The Tree

A film by Julie Bertuccelli
With Charlotte Gainsbourg, Marton Csokas & Morgana Davies

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SYNOPSIS

After the sudden death of her husband, Dawn must face her own mourning yet still care for her four children. Her only daughter, 8-year-old Simone, seems to take the loss the hardest of all.

Simone shares a special secret with her mother; her father whispers to her through the leaves of the magnificent tree next to their home. Convinced he’s come back to protect the family, Simone spends more and more time up in the tree, speaking with her father. Soon, Dawn herself is mesmerized by the tree’s commanding presence.

When Dawn becomes more intimate with George, her new employee, the bond between mother and daughter is threatened. With branches infiltrating the house and roots destroying the foundations, the tree seems to be siding with Simone. Feared the tree is in danger of being cut down, she protests by setting up house high up in the branches.

But Dawn refuses to let the tree take control of her family..
I had always wanted to adapt Italo Calvino’s “The Baron in the Tree”, but since it wasn’t possible, I went looking for a story with a Tree — it became an obsession. A cousin of mine gave me “Our Father who Art in the Tree”, by Judy Pascoe. It was a revelation. The story’s central figure of the tree sparked off my desire, and its themes strongly inspired me, to the point of imagining my second film.

An Australian producer, Sue Taylor, had already acquired the rights. Yael Fogiel, my producer, and I contacted her. She watched my first film, Since Otar Left, and we started working together. The book was written from the point of view of the child, but I chose to include that of the mother. I wanted to make a movie for grown-ups, with tenderness and humour. It flirts with the possibility of a supernatural world while being deeply rooted in realism and simplicity.

Not just because the story was written in Australia. The film uses the primeval power of beings and elements, and Nature as a mirror of feelings. This is why shooting in Australia, where Nature and its excesses are central and stunning, seemed momentous. As a French director looking at this country from a distance, I found several advantages to setting this story in the Antipodes (as is the case in the book), in a scenery far away from France, from home, from me. The southern hemisphere, the opposite side of the world, different culture, vegetation, climate, habitat, so many differences which match the tale and highlight its universality. The process of mourning is akin to going into exile, to tearing oneself away from the other, from a part of one’s self. It is a journey one must undertake to guiltily part from the other while keeping him within, as an exile trying to maintain internal contact with his or her roots. Therefore I found it was important to me to go and tell this story far away from home, as far as possible. On the other side of the world.
Two things: how death is dealt with, and how sadness pushes the characters to another place, to find comfort in their imagination. Simone, the young daughter, refuses to feel sad, so she tries to find another way to accept her father’s death. In a way, it’s similar to my first film — except then, it was a lie, it was about hiding death. In _The Tree_, it’s the unstoppable power of life asserting itself over sadness. The voice of the father is never heard, it remains a whisper, a blend of rustling leaves, animal noises and wind, akin to an inaudible murmur, which stirs up doubts but never turns unreal. The tree’s roots do seem to grow at a remarkable pace but then again, it is realistic because of the drought in the region. As in life, there is a balance between poetry and sensitivity, doubt and mystery, imagination and realism, emotion and humour, lightness and sadness. When terrible things happen around you, you know that you have to live with your sadness. But you can transform it and use this emotion creatively.

We had always envisaged a Moreton Bay fig tree. The book is set on the outskirts of Brisbane, so it seemed a good place to start. But there are hundreds of Moreton Bay fig trees out there! Finding the right tree was the most important thing and it was a very substantial challenge. It had to not be surrounded by other trees, in a place with space around it, so we could build the family house. Because the connection between the house and the tree is crucial to the story.

The tree is the founding, central character. How did you find it? We had always envisaged a Moreton Bay fig tree. The book is set on the outskirts of Brisbane, so it seemed a good place to start. But there are hundreds of Moreton Bay fig trees out there! Finding the right tree was the most important thing and it was a very substantial challenge. It had to not be surrounded by other trees, in a place with space around it, so we could build the family house. Because the connection between the house and the tree is crucial to the story.
It also had to be big. The story is about nature, how nature is always stronger than humans, a feeling that is particularly stark in Australia. However, it wasn’t just a matter of size. I was seeking not just an impressive tree, conveying mystery, fear, as well as beauty. We could have built a fake tree to fit exactly what we needed. But from the beginning I wanted the tree to be natural, alive, organic, real. So I insisted.

The tree we finally chose was amazing. For all three reasons, and because it was also very inviting — a tree that children could climb and would want to climb. Sometimes there were 20 people up in the tree, and it remained safe. As we came over the hill, the tree revealed itself to us — and beyond the tree was this awe-inspiring landscape.

In documentary-making, unpredictable things happen. In fiction, it’s similar and different at the same time, because everything has to be created from scratch. For example, we were shooting on the beach, and the weather report suddenly announced a big dust storm for the next day. So we decided to speed up the shoot there and to run back to the tree — which was far away — to capture this storm around the tree, to integrate it at the end of the film. With the wind machine, it’s never quite the same. Maybe because I come from documentary filmmaking, I believe reality is much stronger than anything artificially created.

How does your background as a documentary filmmaker influence your methods?

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It was difficult to find the right girl, to be sure she could carry the role, every day, for nine weeks. With Morgana, it was obvious: she was amazing, really moving, beautiful, and strong. Yet decisions aren’t always made with your intellect. It was the same thing with the tree: suddenly, we knew we’d found the one. But it took a lot of time and I saw more than 20 girls and about ten trees — it’s impossible to define all the reasons, it’s instinctive.

And Charlotte Gainsbourg?

At the beginning, I did not think about Charlotte because she was too young in my mind... I had forgotten that she had become a mother. She was perfect for Dawn, a mother, a girl and a woman at the same time. Charlotte is one of the most amazing actresses I’ve ever seen. She has such a strong presence, she’s charming, graceful. You simply have to tell her a few words and she completely inhabits her character. She illuminates every scene. She was the perfect gift for this film!

I hear that you had a very family-oriented shoot.

The children brought real happiness on set: my children were there, Charlotte’s, the crew’s, the actors’, the producer’s... Of course there are challenges with working with children. — I had never make a film with children before. As a director it pushes you to be inventive to find the best way to ask a three-year-old to stay in one place for two minutes. I had to find less of little tricks to be surrounded by so many children was really inspiring.
CHARLOTTE GAINSBOURG
AS DAWN O'NEIL

Charlotte Gainsbourg has established herself as an actress of international re
nown who has brought truth and originality to a diverse, and often challenging, array of roles. Honoured with the prestigious Best Actress prize at the Cannes Film Festival (2009) for her work in Antichrist, Lars von Trier's latest production, she has also acted in the Academy-Award winning Alejandro González Iñárritu's 21 Grams, Todd Haynes’ I’m Not There, Franco Zeffirelli’s Jane Eyre, Michel Gondry’s The Science of Sleep and Patricia Highsmith’s Perfume. Charlotte’s feature film debut was in Parade at muzique (1994), in which she played Catherine Deneuve’s daughter. Her English speaking debut, in 1999, was in The Cement Garden, written and directed by her uncle, Andrew Birkin. Charlotte is also a successful singer/songwriter. Her most recent album, 9,99, was produced by Beck. She is the daughter of British actress and singer Jane Birkin and French singer-songwriter, actor and director Serge Gainsbourg.
MARTON CSOKAS
AS GEORGE

Born in New Zealand and now living in the U.S., Marton Csokas has built his acting career around prolific work in both the theatre and in film. His diverse feature credits include the international smash hit Alive in Wonderland, directed by Tim Burton, David Mackenzie’s Asylum with Natalie Richardson and Ian McKellen, Paul Greengrass’ The Bourne Supremacy opposite Matt Damon, Ridley Scott’s Kingdom of Heaven, Peter Jackson’s Lord of the Rings and Christine Jeffries’ film. Csokas won the 2007 AFI (Australian Film Institute) Award for Best Supporting Actor for his performance in Romulus, My Father, in which he starred with Eric Bana.

MORGANA DAVIES
AS SIMONE

Morgana Davies ventured into the world of film acting for the first time, aged just 7 1/2, with the lead role of Simone. Fortunately Morgana, along with the other young actors in the film, loved climbing and playing in the giant Moreton Bay fig tree that dominated the set and is so integral to the story. Despite the tree being her first role, Morgana’s performance is astonishingly accomplished. Producers Sue Taylor and Ian Fong, and director John Berosselli, were completely surprised by her ability to deal with the demands of long hours and late nights required on the shoot.
JULIE BERTUCCELLI
WRITER/DIRECTOR

Julie Bertuccelli started her film career as an assistant director, working with acclaimed directors such as Krzysztof Kieslowski, Bertrand Tavernier, Otar Iosseliani, Ritri Park and Emmanuel Finkiel. She has also directed several highly regarded documentaries.

Her feature debut, Since Our Left, which she both wrote and directed, won several major awards including the Grand Prize, International Critics’ Week at the Cannes Film Festival in 2004, and a Cesar Award for Best First Feature.
CAST
Charlotte Gainsbourg
George Martin Cukars
Sinuous Morgan Davies
Peter O'Halad Young
Yvonne Gillian Jones
Miss Julianne Penny Hackforth-Jones
Tim Christian Bayers
Les Tom Russell
Charles Gabriel Güttinger
Mignon Zoe Boe

CREW
Directed by JULIE BERTUCELLI
Screenplay by JULIE BERTUCELLI
Adapted from JUDY PANCEV’S OUR FATHER WHO ART IN THE TREE
Produced by LES FILMS DU POISON (Jellyfish, On Tour), TAYLOR MEDIA
Director of Photography NIGEL BLACK
Sound Designer OLIVIER MAUVEZIN
Art Director STEVEN JONES-EVANS
Costume Designer JOANNA MAE PARK
Makeup/Hair Designer WENDY DE WAAL
Casting Director NIKI BARRETT
Editor FRANÇOIS GÉDIGIER
Sound editor NICOLAS MOREAU
Sound mix OLIVIER GOINARD
Music Composer GRÉGORY HETZEL
1st AD CHRISTIAN WIBB
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In coproduction with ARTE France Cinéma, ARD/Degeto, WDR/ARTE, and Tatfilm
With the participation of CANAL+ and ARTE France
In association with Dorje Film, Screen Queensland, Screen NSW, Le Pacte, Memento Films International, Goalpost Pictures, Kojo Pictures and Coficup 2 (a fund operated by Backup Films)

LES FILMS DU POISON
When Greg creates Les Films du Poisson in 1995, Valéry Giscard and Lucette Gisacri intended to build upon an international and awards-winning author cinema. Through many awards and acclaimed successes around the world – four César Awards, the Cannes Film in Cannes 2007 for The Fox, When pigs and Cocks Delas, among others – they have trained with renowned directors such as Emmanuel Franz, Juan Bertocci and Mathieu Amalric. Today the catalogue amounts to more than one hundred titles, short and documentaries. Les Films du Poisson is presenting two films at the 2016 César Film Festival in Paris (Mythos Aryan (A Competition) and The Fox, by Jérôme Bonnet)

TAYLOR MEDIA
 Sue Taylor has been a filmmaker for over twenty-five years. Since establishing her own company in 2006, Taylor Media, she has been most recognized for her Australian productions, including The Shark Net, the award-winning legal series based on the original Robert Burrell Australian, the feature film, Land That Ty Fox Free, a superbly acted emotional roller-coaster ride of public transport, destiny, money busts and the accused/perspectives, 2 Acts of Murder directed by Simon Wilmshurst. In 2004 Sue received the Screen Producers Association of Australia/GAMM (France) Producer of the Year Award.

Aesop
Screen QLD
Screen NSW
Le Pacte
Memento Film International
Gujrat Pictures, Koji Pictures
and Coficup 2 (a fund operated by Backup Films)