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presents

A Franco-Belgian Coproduction
Les Films d'Ici Ciné-@ La Parti Production

GOD'S OFFICES

Les bureaux de Dieu

A Film by **Claire Simon**

PRESS

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Synopsis

Djamila would like to be on the pill because her relationship with her boyfriend has become serious stuff now; Zoé's mother gives her condoms but calls her a whore; Nejma hides her pills outside because her mother searches her bag; Hélène finds herself too fertile; Clémence is scared; Adeline wishes she could have kept it, and so does Margot. Maria Angela would like to know who she's pregnant by, while Ana Maria has opted for love and freedom.

Anne, Denise, Marta, Yasmine, and Milena are the advisers receiving and listening to each of these women as they wonder how sexual freedom can be enjoyed. In God's offices, you laugh and cry and feel swamped. You dance there, you have a cigarette on the veranda, and you come anonymously to tell the commonplace or unbelievable story of your life.

God's Offices

By Claire Simon

Presentation

How can I describe what I have wanted to film and found so beautiful each time I spent time in a Family Planning center ?

You see the most modern and ancient tragedies unfurling there, shielded by the dusty mouldings of what used to be stately bourgeois apartments. There, free women are inventing every day a profession they have chosen, which consists in listening to other women wrestling with their freedom to love and have children now, one of these days, or never.

Because of a phone call that's been missed, a child will be born, for better or for worse—for the young woman and for the child itself? Who knows?

We are between walls that hear what people never tell outside about the new life we have all known since it became possible to make distinctions between amorous embrace and sex and the birth of a child.

The Making of the Film

Just like everyone, I assumed I knew everything about Family Planning when I first connected with the Grenoble center 9 years ago. Back then, I spent a few days there and all my assumptions vanished in front of what I saw.

Here is what I wrote them at the time :

When I came to see you, I discovered an extraordinary place, where modern women pass on their experience to other modern women. While I usually tend to dread places where women are confined together, I was captivated to see women from different generations talking and listening to one another, wondering aloud in the secrecy of the place you have gradually invented, which is neither exactly an institution, nor a mere women's club. Here, away from friends and family, you talk about your private life, trying to understand and cope with your body—the receptacle of your destiny—and you deal with what is both most intimate and most public in your own life....

I feel like painting all the women I saw at the center, to show their faces, their gestures and silences—not just their words—, the young and the older women, those who come and go and those receiving them, the weariness and enthusiasm, the unsweetened coffee, the need to talk about something else, and the threads the advisers gently unravel.

And here is what I wrote to my producer :

So I went to Grenoble, to the fifth floor of the building on boulevard Gambetta, number 30. A very discreet little plaque outside of the building lets the women—or men—looking for this place know that they are on the right path. Then you have five stories to climb to land on the place where you try and understand what is unseen, unspoken in the open, and mysterious to women themselves—living with their own bodies.

Many women or girls come there unbeknownst to their families, boy- or girlfriends, or even their family doctors. They come because they have to face things that are difficult to live with, speak about or think about both in private and in public. They come to meet other women of similar walks of life, of the same gender as themselves—as if each of them came there to find one or several women who can hear without passing out what their mothers, daughters, brothers, fathers, husbands, lovers, girlfriends, teachers, doctors, the police or the state prefer not knowing anything about.

Very often, they are not clearly aware of this. It is once they are there, right in the middle of an interview, that they let out something they didn't expect at all, and which they did not even know they had in mind. As with a shrink? No, for what is said there is about both politics and love, and the issues raised blend humble, private history and great, public History.

Once I had experienced this initial shock, I found myself confronted with the difficulty of the project.

I had the feeling that no one realized a Family Planning center was such an amazing place and that, on the contrary, such words as "family," "planning," "abortion," "birth control" or "HIV" were acting as so many screens, preventing us from grasping the humanity and legendary dimension of the place.

In these offices on top of buildings, we thought, there were girls and women keeping themselves busy with these words. We assumed these were settled cases. No problem—birth control and abortion are simple matters, right? Or else, we referred to them as "those women"—as if there were only people from problem families coming to Family Planning centers—as if the questions of whether to have a child, whether to make love, were never raised outside of "underprivileged" backgrounds—as if separating sex from procreation was none of our concern.

So I gradually worked out a cinematic system to tell the story of the Family Planning. I carried a tape recorder, and also a little notebook, to record the life stories, interviews, and conversations in several Family Planning centers, and wrote a script out of it which kept the words uttered by each woman or man, and the quality of her or his speech. Then, little by little, I thought up the casting system—the advisers, doctors, interns,

in short, all the professional people from the center would be played by immediately identifiable, great actresses, “stars” who represent icons, and even role models. For the women coming for advice, the advisers would thus be both aloof as professional people are and awe-inspiring as models of free women, as Nathalie Baye or Nicole Garcia can be.

I wanted to show how you listen to people. And I was telling myself that playing the role of the listener was a very difficult thing to do, which is why it was worth offering such parts to stars.

And then, the presence on screen of top actresses would allow the viewers to grasp that this was fiction and addressed all women. Also, of course, it was a reference to the famous manifesto of the 343 “bitches” (a petition initiated by Simone de Beauvoir and published on April 5, 1971 in the left-wing magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur*, translator’s note) all of them female celebrities of the time, who had declared they had resorted to illegal abortion.

As for the women in need of help, I decided to look for them among the strangers you meet on the street—women and girls who would sound like the ones from the interviews I had been recording. I had acute memories of each of them and we searched for them in all kinds of places, according to the profile of each character. They did not know anything about acting, but they knew what it’s like to be a woman, quite simply. They were not trying to play a part or convince anyone, they were voicing the words of other strangers for whom they had become spokeswomen.

As the casting and the preparation went by, I realized it was necessary to re-create the conditions of the actual interviews in some way or other, in order to end up with something similar to a real encounter. That’s why up to the first take, nobody knew whom she was going to play with, and they met in front of the camera, with all their lines in mind, but with the emotional charge of the first encounter happening directly in the realm of “fiction.” The interviews were shot in single takes, with a premium on listening, which allowed the actresses—both famous and non-professional—to have a real-life experience of this re-staging of the dialogs, and enact them rather than interpret them.

Why ?

I would like people to recall how each little word, or each pause, left an imprint on the face of the one who listened with eyes wide opened, anxiously waiting for the story of the one who spoke.

When shooting the film, I had the feeling that everything that was said there had remained concealed for a long time, even though there is legislation in France—that the silence went far beyond the legal and the

political, and that perhaps we would never had a chance to get out of this silence.

When I filmed Nathalie Baye holding the speculum and describing a gynaecological examination to teenage schoolgirls, I was not just seeing the actress but also the woman, suddenly committed as she revealed to all the secret, mysterious and fateful dimension of each woman's representation of her own body. "Do you girls know a little about what you're like inside?" she asks them—and the girls giggle, eschew the question and listen.

This film is a picture of our lives—the ambivalence, the difficulty of choosing an option, how unfamiliar the act of choosing is to us, the difference our choices make in our relationships with men, and the permanence of these choices.

NB

I made the recordings at various times periods between 2000 and 2007. Which means some of the interviews predated the amendments to the legislation making it compulsory to have an interview prior to an abortion and setting the time limit for an abortion at 12 weeks. I chose to keep them as they were because I felt they were in no way outdated.

A Short Biography of Claire Simon

Born in London, she learnt filmmaking through film-editing, and in parallel began shooting short films in a totally independent way. Among her most renowned films are *La Police* (1988) or *Scènes de ménage* starring Miou Miou (1991). She discovered the genre of direct cinema at the Ateliers Varan and made several documentary films—*Les patients*, *Récréations*, and *Coûte que coûte*, all of which earned her prizes at many international film festivals. The latter two films were screened in movie theatres—evidencing the birth of a new documentary current in French cinema.

At the 1997 Directors' Fortnight, she showed her first fiction feature film, *Sinon, oui (A Foreign Body)* about a woman who pretends to be pregnant and steals a baby. She made a film for the Franco-German TV channel Arte with the students of the Théâtre National de Strasbourg (TNS) at the European Parliament. A half-documentary, half-fiction film, *Ça, c'est vraiment toi (That's Just Like You)* won the first awards for documentary and fiction at the Belfort Film Festival. After trying her hand at the theatre, she resumed documentary-making, shooting *800 km de différence/romance* and *Mimi* (shown at the 2003 Berlin Film Festival,) both of which were screened in movie theatres.

Her second fiction feature film, *Ça brûle*, was shown at the 2006 Directors' Fortnight.

Filmography

2008 LES BUREAUX DE DIEU (GOD'S OFFICES)
2006 ÇA BRÛLE (ON FIRE)
2004 EST-CE QU'ON A GAGNE OU EST-CE QU'ON A ENCORE PERDU ?
(SHORT)
2002 MIMI
2001 800 KILOMETRES DE DIFFERENCE / ROMANCE
1999 ÇA C'EST VRAIMENT TOI (THAT'S JUST LIKE YOU)
1997 SINON OUI (A FOREIGN BODY)- Selected for the Directors' Fortnight
1995 COÛTE QUE COÛTE
1993 COMMENT ACHETER UNE ARME (SHORT)
HISTOIRE DE MARIE (SHORT)
1992 RECREATIONS
ARTISTE PEINTRE (SHORT)
1991 SCENES DE MENAGE (10 SHORTS)
1989 LES PATIENTS
1988 LA POLICE (SHORT)
1980 TANDIS QUE J'AGONISE (SHORT)

Interview with Nathalie Baye

How did you meet Claire Simon ?

Our encounter first took place via Claire's work. Long ago, I had seen a documentary on TV on a country doctor spending his last week in practice before retirement. It was called *Les Patients*, and I had found it so beautiful that I had written to Claire Simon to tell her, something I don't usually do. Later on, I saw other films by her. So when she came to ask me if I wanted to work with her on this project, our encounter took place quite naturally—she told me about her film, and as I was familiar with her work, I said yes immediately.

How did you feel about working with non-professional actresses?

It is a very exciting parameter. I had already experienced it once in a while (with Pialat, Beauvois and a few others,) but never in such an overwhelming, radical way. I think the stakes are higher for the professional actors than for the non-professional—because the latter convey such forceful authenticity and truth, the least “faking” from a professional actor can undermine the whole thing. You have to remain both extremely focused and extremely receptive. What matters most is “to be,” not “to act.” Listening, too, is crucial. Listening is the most important thing. And in fact, Claire films the listening rather than the words spoken. She is right—words are often just things you hear, while the listening is always telling.

How do you relate to Family Planning?

I was not aware of how up-to-date a matter family planning still is. I used to think that many things had become commonplace between the sixties and the eighties—maybe because I live in Paris and belong to a generation that was lucky enough to see the legalization of the pill. But I realized that for many young—and not-so-young—women who have little chance of talking with their families, and for whom talking about sex remains a taboo, Family Planning still plays a unique, wonderful and absolutely essential part.

Interview with Nicole Garcia

How did you react when you first read the script ?

What most moved and stirred me in the script was its length, duration, and the repetition of the interviews. The outreach, the last-resort dimension, the disarray and the multiplication of exchanges between the advisers and the women—all of it was like a heave of many different voices, all of them tied to Femininity. There was something unique in it, akin to a song.

How did you work with the non-professional actresses ?

You know, the line between professional and non-professional is quickly blurred, because they can go through one take after another just as well as we do. Knowing how to repeat and do the same things over and over again, as many times as we're asked to, is really an actor's job—although Claire made this difference matter again, by putting the professional actresses in a position to stage the scenes. We'd play our parts, but each of us actually played for her counterpart, so that she may have as much room as possible. Our acting had to boil down to this listening quality, or at least, that's how I experienced it. It was very moving to find ourselves in front of them. We didn't know much about their lives, but the stories they were acting out seemed to be echoing their own. There was a similarity, a bridge between the roles and the parts played by each of them. And at the heart of the system, there was the text learnt by both parties, working as an element of sharing and communion.

Did you think it was important to deal with Family Planning right now ?

No, because it is something that I thought was pretty remote from current concerns, something from the seventies—which is wrong. But further than that, what I was interested in was this way of talking about Femininity in its variety of states and stages—from asking for the pill to birth control to abortion to the desire to have a baby. All these issues are addressed throughout the film and all women share in them.

Interview with Isabelle Carré

Had you seen films by Claire Simon prior to this project ?

I discovered her work when I saw *Recréations*. I find this film crazy in the way it has us experience again the world of the playground at kindergarten. I really like the idea of having a child's view of the world for months in a row. You are in a microcosm, and yet there's life, and a world in the making, with its wars, love stories, family histories, and everything that's awaiting these small human beings, these adults-to-be. I had the same feeling with *God's Offices*. The Family Planning center is a tiny place, with a handful of women listening to other women as they tell them their lives and experiences. Yet in reality, it has a much wider scope, it tells us about the way our relation to our sexuality and rights as women has evolved. Where do we go from here? What gains have we really made in terms of liberty? This little apartment is also a world in itself.

Did working with non-professional actresses change your way of acting?

Yes, I believe my acting has changed. Just being with Claire makes something happen. The very way she stands behind the camera commands sincerity in any actor. And then I was really impressed by the professionalism of these so-called non-professionals—their tongues never slipped although each of them had between fifteen and twenty pages to learn by heart, plus, we were shooting in single takes and never repeated a scene. Their way of playing with their own personalities, the work they had done before with Claire and the bonding they had developed with her—this made me feel like I had experienced something unique. It was really incredible to land in that room and immediately set off on such an adventure.

What did you learn about Family Planning ?

I really feel that discovering the reality of a Family Planning center made me grow. I was aware that there were women out there going through such things, but I learnt a lot when I read the script. Apart from the pill and the coil, there was pretty little I knew in these matters. And I was far from having any clue about the lack of freedom shown by the film throughout the interviews. This is something precious I will take with me from this film—one more suitcase I'll bring with me as a citizen, a person, and a woman.

Interview with Rachida Brakni

What attracted you in Claire Simon's project ?

I was first told about the film more than one year ago. I met Claire and read the script in one stretch. I was immediately fascinated by these interviews, especially because of what they were revealing of the life at the center. I was also attracted to the choice of shooting in single takes, for it creates a special something, like a block. It is not always easy for an actor to go through a single take—there may be a sort of depression or power failure at any given moment. And then there was the unknown parameter of facing a non-actor, which made the challenge even more thrilling.

Yes, precisely, how did you address the issue of working with non-professional actors ?

I was unprejudiced about that. I had already acted with non-professionals in a film and I had been very impressed. As a rule, I am not one of these people who believe that you have to go to a school to learn how to be an actor. I am convinced that if a non-professional has the will to fit into a story, they will find on their own the degree of professionalism a more seasoned actor can muster. I realized in the past that the line almost couldn't be drawn between the two, and that nothing determines who is an actor and who isn't. This has been evidenced again in this film. Claire herself, in the way she gives directions, makes no distinction between professional actors and the rest of the crowd.

What did you know about Family Planning ?

It is a place I didn't know. But I have a feeling, when reading the press or listening to my 20-year-old sister, that things have gotten tougher over the last few years. There's something a little reactionary about our society, where things are increasingly being put into boxes. Sometimes I hear absurd statements from young women who mistake desire for pornography and seem at times to have forgotten that former generations of women fought for women's rights and liberation. I have a feeling that in a covert and underhand way, this legacy and history are being wiped clean. With Family Planning, we stand in the very midst of a choice—the choice of one's sex life, the choice of having an abortion, the choice of being free. And I feel like such choices are being threatened in the present climate of apathy. There is a sense of regression, and this is what makes Claire's film important.

*Interview with **Béatrice Dalle***

How did you get involved in the project ?

I didn't know Claire's work. She tried to contact me. We met. We had a drink together, we talked, and she told me about her film. I did not read the script—I don't usually make a decision on the basis of the film's topic, but on whether or not I feel like working with the filmmaker.

Were you well aware of the Family Planning's work?

Not at all. I had never set foot in a Family Planning center. I more or less knew what it was about, but that was basically it. Maybe I was luckier than other girls who had the same kind of problems. At any rate, I found myself in a world I was totally unfamiliar with.

How did you work with Claire Simon on the set ?

I had a hard time with the text and this way of talking which isn't mine. In twenty years of acting, this was one of the hardest dialogs I had ever had to memorize. The decision to shoot single takes was not an issue, but the fact of working on the transcription of an interview, with a way of talking which really characterizes a person, was something I found rather upsetting. And then whenever Claire tried to change something, I was completely lost, incapable of improvising or having a personal reaction, I didn't have a clue. So I followed Claire's indications, which were always very specific. I was receptive, like an instrument, because in fact that's what an actor really is—an instrument.

Interview with Michel Boujenah

Was it the first time you acted with non-professional actors ?

The girl in front of me in the sequence was playing a part ; she was not the character in real life. I don't think you play differently whether you are a professional actor or not—you're acting, period. But the thing is, someone with more experience may sometimes help, support and guide you when you're having a hard time.

Claire Simon essentially shoots single takes. Is that a stimulating constraint for an actor ?

Even though I shoot films as a director, I don't ask myself such questions when I'm acting. I let the director whatever he or she wants, and I do my best to do what they ask for. But I must admit that single takes demand from actors a lot more focus, more precise knowledge of the lines, and deeper commitment. Besides, the film was inspired by actual interviews that were recorded at a Family Planning center, and I have the feeling that single takes help reinforce this link with reality and real-life situations.

What did Family Planning suggest to you before you made the film?

I didn't know Claire's work, but I liked the fact the project was a militant one, addressing important issues that are finally hardly ever tackled. Since the legalization of abortion and the coming of the pill, we had been assuming that everything was fine, but it's not true: lots of young women, in France and elsewhere, have no access to any kind of information, and don't even know that these things exist. In 1968, I was a teenager and therefore I knew about the MLF (the French women's lib movement, translator's note), the MLAC (Movement for Free Abortion and Contraception, translator's note) and so on. On top of that, I come from a family of doctors—my father was a general practitioner and my brother became one too. From an early age, I was confronted with problems related to abortion, birth control, and of course the existence of Family Planning. In other words, I knew it all like the back of my hand!

Selected Lines

**If I ever got pregnant, I think my Mom, she's gonna kill me.
Still, you say this with a smile—she's gonna kill you—**

.....

**Right now I feel like it, but I'm still young, I can't say for sure he's
Mr. Right, you know, I don't know—**

.....

**She can't come because she's got to take the tram and she's afraid
she's gonna get lost !**

.....

**I can love the child only through the other person. So if the
answer is yes one day and no the next day, forget it!**

.....

**There's a bus leaving on Tuesday evening, and abortions take
place on Wednesdays.**

.....

**I never used to forget it—and now I forgot my pill twice, two days
in a row, I don't know why I keep forgetting like this !**

.....

**And what is the hardest thing to bear when you go there ?
Well, first, the "don't you get out of the house"—**

.....

**You mean you can't tell who's the father of my child ? You can
only know afterwards—when it's too late?**

.....

**It would be a good thing for you to sit back and take a deep breath
for a couple of minutes—anyway you're the one making the
decision.**

.....

I'd like to know if my girlfriend's a virgin or not ?

.....

**This means that you too are capable of bearing children. Is it
precisely what she could not accept?**

.....

In our family we do a lot of talking, that's why I don't get it ! I asked her, "are you sure you didn't fool around ?"

.....

And when you say they're all out against me, what do you mean ? That there might be violence ?

.....

A third child means a third bedroom, you see—

.....

It's important also that you shouldn't feel like you're just a number, you see ? You are somebody. You're somebody for somebody else.

.....

My mother she called me a bitch, a whore, a broad, she said I was fucking with the whole hood—

.....

We talked about whether two people are obligated to have sexual intercourse when they're in love—

.....

To me this pill was like a sandblaster, you peel off the whole thing, you strip it all out—

.....

It's the first time you say you feel like keeping it. You may not end up doing this, but still—

.....

Three times with the same man—yes, I know, but I just can't, that's the way it is !

.....

Does he know you are pregnant ?

Yes he thinks so.

He *thinks* so?

No, he *knows* it.

CAST LIST (by alphabetical order):

Dr Marianne
Anne
Dr Lambert
Yasmine
Marta
Emmanuelle
Milena
Denise
Martine
Marceline
Pierre

Anne ALVARO
Nathalie BAYE
Michel BOUJENAH
Rachida BRAKNI
Isabelle CARRE
Lolita CHAMMAH
Béatrice DALLE
Nicole GARCIA
Marie LAFORET
Marceline LORIDAN-IVENS
Emmanuel MOURET

Appearing for the first time on screen :

The Italian woman	Loredana AQUAVIVA
The waitress	Caroline BENNEQUIN
The Portuguese mother	Isabel COELHO
The Algerian-French girl	Mounia DAHOU
The girl who hides her pills	Amel DELEU
Valérie, the social worker	Manon GARCIA
The Portuguese father	José GUERREIRO
The overly fertile girl	Rachelle KANGA
The young man in the couple	Benoît LABORDE
Arnaud, the intern	Romain LONGUEPEE
The girl who dreads injections	Celine MANE
The girl for whom the morning-after pill didn't work	Alice NIAV
The Bulgarian prostitute	Tania PETROVNA
The young woman in the couple	Auréliе PONTI
The girl who hates her mother	Zara PRASSINOT
The young woman who went to a psychiatric hospital	Evelyne TISSIER
The young woman with professional reasons	Laure TOGNINI

CREW LIST

director, scriptwriter, framer

Claire SIMON

co-scriptwriters

Natalia RODRIGUEZ

Nadège TREBAL

casting director

Stéphane BATUT

1st assistant director

Shirel AMITAY

director of photography

Philippe VAN LEEUW

production sound mixer

Olivier HESPEL

set decorator

Raymond SARTI

costume designer

Nathalie RAOUL

film editor

Julien LACHERAY

supervising sound editor

Dominique VIEILLARD

original soundtrack

Arthur SIMON

production manager

Nelly MABILAT

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Richard COPANS

Ciné-@

Philippe CARCASSONNE

La Parti Production

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