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62nd Cannes Film Festival

Competition Quality
Synopsis

1789. On the eve of the French Revolution, those living at the Court of Versailles continue to lead carefree, uninhibited lives, far from the growing unrest in Paris. When news of the assault on the Bastille reaches the court’s ears, the nobles flee along with their servants, deserting the palace... But Sidonie Laborde, a young reader of the Court who is devoted to the Queen, refuses to believe the rumours. She is certain that under Marie-Antoinette’s protection she will come to no harm. Little does she know that these will be the last three days she will spend at her queen’s side.
Interview with Benoit Jacquot

How and when did you discover this book by Claudel? The book was back in 2002, during a roundtable discussion that we were having for “Adolphe.” At the time, Antoine de Bercy was heading up a film adaptation of the novel. He brought Isabelle Adjani, Claudel Thomas and myself together to discuss the problems of literary adaptation. Because of that, I got into a copy of Claudel’s book “Farewell, My Queen” which had just won the Femina Prize in 1991 and I knew I wanted to make it into a film.

Why did you wait so long? At the time, I realised it was almost impossible to try and put together a project of this scale. “Farewell, My Queen” was a theatrical drama set at Versailles and therefore very expensive to make. I didn’t know any producers willing to put together the necessary budget for such a project. So, I dismissed it from my mind. Then, when Jean-Pierre Cognet bought the right, I asked me to adapt it. I was still keener on the project.

Of the twenty films you have made, 10 of them are adaptations. I am a big reader but I chose to be a filmmaker and not a writer – a conscious decision on my part. Naturally books will always play an important role in my film projects.

The film tells the fall of the courtiers, in the period between the 14th July, the day of the storming of the Bastille, and the 16th, when the new XVII under public pressure was forced to sack Bertral. The entire story is told through the eyes of a young girl, Sidone Labarde, one of the Queen’s maids of Honour. She sits at the center of the story. She is the constant presence in the film. I wanted the viewer to feel exactly what she experienced in the events unfolding. I also wanted the spectator to be totally immersed in life at Versailles on her level. To have the same doubts and intimations. Sidone is so close to events that she is not able to understand everything that is happening around her. By defining where you are in the present moment, you do not have a perspective on what you are experiencing. Sharing the spectating experience of number of events means that it was a way to make the film as vibrant as possible, and avoid the need for any retrospection.

Sidone, the reader, is played by Léa Seydoux, is much younger than the original character in the book. From the outset, Gilles Taurand and I wanted the reader’s point of view to be one of a very young woman, unlike the book where she is ten, as this was interesting as she still has a close link to childhood, and therefore the narrative of the film does not have to be the perspective of a young child. Claudel’s man’s narrative was robust enough for us to be able to make certain changes without altering the key events in the novel. That decision, adapting the book became very straightforward: all that was left to do was to leave aside the iconic scenes and reduce the number of characters and either shorten or condense certain passages to heighten the drama. That really is the key to the adaptation of Claudel’s novel. It was a question of stripping down the work in order to discover its essence.

In this film you have respected “time of enemy.” The notion of time is something you often like to play around with in your films. This is a very particular notion of time. For example, I find it interesting to compress time and recount a whole lifetime in an hour and a half. Or, work in real time and record in an hour and a half; this is something I have already experimented with.

Ironically, when a group of them finally leave Versailles, the reader is left alone. They escape in a stagecoach that the camera never追. Yes. They exist outside the castle gates, it is as if they are conflated yet again.

Versailles is shown in a state of real fight. In his “memoire”, Saint Simon brilliantly depicted the last stages of the latimes at Versailles. A series of stunts that came from behind the most beautiful woodland panning, filming and clandestine in the world. Something revolting, cutting and putrid. As if the state of the building at Versailles was a metaphor for the collapse of the regime.

Sidone, the reader, is beset with Marie-Antoinette who is also time and cloud in the novel of Polignac. All the events that unfold are set against this troubled relationship.

And in the same way, you have set the speed. I was really interested in the childhood infatuation she had for Marie-Antoinette, as well as in the more adult, sexual infatuation with the Queen and the Duchess of Polignac. This love triangle elevates the film.

Sidone’s love is very distant. It is less obviously sexual than the relationship between the Queen and Polignac. Except the Queen herself, maintains a sexual ambiguity with Sidone. She enthralls over her choppy arms, and ritualizes her to soothe a mosquito bite. Like a wild nature, Marie-Antoinette loves everything real. At the end of the film, when she asks Sidone to ends so as to take Polignac’s place, it is as if she loved the same thing so completely. It is so very important, that at a certain point in the film, two of the three women should appear naked, stripped of the entirely covered dresses they wore and that played such an important part in their everyday lives. Two out of three, but not the Queen. The Queen never shows herself, she gives the order for one of the others to melt.

Lea Seydoux is exceptional in this part. She is both very physical and very modern. Lea lives in jeans. I wanted her to wear the dresses but a period that were very complex to put in the same casual way she would wear a pair of jeans. Yet I did want her to be aware of the contrariness of those dresses. I wanted her to understand XVIII century costume, and to live with her. Yes, she is amazing.

Diane Kruger is also very remarkable as Marie-Antoinette. She has the same background as Marie-Antoinette and is exactly the right age for the part. The role of Marie-Antoinette was made for her, she was the only one. The role of a queen was the opposite of Lea. Diane is meticulous, focused, deep down she is very AngloSaxon, whereas Lea is more amicable, instinctive, glowing
In the film, like in the book, we discover the lesser-known sides of Marie-Antoinette’s personality. It is as if, in the center of the picture, the queen bee starts, for whatever reason, to upset the equilibrium and her situation spreads throughout the hive. The accelerated events over these four days show all the different phases Marie-Antoinette went through in her life—the period of innocence, then of liveliness, then near deliriousness ending with a period of great deviation. They are all mixed together.

Without warning, she moves from extreme fidelity to a state of incredible brutality, to great self-destructiveness. Like the weather. I love that. On set, when I’m giving instructions to the actors, almost all my references are weather-related. "Like the sun breaking through the clouds, the sun goes in, day night." Different weather for different moods.

You film scenes quickly and you have a habit of giving actors a free rein.

The fact that I film quickly means that I have to force them to be good. The limitations of speed are such that there is only time to frame the shot, enabling us to achieve certain realism. I don’t really believe in rehearsals. For "Farewell My Queen" we just booked a few days with Lea, Diane and Noemie Lenoir, who plays Madame du Barry. "They don’t really agree on what they could and could not say."

This was particularly important for Diane, as French is her first language and we wanted to be sure about certain pronunciation and emphasis. I didn’t have to say anything to Virginie Ledoyen, I know her so well, there was no problem.

There are always a lot of women in your films, and a lot of very young women. I’d say it was about fifty. I have done five films with Isabelle Huppert. She was always when I first met her and we have worked together ever since. I lose women when they just start becoming women, when they have just past the stage of being young girls. I believe this moment is special and important.

Xavier Beauvois, Jacques Nolot, Marie-Julie Pat Edison... also figure in the credits.

A film’s cast is important. I do agree that, in this case, the cast is particularly distinguished. But it was vital that Lea, who is in the film right from the very first scene through to the last, be well supported. She needed to be surrounded by actors and actresses whom she admired and also who would set high standards.

The lighting in "Farewell My Queen" is strange.

I wanted the lighting to be both very sophisticated and very dramatic. I had already worked on another idea similar to this with Roman Wasi- ding.

And the set design is incredibly simple.

Each set was conceived by considering one piece of furniture at a time, after meticulous planning and plenty of discussion. Precisely, on other period dramas, I arrived on location and barely changed a thing. But for this film, everything was worked out beforehand. Take the golden cabinet, for example. It is night. A fire is lit and Marie-Antoinette is burning some letters. The fire lights up everything. What could be more true than that the light from the fire would contribute a musty atmosphere to the scene? Since this place was called the golden cabinet, Karin Wesbrook came up with the idea of making large gold sevets. They add a warm, golden gloss but they also add a disturbing decadence too.

You did a lot of the filming at Versailles. Very famous places have never been filmed.

We filmed there as much as we could i.e., every Monday and every day. The people running Versailles were very welcoming and made things as simple as they possibly could. A few films are made at Versailles because filling there costs a great deal, which puts a lot of people off. You have to be sure, which is the case in this film, that Versailles really is one of the main characters. Saying this, he did also film in other châteaux. It’s actually quite funny trying to work out where each scene was shot, whether it was at the real Versailles or at one of our perfect Versailles.

How about costumes?

Three maids: The queen’s chamberlain at The Petit Trianon was restated in Maison Laffite. It would have been impossible to film in the real castle, which was too small to let a camera in. So we had to rethink it. However, the hallway and the staircase leading to her room as well as the staircase to the Petit Trianon and its immediate surroundings were all filmed at The Petit Trianon. We shot filmed at the Château de Chantilly. This is where we shot the long gallery. The film that the nobles can see walking through must be their own pretty apartments.

"Farewell My Queen" is a big-budget film, yet it feels incredibly light and airy. We have already encouraged the way Suffren. Leos’ learnt to move in

the film’s existence. But, there is also a way in which you feel it and not in an approach. That’s something very important for me. When I make a period drama, I always try very hard not to make it look, like an exhibition of beautiful imita- tors. Of course, that said, approach can be very beautiful, there are some wonderful films—take Verhoeven’s film for example or Kubrick’s “Barry Lyndon” there are such quotable “quotes.” But that’s not my thing, I want people to think this is this, this is how it is, and that’s all there is to it.
Interview with Chantal Thomas

How did you react when you first saw Benoît Jacquot’s film?

I could no longer remember my book, I watched as if it were being told to me. The story unfolded in a new and very different style but of course it had an extraordinarily familiar feeling to it. It was both my book and his film.

Did you know his films?

Benoît and I occupy a similar intellectual universe. When I saw “Deep In The Woods” for example, I immediately thought, “I was right,” that he must be an avid reader of Balzac. I also knew how we met in 2002: during a debate about literary adaptations. He had just read my book. It’s quite a surprising sequence of events, isn’t it?

You have written several books about Sade (1) and Benoît Jacquot made a film about him. There are quite a few connections between you two.

I don’t think that this is a coincidence. Very few people, whether in France or elsewhere, have made a film about Sade. Benoît is inspired by the beauty of the French language and by the art of cruelty when enacted with certain elegance. This is exactly what I love about Sade.

Did you follow the different stages of the adaptation?

I was not in any way involved in the adaptation but I assisted the scriptwriter Gilles Taurand and Benoît did send me the different versions of the screenplay.

Several comical characters from the book have been sacrificed notably Captain de Laroche, who is in charge of the mensage. The animals are very much in the film. Is Laroche exactly a premonition of what is going to happen?

It was probably as happy when I came across this character as I was scribbling through the archives. Louis XVI was very fond of Captain de Laroche and I felt that he said a lot about that period – not only about the morals at the court, but also about the king’s personality, who appeared to enjoy his company. Yet, when I saw the film, I did not get the impression that Laroche was somewhat missing. Whichever Benoît took out of the book, appears differently elsewhere. He has moved things about: Take, for example, the wonderful walk that Léa/Sidonie takes along the Grand Canal. When I wrote that scene, Sidonie, my reader, was simply lovely. They were no sign of the decline to follow. Benoît made this scene incredibly strong: the moment she holds her hand in the water and the rat appears, it is a premonition of the “shipwreck” to come. From the book to the film, the symbolism has changed.

Tell us more about Petite Venise (Little Venice) the place where this scene takes place.

It was an area that Louis XIV created and was looked after by a group of Italian families. The big canal was full of boats – gondolas – it’s hard to imagine, isn’t it? People would go there in the evening to ride on the boats. At the time, Versailles was a very lively place to be. There were Guignoliettes (open-air taverns) all the way along the railings – that was something I loved seeing in the film – and lots of traders. Everywhere in Versailles, in the entrance, in the corridors, people were selling things. Did you know that you could hire a jacket at the entrance to the Château so that you could participate in the King’s hunts? Isn’t that wonderful? We no longer have access to such power like that anymore.

Another passage that was left out is the incredible choreography that took place between those lovers and those lying on the bed at the end of July. There were some fabulous scenes.

The story of the revolution always talks about Paris but never Versailles. But Versailles was the starting point for my book. I love the idea that the conviction of certain revolutionaries was such that it seemed natural for them to take refuge at Versailles whilst others fled: it’s a timely movement which is very theatrical. Benoît Jacquot’s angle was to never abandon the character of the reader. She plays the role of guide, everything is seen with her in mind. It was impossible for him to keep these coming and going and Sidonie did not take part in any of that.

The religious dimension is also rarely addressed in the film. Yet religion is one of the main reasons that explains why Louis XVI could not understand the revolution: he was haunted by the
Be the book, the film portrays her as a volcanic force of nature. 

Ironically, "Farrell's Merry Queen" bore the brunt of a number of attacks. 

Benjamin Jaccott has managed to convey the tension in her vivacious nature—an almost normal sense of what everything collapses around her. He also shows her maturity. Marie-Antoinette is not a woman of senselessness, in spite of her wealth and status. 

Her love for the Duchess of Palma makes her character even more engaging. Marie-Antoinette has a heightened sensibility, a passion, and a surprising aesthetic sense. 

We can see the same thing in Chekhov’s plays. It was the bourgeois society that broke up these links. That is what is so fascinating about historical novels (and films), that they can bring huge unknown areas of social history to light that at present are against the ideals of our present day.

In the same way, in which Jeanne d’Arc portrays her beauty in some awe-striking scenes. She is a figure that shines: we do not ask ourselves the question who the real lady is.

Both the book and the film portray her as a timeless allegory.

In the same way that Versailles is a metaphor for all the great European monarchies of the 18th century. 

It was whilst writing a thesis on Novel that I began unfolding all about this period in history. Later, when I was at the CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research), I worked on historical documents. It was there that I discovered that real people were driven by these same ideas today. Consider the scene when the widows are preparing to be executed. They hurriedly load their belongings into a steam-coach, trying to take as many objects as possible with them. These like the members of any authoritarian government, they run away.

Let’s talk about Nicolas-Maurice Vernhes’ official historian during this period. 

Faced with the gravest of events, the king asked him to write an episodic witnessing of the imminent punishment that was to be read out in all churches. But the writing of the episode progressed very slowly because of his own health. He was aware of the certain of the nobility, Jacob-Nouvel Mouret thought that the pleasures that the nobility were entitled to should also be accompanied by re- sponsibilities. He had his own notion and considered that it was the price the nobility had to pay for being called elites. Michel Robin is wonderful in this role.

Nicolas-Maurice works, reads, eats and sleeps in evoking telarons. This is a difficult role to play. 

That is what I like so much about the film, and in the book too everyone simply shrugs: "behind deck." Meanwhile, "deck" anything is a cumbersome phrase, and I am on the brink of collapse.
Filmography of Benoit Jacquot

SCREENWRITER
2007 JE SERRA LA
2007 FAREWELL MY QUEEN
2006 AU FOND DES BOIS
2006 VILLA AMALIA

TV SCREENWRITER
2007 LES FAUX MONNAYEURS Directed by : Benoit JACQUOT
2004 GASPAR LE BANDIT Directed by : Benoit JACQUOT

STAGE DIRECTOR
2004 WERTHER

FILM DIRECTOR
2011 FAREWELL MY QUEEN
2009 AU FOND DES BOIS
2008 VILLA AMALIA
2003 L'UNTOUR CHAMBRE
2002 À TOUT DE SUITE ADOLPHE
2001 TOSCA
2000 5ÂME
1999 LA FAUSSE SUIVANTE
1998 PAS DE SCANDALE
1998 L'ECOLE DE LA CHAIR
1997 LE SOPHIE CIEL

1994 MARIANNE Based on the novel written by Martin
1990 LA DESANCHANTÉE
1987 LES MENDANTS
1986 CORPS ET BIENS
1981 LES AILES DE LA COLOMBE
1977 LES ENFANTS DU PLAISARD
1975 L'ASSASSIN MUSCHIEN

SHORT TV FILM DIRECTOR
2009 LE SECATEUR

TV DOCUMENTARY
2004 LA MAISON DE TANGER

TELEVISION FILMS
2007 LES FAUX MONNAYEURS
2004 GASPAR LE BANDIT
2003 PRINCESSE MARIE

2 parts Screenplay 2003 Award for Best Television Screenplay

1996 LA VIE DE MARIANNE Based on the novel written by Martin
1992 EMMA ZU NZ Based on Borgs
1992 UNI VILLA AUX ENFANTS DE NEW YORK Based on Kafka

COMPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:
Director of several documentaries about Jacques Lacan, Alfred Deller, Merce Cunningham, Lumi-Rene des Forêts, Robert Motherrw, Marguerite Duras...