THEMA FILMS, MANCHESTER FILMS and MK2 present

A Monkey on My Shoulder

A film by Marion Laine

Juliette Binoche
Édgar Ramírez
Mila and Javier, both renowned surgeons and both passionate about their work, have been madly in love for the past 10 years. They have always taken great care to preserve their extraordinary love for each other and refuse to succumb to the routine of everyday living. But Mila’s unexpected pregnancy, combined with increasing pressure from work at the hospital, drives Javier to drink more heavily and he ends up being suspended. Faced with his demons, Javier drifts further and further away from Mila. Yet, when their relationship is under serious threat, Javier is ready to do whatever it takes to win Mila back.

Based on the novel by Mathias Enard (published by Actes Sud)
Sometimes, I’ll use a painting as a starting point for the visual imagery. For example, Caravaggio’s painting of Saint Thomas and the finger in Christ’s wound made me think of the surgeons’ (Mila and Javier’s) hands inside people’s bodies. The skull in this same painting made me think about using mummies.

I always move away from the storyline of the book that I am adapting. I tend to put a great deal of myself into it and the more I get inside the novel the more I feel a part of it. My version still has visible traces of the original story behind it, like a musical score, but it is my own interpretation.

My producers and I chose this novel because we both wanted to work on a love story and we are both fascinated by the world of surgical medicine.

Your first feature-length film A SIMPLE HEART (original title: ‘UN CŒUR SIMPLE’) was released in 2008. What have you been up to since then?

The film is called “A MONKEY ON MY SHOULDER”, how did you develop the animal characteristics of the characters?

In the book, the woman is an immigrant so I began by looking for a Spanish actress who could speak French. But when I saw Edgar Ramirez in Olivier Assayas’s film CARLOS, it was a revelation. I decided to switch it round. I wasn’t used to writing for male characters but he was very helpful when building Javier’s character. It was also his idea to ask Juliette Binoche to play the part of Mila as he had always dreamed of acting in a film with her.

The interior colours of the hospital to the rooms in the apartment are filmed as if they are living organisms. They echo the underlying inward tension of the characters in the film. Inside the hospital, the walls and the floors are monochrome, but the medical staff are very clinical, like the hospital (the only colour being the dashes of red where they are testing paint colours).

The hospital decor is monochrome throughout, as are the hospital staff. The only dash of colour is that of the patients’ hearts as they are being operated on (these scenes show live operations).

Then, when Mila and Javier decide to move house, it is left empty and bare. In the final part of the film there is work going on in the apartment, it is falling apart.

Both the apartment and hospital interiors are in stark contrast to the “exotic” exterior locations (the zoo, the park, the palm grove, the river) which are very base and her reactions and impulsive behaviour were very animal-like. I like to go via the animal first to get closer to the human being.

How did you define the relationship between Mila and Javier that appears to be so natural and impulsive?

I got Juliette and Edgar to work together using how a pair of monkeys would interact as their model. The actors took their inspiration from documentaries about chimpanzees. In A SIMPLE HEART, Sandrine Bonnaire and I also worked on animal characteristics. Her character, Felicity, was very base and her reactions and impulsive behaviour were very animal-like. I like to go via the animal first to get closer to the human being.

How did Juliette Binoche and Edgar Ramirez get involved in this project?

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Yes, the idea was to give each location an organic treatment. I imagined the apartment as a third character. As first it is furnished and full of life. Then, when Mila and Javier decide to move house, it is left empty and bare. In the final part of the film there is work going on in the apartment, it is falling apart.

Simultaneously, there is Mila’s pregnancy and Javier’s descent into alcohol. Even the soundscape follows this progression: at first it is summer and falling apart.

How did you come across the novel Remonter L’Orénoque (lit. trans: Travelling up the Orinoco) and what elements of the novel appealed to you before knuckling down on a film project? It was a good training exercise: as people always say, a film made for television is a sprint, whereas a feature-length film for cinema needs the stamina required for a long distance race.

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I was always excited by the idea of trying lots of things that they had never done before, like riding a motorbike, driving a motorboat, interacting with monkeys (with all the risks this entails, including being bitten), diving 23 feet underwater (with no training), breaking down walls, cutting open bodies, seeing a human heart beating and then stopping, diving into the depths of someone else’s most private space..... We had no time to rehearse any of all this before filming began. Juliette and Edgar only met once for the screen tests. For scheduling reasons, we started by filming the very intimate scenes in the apartment. We were really lucky that both actors got on so well and that they trusted me and agreed to let me take them on a free-fall over the next 30 days!

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Javier is a very sensual character. You constantly film his hands, his skin. This is almost a film about touch.

Exactly! I instinctively feel close to the actors I work with and, in this film, I wanted the camera to be right up close to the actors so that the viewer would feel very involved.

For example, in the love scene, I wanted us to be inside the bodies, I did not want just caresses. I wanted, like in Bernini’s sculptures, to show fingers pressing into flesh. I wanted to film the desire that makes one person merge with another, to be in a state of osmosis, like in the shot when Mila starts trembling as she buries her fingers into Javier’s beard, as if she wanted to draw him in and eat him up.

Death is present throughout the film: Javier and Mila perform open-heart surgery, they drive a fast motorbike, Javier’s alcoholism puts their relationship in danger. How did you approach this theme?

For me, death is not taboo. But in this film, what I really want to say is that love is stronger than death. My intention was for us to always feel frightened for them. Like in real life when you are very happy and you think this won’t last, that something is bound to go wrong, that someone will call to say that the person you love has been knocked down...

What was your angle on treating the theme of addiction and alcoholism?

What I really liked about the book was that there was no explanation as to why the male character was an alcoholic. I had absolutely no wish to delve into the psychology or explain the reasons why he was ill. At the end of the film, the reasons are touched upon but in a very roundabout way. It is a subject that the protagonists avoid. I was only interested in looking at the consequences. Alcoholism exists in all areas of society. It is a subject that touches us all. I think. But, it is more complex in the world of surgical medicine, than in a business like ours, where an alcoholic artist can still hold down a career (like in the rural environment I come from too) whereas for a surgeon, or an airline pilot, it’s slightly more complicated than that.

Did you use any particular films or literature as inspiration for the treatment of this theme?

Not really, even though certain pieces of literature have always been very important to me over the years such as Under The Volcano by Malcolm Lowry, Journey To The End Of The Night by Celine and Ulysses by James Joyce. And there are certain films I love like THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN ARM by Otto Preminger and DAYS OF WINE AND ROSES by Blake Edwards, a tale of the downward spiral.

Interview by Juliette Reitzer
**FILMOGRAPHIES**

**Marion Laine** (As A Director)

- **2012** A MONKEY ON MY SHOULDER, with Juliette Binoche and Edgar Ramirez
- **2008** A SIMPLE HEART, with Sandrine Bonnaire, Marina Foïs and Noémie Lvovsky

**Juliette Binoche** (Selective)

- **2012** CAMILLE CLAUDEL, by Bruno Dumont
- **2008** A MONKEY ON MY SHOULDER, by Marion Laine

**Édgar Ramirez** (Selective)

- **2013** CORPUS CHRISTI, by Richard Kelly (pre-production)
- **2012** ZERO DARK THIRTY, by Kathryn Bigelow

**CAST**

- **Mila**
- **Javier**
- **Marc**
- **Christelle**
- **Sylvie**
- **Nurse**
- **Elisa Taveron**
- **David**
- **Romain Rondan**

**CREW**

- **Author & Director** Marion Laine
- **Original Score** Bruno Coulaud
- **Set Design** Christine Godin (Thelma Films), Catherine Bozorgan (Manchester Films)
- **Costume Design** Antoine Héberlé
- **Editing** Pierre Queffeleau
- **Sound** Olivier Bériot
- **1st Assistant Director** Luc Barnier, Mathilde Van De Moortel
- **Production Manager** Laurent Lafran
- **Production Manager** Dominique Furgé
- **Set Photographer** Ludovic Naar
- **Set Photographer** Marion Stalens