a first treatment that we liked a lot. With a narrative thread, characters... The development then took place over almost three years, with lots of back and forth. Cyril sent us his work. We sent back pages of notes and observations. He sent us another version. And we went from 6 or 7 pages of notes to a half page, and then just a few lines.

What made you think of Roschdy Zem as director?

EA: Roschdy Zem is a raconteur and an actors' director. He was all the more likely to bring an intelligent and sensitive point of view on board, since given his own personal journey, he knows not only what an artist is, but also what it means to have opened a breach .

How did you harmonize your points of view?

NA: When you approach a director, you are looking for a certain vision of a story. Because ultimately, when he is directing actors and the story-line on the shoot, it is his point of view that will prevail. And Roschdy's vision of the film matched ours perfectly. We could have developed the script before engaging a director. I had warned Cyril Gély that our director would need to adapt the screenplay himself in order to fully appropriate it. Which can at times be painful for a screenwriter, but that's only natural. Roschdy and his co-author Olivier Gorce started to first work on it with Cyril, and then embarked on a second phase, alone, to arrive at the shooting script.

Did the film evolve much between the project you had in mind and the way it finally took shape?

EA: Any film is in constant mutation. The original idea filters through screenwriters, adapters, and then a director, to take on his vision. But without betraying our own. We often initiate a project. We sustain its development. Handing on the torch to a director is part of the process. Moreover, when you start preparations, and then the shoot, you let the boat sail away. You ask for news regularly, but from certain distance, in order to let the crew express itself freely. You get it back again first during the edit. That is where you enter into more constant dialogue with the director

What does Chocolat represent for you personally and professionally?

NA: An adventure that synthesized all the reasons that we are in this profession: we start with an idea, we want to tell a story, and we unite all the

elements we need to build up the project. We take on for the ride all the talents and collaborators we need for it to succeed. We also have to convince our financial partners, the TV channels and distributors, that our idea has legitimacy. It is always difficult to put together a film budget, but there was such great enthusiasm for this film. There was an accumulation of mutual and complementary desires, thanks to the emotion aroused by Chocolat's fate. It was an opportunity to resurrect the memory of a forgotten artist by creating a great melodrama. We all shared the conviction that, with this story and all the talents working on it, Chocolat could become a film that lasts. I hope that will be the case.

What do you think this film can bring to audiences?

EA : Chocolat is unabashedly a mainstream film, in the best sense of the term. We wanted a spectacular, stunning film, rich in emotion. In our opinion, that is the primary pleasure of cinema. I would like for audiences to feel moved by the story of Chocolat and his partner. And all the more so, since his incredible story shows that where there is enthusiasm and energy, everything becomes possible.

CAST

CHOCOLAT
FOOTIT
MARIE
OLLER
DELVAUX
MME DELVAUX
CAMILLE
GEMIER

OMAR SY
JAMES THIERREE
CLOTILDE HESME
OLIVIER GOURMET
FREDERIC PIERROT
NOEMIE LVOVSKY
ALICE DE LENCQUESAING
OLIVIER RABOURDIN

CREW

PRODUCED BY
DIRECTED BY
SCREENPLAY
ADAPTATION
FREELY ADAPTED FROM
"CHOCOLAT CLOWN NEGRE" BY
CAMERA
EDITOR
ORIGINAL MUSIC
SOUND

ERIC ET NICOLAS ALTMAYER
ROSCHDY ZEM
CYRIL GELY
ROSCHDY ZEM ET OLIVIER GORCE

GERARD NOIRIEL
THOMAS LETELLIER
MONICA COLEMAN
GABRIEL YARED
BRIGITTE TAILLANDIER
DIMITRI HAULET
VINCENT GUILLON

ART DIRECTOR
COSTUMES
CASTING
FIRST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
CONTINUITY
PRODUCTION MANAGER
POST-PRODUCTION MANAGER
A COPRODUCTION

WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF

STEPHANE THIEBAUT
JEREMIE D. LIGNOL
PASCALINE CHAVANNE
DAVID BERTRAND
MATHIEU SCHIFFMAN
SANDRINE BOURGOIN
PASCAL ROUSSEL
PATRICIA COLOMBAT
MANDARIN CINEMA GAUMONT
KOROKORO M6 FILMS
CANAL+ CINE+ M6

FILM FORMAT

DURATION: 1 hour 50 minutes

ASPECT RATIO: 2.40

SOUND: 5.1

VISA : N° 141 419

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