

Lionceau Films and Studiocanal

Present

# Elementary

(Primaire)

A film by  
Hélène Angel

Starring:  
Sara Forestier  
Vincent Elbaz

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## **SYNOPSIS**

Florence is an elementary school teacher who is devoted to her pupils. When she meets Sacha, a little boy with a complicated life at home, she does everything in her power to save him – even if that means putting aside her life as a wife and mother. Florence gradually realizes that one is never too old to learn a new lesson.

INTERVIEW WITH **Hélène Angel** *Director***Why make a movie about a schoolteacher?**

She's a teacher who's devoted to her pupils, and also a mother who is questioning herself. I first had the idea of the movie on the last day of my son at elementary school. I cried, because in a certain way, it was the end of his childhood, the end of an era. Of course, he was excited about this new life opening up before him, but I couldn't let go. I then realized just how big an impression school leaves on us, both children and parents, with all the different stages of initiation. Florence has to go through one of these stages. She has a lot to teach, but she also has to learn from others, which she has forgotten along the way. And we all know there's something heroic about teachers today. We ask them to teach everything, knowledge and values, in working conditions that are increasingly difficult. Florence does the best she can, working within the system, because she believes in the Republican model of school: secular, free and compulsory. In a world where money rules, these are simple and important values that I find touching. I wanted a heroine wrestling with moral questions and struggling with emotions, one who trips up, but who must nonetheless become good. And all that in a closed setting that is a world in itself...

**Did you want to draw the portrait of a woman?**

I never thought of it like that. Of course, having to take on a career and a family life at the same time is a very feminine and contemporary concern. But Florence's questions about life, about what she wants to pass on, are mostly human. Man or woman, we're all alike. Before I met Sara, at a moment when I wasn't sure I'd find the right actress, I was on the verge of looking for an actor and turn Florence into a man. I never defined my characters by their gender, but by their idealism.

**Then Sara Forestier came along...**

Yes, and it was like a revelation. Sara is a wild animal! As a woman, she doesn't build relationships on seduction. As an actress, she doesn't "fabricate". She is full of energy, she conveys power and life. Sara has faith and passion, so she's exactly like Florence. There's also something childlike in her way of being and believing. And Sara brings great modernity, she's really a young woman of her time. That's also a thing she liked about the role, which is far from the girlish parts she has done before and more **of** a woman's part.

### How did you handle working with the children?

We started by rehearsing the end-of-year show (which brings the film to a close) several weeks ahead of the shoot so they could get to know each other, lose their inhibitions, and form a believable class. Then, during the shoot, we used a twin camera set-up to give them the freedom to be themselves and to play, and paradoxically, so they wouldn't forget the crew. They could see us all the time, they got used to us, but they no longer knew when we were filming. Nothing was systematic, there were no set rules in our approach. Sometimes I would say "action!" and the children had to do a take, just like adult actors. Sometimes we would film the rehearsals without them knowing. Sometimes they would improvise, but the great majority of the dialog comes from the script, because I wanted the film to remain a fiction. And we captured life amidst this cheerful cacophony. The adults adapted to the children.

### Was it easy for them?

It wasn't always easy, because the professional actors still had a script to perform. I'm mainly thinking of Guilaine Londez, who plays the teaching assistant, Mrs. Duru. She had to let herself be guided by Hannah, the little autistic girl who plays Charlie. We had very short windows to work with Hannah, who quickly gets tired or anxious. With the other kids, I could always negotiate another take. With Hannah, there was no negotiation possible, which is good. Her parents and social workers agreed she could act in the film because they thought it could be good for her. This mutual benefit was an important moral contract for me. I also made sure that all the children enjoyed working with us. I'm sure it's this coherence between the story told by the film and the way we made it that gives the movie authenticity.

### How did you tackle little Sacha's case?

Sacha poses a moral dilemma. Do you notify the social services or not? Everyone's answer in the film is different, which reflects the reality. When I asked about it, there were as many answers as there were teachers. Some principals, like Mr Sabatier, would have entrusted Sacha to his former stepfather for a while. Others would have immediately called the authorities. It's that uncertain, yet deeply human grey area that we were interested in during the writing. The teachers are not representatives of the law, nor social assistants. They have to deal with it as well as they can. Sacha triggers something in Florence. There's always a child who awakens the wounded child within you. Sacha also acts as a mirror to Denis, the protected son, who is more "civilized". Sacha is the savage reflection of Denis. The same thing is going on at the maternal level: Sacha's mother, played by Laure Calamy, is to some extent the dark side of Florence.

### How did you structure the screenplay?

We wanted a simple dramatic thread: the story of a woman who teaches, of a mother whose son is in her class. As screenwriters, we didn't start out by saying "let's make a film about school". It was more like "It's the story of a woman who has a very idealistic approach to work, but in her home-life, she's got a lot to learn!". We had to keep it simple to respect the balance between the collective and the individual. The material was dense, there are a lot of characters, and lots of issues too. I wanted to keep the collective dimension of the school, a bit like a beehive. So Florence's trajectory is simple and tight: like her pupils, she is going to get from "elementary" to "secondary". She is going to achieve greater awareness about life. But to achieve that means giving up on certain things, like being able to save every children, being a perfect mother, or being indispensable to her pupils. At the end, her pupils get on the stage and become little grown-ups. The narration in the show explains, "In the beginning, there was chaos, nothing in the universe had any shape. Then Man arrived, unique, fragile, and mortal." Then Florence can start teaching again. It is a tiny step, yet at the same time gigantic. The film operates around some obvious moments of initiation, like the ritual of the first day in "big school", and the end-of-year show. In the editing, we had to maintain the balance and the tension, while allowing the kids' exuberance to come through.

### Despite being fiction, the film has a documentary feel when it comes to the school.

I spent two years in classes to be authentic in my writing, and to understand it from the inside. But above all, that allowed me to identify the challenges and the contradictions. For example, as parents, we all feel that raising children is a mission that has many joys, but which can also be rather melancholic. We format,

we turn away from the freedom of primary instincts. That is blindingly obvious when you are in a

classroom. We can see that school has imprisoned Florence. I hope the film reflects all these contradictory feelings.

**In cinema today, does capturing life mean filming with a hand-held camera?**

Yves Angelo, the cinematographer, and I opted for a fairly classical rigor, without any effects; one fixed camera, another on a dolly to focus on the child we were interested in. We often had shots with two or three characters. The life comes from within the frame. There is very little hand-held work in the film. We used it for the rehearsal of the show, because it was all improvised, when Florence leaves the school so we could follow her, and when Denis breaks down and cries, because the scene was very demanding, and we wanted to make sure that we didn't miss any bit of his performance.

**ELEMENTARY is less dark, more open than your previous movies. Nonetheless, there's an obvious link between them, involving the relationship with childhood.**

Right, I did want a more open film. So my son might see it and understand the issues, and realize that it's not so simple being a parent. I also remember the impact [François Truffaut's] "Small change" had on me as a child. I felt understood for the first time. So I was guided by a desire to inspire that again in turn. Also, I wanted adults to get a sharp reminder of the intense emotions of childhood. I wanted the movie to be relevant to both adults and children. It is a "primal" film, in the sense that it deals with the primal emotions. In that respect, it is not so different from my previous movies. Hélène Cases, who produced "Skin of Man, Heart of Beast" for Why Not, saw that right away.

## INTERVIEW WITH Sara Forestier

### What did you like about the screenplay and this character?

I felt a great authenticity and I really liked the dramatic dimension slowly rising in a crescendo. I like when there is a tragic spark in an everyday story, and I found that spark in H el ene Angel's screenplay. This schoolteacher is a true heroine who transcends the everyday. Through her, the film tackles multiple themes, including maternity, women's place at work, and of course teaching, a genuine vocation. I told H el ene right from the start, if I hadn't been an actress, I would have been a teacher.

### Do the two jobs have anything in common?

They are both jobs involving transmission. It's a hackneyed notion, one that is somewhat belittled in our society, while the link between generations is actually essential. Everyone wants to be the same, to be at the same level, to live in a horizontal society. We have to get back to a certain verticality: knowing how to learn from our elders and passing on to subsequent generations. And in a way acting is also being part of this quest for transmission. But an actress, when she transmits knowledge or emotion, has no direct feedback. She doesn't know if the audience picked up on the emotions she wanted to convey. A teacher has a direct response from her pupils. Her transmission is much more concrete. It's a key link in our society.

### How did you prepare for your role?

I went into some classes in the final year of elementary school, and I met some teachers. Their bond with the children is incredible, and I saw just how much the personality of each teacher influences a class. One of them was all about being kind to the kids. As children, we all had our favorite teacher, the one who showed faith in us and who gave us a boost. I had teachers who made me like school, and who helped me structure myself as an individual. I was lucky enough to experience that. In the film's final monolog, my character says that school opened her eyes to "the infinite possibilities of the mind". I really share that view. To portray that teacher, I also put my faith in my natural complicity with the children.

### How was it for you working with the children?

Easy! I have to say, the children who were casted were great: It was just like a real class. Right away, I established a certain connection with them. They didn't take pictures with me just because I'm an actress! I had a very direct relationship with them, quite blunt, to break down the cinema aspect and remove the barrier between reality and fiction. So to begin with, there was an equal relationship. Then, as the shoot progressed, the longer I acted as their teacher, the more they treated me as such. When they let slip a swear word, even outside of filming, oops! They took it back quickly!

### It's often said that children make difficult acting partners.

Not at all! On the contrary, their spontaneity is a terrific challenge. They are all about pure veracity and vitality and they push you. When they intellectualize too much, when they try to pretend, they can become stiff. Then you have to help them become natural again, and off you go. It was sometimes hard with little Sacha. You had to push him so his violence would come out, but without harming him.

### Did you have a favorite among your pupils?

My on-screen son! Even during the screen tests, that young actor made me well up.

### This teacher is also a mother. What sort of mother is she?

She's not a bad mother at all! If her son is seeking more attention, it's mainly because he's still suffering from the divorce and is trying get his own back in a way. Of course, she is not fulfilled as a woman. She has somewhat lost herself in her job, and is in need of love and affection.

**What did ELEMENTARY do for you?**

I was in a period of questioning vis-à-vis my career. I was looking for some motivation, for a way to regain the pleasure of being an actress. And Hélène helped me to find that again: she offered me the chance to act with children and play this character who gives instead of taking, in a society where overconsuming is often pushing us to take without giving. The beauty of the character's involvement and her willingness to give renewed my faith in my own profession.

**CAST**

Florence **SARA FORESTIER**

Mathieu **VINCENT ELBAZ**

Mr Sabatier **PATRICK D'ASSUMCAO**

Mrs Duru **GUILAINE LONDEZ**

Marlène Peillard **OLIVIA COTE**

Laure the intern **LUCIE DESCLOZEAUX**

Rémy **FREDERIC BOISMOREAU**

**THE CHILDREN**

Denis **ALBERT COUSI**

Sacha Drouet **GHILLAS BENDJOUDI**

Jean-Philippe **JULES GABORIAU**

Charlie **HANNAH BRUNT**

Tara **TARA DECHAUD**

Lamine **LAMINE MARA**

Timothée **TIMOTHEE FOURNIER**

Christina Drouet **LAURE CALAMY**

Charlie's mother **ANNE BOUVIER**

Denis' father **ANTOINE GOUY**

**THE TEACHERS**

**DENIS SEBBAH, ERIC BOUGNON, FLORENCE FOUX, VINCENT JONCQUEZ, NABIHA AKKARI**



**CREW**

Original screenplay	<b>Hélène Angel and Yann Coridan</b>
With help from	<b>Agnès de Sacy and Olivier Gorce</b>
Photography	<b>Yves Angelo</b>
Sound	<b>Antoine-Basile Mercier, Arnaud Rolland and Olivier Dô Hùu</b>
Casting	<b>Julie Navarro</b>
Set design	<b>Nicolas de Boiscuillé</b>
Costumes	<b>Catherine Rigault</b>
Editing	<b>Sylvie Lager, Yann Dedet and Christophe Pinel</b>
Original music	<b>Philippe Miller</b>
Production manager	<b>Bernard Bolzinger</b>
Produced by	<b>Hélène Cases</b>
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