



CATHERINE FROT

SANDRINE BONNAIRE

MARK OF AN ANGEL

A FILM BY SAFY NEBBOU

***“Packs a punch... a tense drama
that gives two of France’s finest
actresses roles to sink their teeth
into... Fascinating.”***

SCREEN INTERNATIONAL



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France - 2008 - 91 min - Colour - 2:35 - Dolby SRD - French

the directors label



World Sales & Festival Bookings

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2008





SYNOPSIS

Elsa is fighting to keep custody of her son Thomas. One day whilst picking her son up from a birthday party, she notices a little 6-year-old girl. Immediately, Elsa is convinced that Lola is the daughter she lost in a hospital fire and becomes fixated on finding her again.

Obsessed by this uncontrollable feeling, she manipulatively inches her way into Lola's life. Claire's mother, progressively finds Elsa's behavior disturbing to the point of insisting that she stop intruding in their lives. Elsa, seemingly crazy, challenges Claire by asking for DNA tests. The rivalry between the two women begins. A psychological face-off between two women who should never have met...

INTERVIEW WITH SAFY NEBBOU

THE OPENING OF THE FILM

This opening sequence subconsciously presents a way of interpreting the film. You are not only in reality but also inside the inner workings of this woman. The fire is a strange and extemporal moment, mysterious at this point in the film because the viewer doesn't yet understand its significance. So from the start there is a dramatic challenge, a game between what is real and unreal, dream and nightmare.

It is also a way of letting the viewer know that the film will go back and forth between what Elsa shows and what she hides.

We could have just made a thriller using well-worn plot devices but the human and social aspect of the film was also important to me and my co-scriptwriter, Cyril Gomez-Mathieu. We have attempted to play with these devices, to reinterpret them, to even adapt them. This combination of a thriller with human drama is what, in my opinion makes the film unique.

MATERNAL INSTINCT

What lies at the heart of the film is the feeling of recognition that Elsa feels for a little girl who she has only just come to know. From the start there is a real inner conflict between her gut instinct and her mind. But what pushes her to get back the child she believes to be her own is this inner belief, her animal instinct. 80% of the film is seen from Elsa's point of view. In her loneliness, she is both a voyeur and a manipulator, tirelessly on the lookout, like a beast. We discussed this a lot with Catherine Frot and that was the guiding line for the character. Her way of watching, moving, turning her head, breathing, feeling and acting. From the writing of the screenplay, the parallels were established: two women, two mothers, two lions and therefore an inevitable confrontation, the notion of a duel.

While developing the film, I watched animal documentaries to observe the physical relationships, the way in which a lion watches its cubs to protect them, the way in which two lions can clash... The symbolic scene which shows Elsa's animalistic nature is undoubtedly the scene at the skating rink when she turns around Lola, then slowly goes up to her, fixes her between her legs, devours her with her eyes, presses against her and finally smells her like a beast. It's the first time, after forty two minutes of film that Elsa has physical contact with the little girl. There is something disturbing about her attitude and everything leads you to think that this woman is mad that she could be dangerous and put this family in danger. However there is also something touching about her and it's this ambiguity which will fuel empathy for Elsa.

Many women share this sense of maternal instinct and like to believe in it. Also, in cinema we can use this as a way which allows movies to escape a harsh realism and to introduce moments of fantasy. No one believes that maternal instinct is infallible, which increases the suspicions aroused by Elsa's behavior. So the door is wide open for potential madness. The whole film is built upon the huge premise of the recognition of Lola but from the moment when Elsa herself believes it and convinces us of her obsession, I think that you want to follow her and see where it will all lead to.

THE FILMING

It is a question of delicacy and a taste for subtlety but I feel that 'direction' that you don't see is just as important as what you do. It needs to mean something but not feature too heavily otherwise the film risks becoming an exercise of style. Something that theatre has taught me is that directing should aid the story. Everything is considered in order to best aid the characters, the emotion and the progression of the story. For example the choice of Scope is a real option taken by the director because it creates a very particular feeling: the lack of depth in the shot isolates the character in the populated world which surrounds her and gives this woman a dramatic dimension. From the first shot, Elsa is a black silhouette, standing on an escalator, already alone against the world, who comes into shot and walks towards her destiny. The syncopated nature of the editing is also a proposition by the director. There is something schizophrenic in Elsa and the translation of her problems to the screen is achieved through the agitation of the editing. Alternating between realistic cutting and regulated with long sequence shots but also handheld camera shots to go against the postcard style and the Scope shots. When you see the film, you could think that there are lots of fixed shots, whereas the camera is constantly active and very often moving. It is about giving the impression that the camera was guided by Elsa, which isn't premeditated or anticipated but you feel that the story is being constructed as it happens. For this the idea of an animal tracking its prey also inspired us. The most time-consuming part of the filming was elaborately constructing each sequence from Elsa's point of view.

THE MODEL(S) OF FAMILY

This story is haunted by the themes of family life, of families finding it hard to love each other and communicate, of secrets and unspoken truths. I've always found it very exciting to use film to address things that are left unsaid, it's a way of involving the audience. In *Mark of an Angel*, we are confronted by two types of families: Elsa's, which provokes greater empathy because of its fragility, visible flaws and sensitivity; On the other hand you feel distanced from Claire's family because it appears to be self-sufficient.

Elsa and Claire aren't from the same background but that is not the reason why they clash. We had to avoid all clichés about tension between the working and middle classes: Claire is above all a people person and this is why that she is touched by Elsa's unhappiness.

We tackled the two families in very different ways. With Claire's family the camera is more settled among them, we insisted on greenery, a swimming pool, sun, a little corner of paradise, a bubble that is almost too perfect. The accompanying sound is "quilted", no cars but birds instead. In Elsa's world, there is something more electric, more urban, less serene and the sound is more metallic.

Even the choice of house in les Vigneaux was crucial: it couldn't be completely realistic or look like a fashionable architect-designed house. It was made purely with picture windows like a fishbowl where the family lives in full view and supposedly has nothing to hide. However if you look at it again it also has the stature of a fortress, bounded by metal window bars.

There again we wanted to play with sensations rather than explain them. We also didn't want to outline too obviously the good versus evil aspect or go on appearances too much.

For example: in the theatre scene, Prokofiev's music, which the young ballet dancers perform to becomes the film music, it warns us of the drama to come. During the whole sequence the tension rises and leaves room for all suppositions and in particular the suspicion that Elsa will abduct Lola. At the climax of the music there is no kidnapping but a scene which shows Elsa's intense emotion while she is watching the little girl she believes to be her own in the middle of thirty little dancers. The scene reaches its climax at this point but it's not necessarily what you were expecting.

CATHERINE FROT

The aspect of tragedy within great comic actors always moves me. That behind the comic mask of the characters Catherine plays there lies a certain fragility. I really wanted to take it in a completely new direction, as did Catherine for that matter. Catherine was both surprised by my proposition and very excited by the project. From our very first meeting I felt she would work very hard and had excellent judgement. Catherine needs to prepare herself so that she can let go of herself. We worked together for two months raising all imaginable questions but always keeping the screenplay and Elsa's psychological and animal characteristics in mind.

For a director who enjoys working with actors who also direct themselves, it was a fascinating experience to work with Catherine. One day I told her that working with her was like driving a Ferrari! what I mean is that she demands a high level in her work which is a driving force. Of course there are sometimes disagreements but in the end we helped each other to get the best out of each other.

This requires a lot of trust between two people who are neither friends nor enemies. But there wasn't any time for trial runs as we had to quickly find an accurate delivery and spot problems. Once found it was about the actor and the director taking risks by accepting to reveal oneself and the role of Elsa we had some important meetings. What brought us closer with Catherine was that we didn't have any definite ideas but used intuition instead and never stopped striving.

SANDRINE BONNAIRE

I immediately thought of Sandrine for the role of Claire: I really wanted to work with her again after *The Giraffe's Neck*. In the meantime, we became friends and I gained her trust. Sandrine and I have such an understanding that we don't have to talk much, a few key words suffice but the best way of knowing what will work is just to try it. She is an actress who acts on her instinct rather than psychoanalyzing the character and is wary of the dialogue. As she says: "the further I progress, the less I know... and so much the better". I like how she remains detached from the job and her career, I think that gives her a great intensity as an actress and means will always have a different style to other actors. Although the role of Claire has less screen time than the role of Elsa, she put her ego to one side and agreed to accept the role because she was confident in the narrative. As soon as she gets a movie offer which seems relevant to her, she doesn't ask any more questions and just goes for it. It was a great pleasure to work with Sandrine and Catherine, they each have a very different but complimentary way of working. There was a real sense of mutual respect between them because they share the same demands of their job without losing its playful and fleeting dimension.







BIOGRAPHY - SAFY NEBBOU

Safy Nebbou was born in Bayonne, France in 1968. Initially an actor, he was trained by Tsilla Chelton, Bryan Divers and Jean-Marie Broucaret. He worked for eight years at the Théâtre des Chimères interpreting the works of authors as diverse as Grumberg, Topor, Tchekhov, Molière, Valle-Inclan, Chédid, Feydeau...

He subsequently went on to become an animateur de stage then a drama teacher then theatre director, creating about 30 shows between 1989 and 1998.

Safy Nebbou has written and directed numerous internationally acclaimed shorts before shooting his debut feature film : THE GIRAFFE'S NECK. Since 2004 he has also directed adverts for both french and international brands. MARK OF AN ANGEL is his second feature film. He is currently working on his next film, SIGNÉ DUMAS, co-written with Gilles Taurand.

FILMOGRAPHY

1995 PORTRAIT DE PEINTRE

1997 PEDAGOGIE

1999 LA VIE C'EST PAS UN PIQUE-NIQUE

2001 BERTZEA

2003 LEPOKOA

2003 THE GIRAFFE'S NECK with Sandrine Bonnaire, Claude Rich, Louisa Pili, Darry Cowl and Maurice Chevit

2005 UNE NAISSANCE (a short for ARTE as part of the collection ENFANCES) with Elsa Zylberstein

2007 MARK OF AN ANGEL

CAST

Elsa Valentin
Claire Vigneaux
Bernard Vigneaux
Antoine
Alain Valentin
Laurence
Colette Valentin
Madame Corlet
Lola
Thomas
Jérémie

Catherine FROT
Sandrine BONNAIRE
Wladimir YORDANOFF
Antoine CHAPPEY
Michel AUMONT
Sophie QUINTON
Michèle MORETTI
Geneviève REY-PENCHENAT
Héloïse CUNIN
Arthur VAUGHAN WHITEHEAD
Zacharie CHASSERIAUD

CREW

Director
Screenplay
Cinematography
Editor
Artistic Director
Sound
Sound Editor
Sound mixing
Costumes
Make-up
First assistant Director
Script
Production Manager
Head of Production
Producer
Original Music composed by
Sound Designer

Safy NEBBOU
Safy NEBBOU et Cyril GOMEZ-MATHIEU
Eric GUICHARD (A.F.C)
Bernard SASIA
Cyril GOMEZ-MATHIEU
Frank STRUYS
Benoît HILLEBRANT
Anne LE CAMPION
Corinne JORRY
Chantal LEOTHIER et Fabienne ROBINEAU
Alexandra DENNI
Rachel CORLET
Guenola CHAUSSARD
Stéphane RIGA
Michel SAINT-JEAN
Hugues TABAR-NOUVAL
Rodolphe VASSAILS

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