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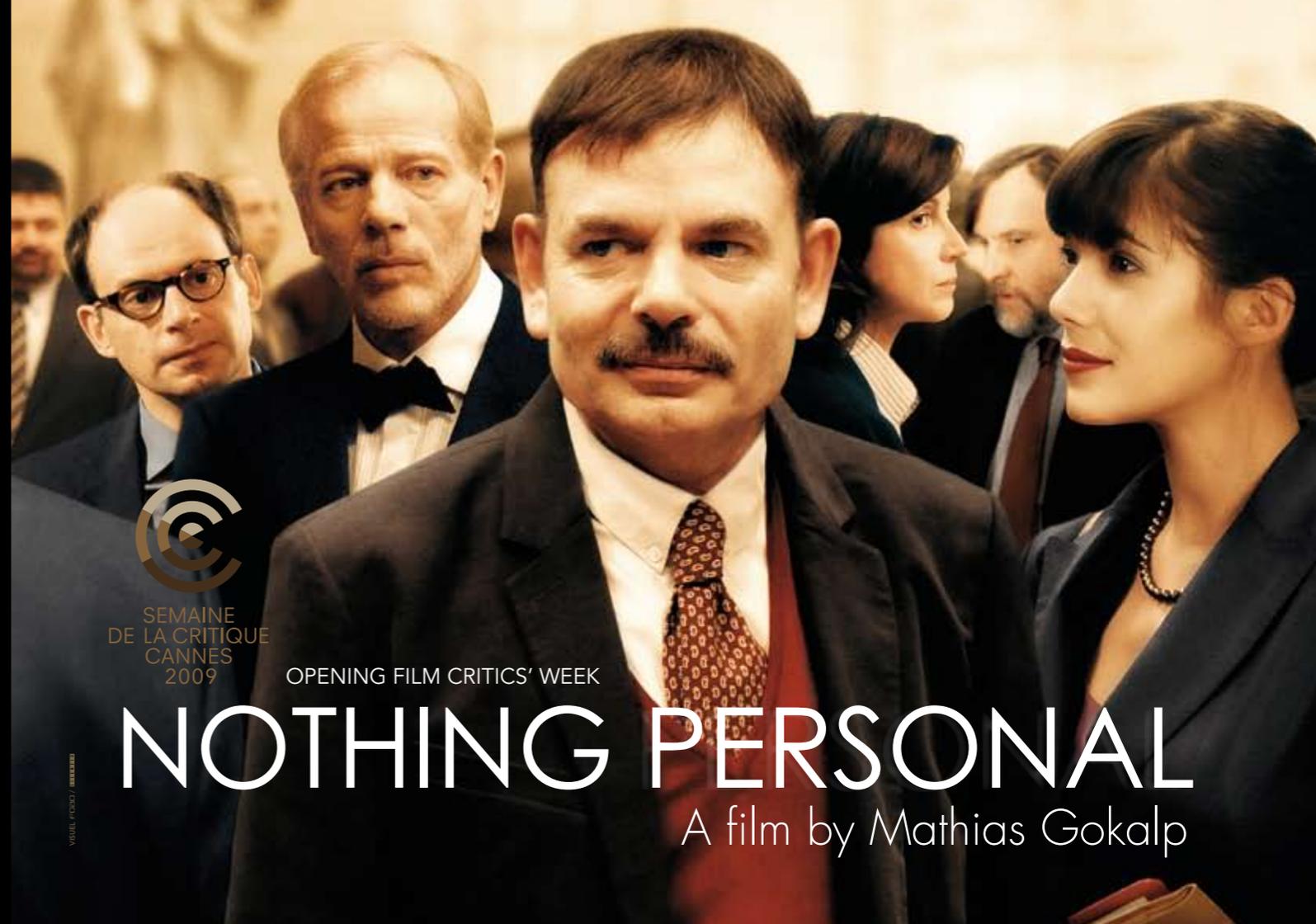
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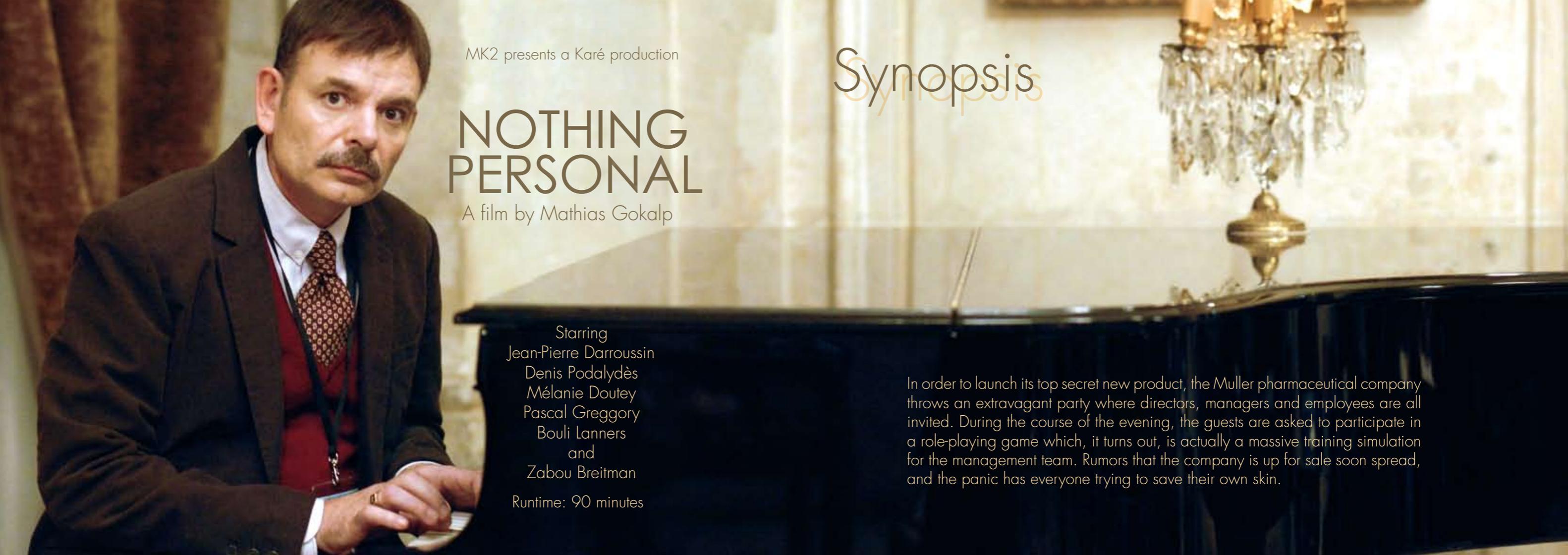
SEMAINE  
DE LA CRITIQUE  
CANNES  
2009

OPENING FILM CRITICS' WEEK

# NOTHING PERSONAL

A film by Mathias Gokalp

VERBIL PORDY / BUREAU



MK2 presents a Karé production

# NOTHING PERSONAL

A film by Mathias Gokalp

Starring  
Jean-Pierre Darroussin  
Denis Podalydès  
Mélanie Doutey  
Pascal Greggory  
Bouli Lanners  
and  
Zabou Breitman

Runtime: 90 minutes

## Synopsis

In order to launch its top secret new product, the Muller pharmaceutical company throws an extravagant party where directors, managers and employees are all invited. During the course of the evening, the guests are asked to participate in a role-playing game which, it turns out, is actually a massive training simulation for the management team. Rumors that the company is up for sale soon spread, and the panic has everyone trying to save their own skin.

Interview with  
Mathias Gokalp



*Can you describe your career in cinema before this first feature?*

I decided very early on to make films. As a child and adolescent, I was a cinephile. The Marx Brothers are responsible for my vocation. Every year, a selection of their films would play in Paris. I would go and watch their movies over and over again. Later on, I obviously discovered other films... When I was at university, I made self-produced, experimental films. It was the only way for me to make inexpensive movies. Lacking all technical knowledge, I would paint directly onto the film and tell stories using still images. I then studied directing at l'Insas, the Brussels film school. I was there for four years. When I returned to France, I made three short films. The first, PART TIME, owes a lot to my years in Belgium and to a certain tradition of socially conscious realist and documentary cinema. It tells the story of a young cashier who is having a hard time making ends meet. Then I made, LE DROIT CHEMIN, where, for the first time, I worked on a more formal and less naturalistic narrative.

*NOTHING PERSONAL was shot in the middle of the global economic crisis, but it had been written long before.*

Me and the screenwriter, Nadine Lamari, began writing the film when the international stock market was at a high. Already, at the time, people were being fired left and right for other reasons. The social relations depicted in NOTHING PERSONAL are those of a market economy. Growth and recession do not really change anything, even if the current crisis contributes to the loss of job security. Detaining the boss in the film turned out to be premonitory, but the scene was inspired by the events of the 1970s.

*Why did you choose such a difficult subject for your first feature?*

Many features by young filmmakers are first-person films. As far as I'm concerned, I felt a greater need to see where society is going than to express myself about my private life. That doesn't mean there is «nothing personal» in the film. Your own life always catches up with you. When you talk about the world, you're talking about yourself.



*The idea of work as a disease which is examined in the film, is this a French concept?*

Work is truly painful. We don't say it enough. People live in silence everyday, and it's extremely violent. One mustn't confuse the work one does to make a living and a labour of love which is done to leave a trace of one's existence. They should be one and the same. But in the West, and not just in France, people rarely have the choice.

*Did you do any research on the subject?*

We used several texts: «The Weight of the World» by Pierre Bourdieu, «Notes of a Work Inspector» («Les carnets d'un inspecteur du travail») by Gérard Filoche. There were films, too, like, LA VOIX DE SON MAITRE by Nicolas Philibert and Gérard Mordillat. Then I met union representatives who had been through periods of crisis in their companies, as well as consultants

responsible for «strong-armed» restructuring... I had them read the screenplay as it was written. The film is more realistic than it may appear to be. During the editing, there were test screenings, and among the most receptive audiences were people who worked in big companies. They identified everything quickly and easily, and found the film funny.

*The film is built around the repetition of certain scenes with different and complementary points of view. Why this «Russian nesting doll» structure?*

The repetition of scenes in the film is not exactly bound to the different points of view. Certainly, each section of the film tells the story of an evening from a protagonist's point of view, but not exactly. Moreover, the camera angles and shots are generally identical from one section to the next. I wanted to question this idea of subjectivity because it is exactly what justifies the suffering of individuals in a society, and their incapacity to be integrated. In NOTHING PERSONAL, the characters blame each other for their misfortunes but, in reality, the positions are interchangeable, and misfortune does not come from



the individual but from a system within which he/she evolves. The structure of the narration allows for the characters' roles to switch: the victim becomes the victimizer, the traitor becomes the hero, and so on. This does not mean that no one's behavior is worse than anyone else's, and that there are no true bastards. But this structure allows us to see the logic of things rather than labeling things as good and bad. Furthermore, it's a dramatic tool which possesses a lot of potential for surprise.

*As screenwriter and then director, is it amusing to play with the audience's truncated perception?*

It was more of a puzzle than anything else. Besides, I don't really like the idea of manipulating the audience. There are reversals, plot twists, and information is withheld, but after the first few minutes of the film, the spectator is well aware that all the images are dubious. If the audience is manipulated, it is in the noble sense of the term: it is because they accept to play our game.



*Your characters are quite frequently in the position of «seeing without being seen.»*

This came about little by little in the screenplay and, later, during the shoot, without my really being aware of it. When I realized it, after placing my camera enough times in one character's place so he could observe another, it seemed to be a meaningful metaphor for working in a company: everyone keeps an eye on everyone else. It's a mode of existence in itself.

*Is there a solution which would allow each worker to attain «happiness» in his/her job?*

We live in a society that pushes people to work more by promising them more consumer goods. But we don't need anything else. We're in hyper-production, we desire growth and profits. But, this is not what it fundamentally means to be human. That lies elsewhere.

*Is NOTHING PERSONAL a political and social film?*

I don't really believe in cinema's potential to change the world. I try to describe what I see objectively and I think that, when you try to be objective on certain social issues, you end up taking a side, despite yourself. When Suso Cecchi D'Amico, the Italian screenwriter, was asked to explain how a great aristocrat like Visconti could make such political films, he replied that Visconti was simply trying to make honest films where he could tell the truth about things. Perhaps that is where militancy and ideology can be found. I'm trying to offer up an image of a world that is different from the one offered by numerous commercial films. Ideally, one would be both militant and as entertaining as a Disney film, for example.

*Is this film a cry of alarm and a warning addressed to both workers and company executives?*

Again, I don't believe that's my role. At best, I would like my way of filming or relating simple facts to lose their obviousness. Nothing depresses me more than the fatalism of «that's how it goes», or «that's how it's always been,» and the blindness that follows.

*Could your film have a catalyzing effect on workers who are mistreated by their higher-ups and give them hope to continue defending themselves?*

It would make me very happy to think that people who are smothered by their jobs might find the strength in the evening, after ten hours of work, to still go and watch a film that talks about work, and enjoy it.

*Given its unclassifiable nature, did the subject of the film «scare» producers?*

I've worked with Antoine Rein and Fabrice Goldstein, my producers, for almost ten years and they're quite familiar with my creative universe. The atypical scares some people and attracts others. The project was greeted with a lot of enthusiasm from both the actors and the financial backers.

*What were your cinematic references for this film?*

I do not work with references to this or that film. I work on a project that has its own form and lives its own life. Along the way, you encounter situations that others have already confronted before you, whose solutions can help you. That's when you look at the classics! For NOTHING PERSONAL, I looked to the films of Alain Resnais, most of which are formal and social, and which I admire. Then, on a more practical level, there was THE FIREMEN'S BALL by Milos Forman. I really love the humor in Czech films, the tenderness in the chronic description of a group. THE FIREMEN'S BALL presents a unity of time and location, and the way they are examined is exemplary. I showed it to the entire technical crew.

*The film's casting is very rich. How did the selection of the actors take place?*

The producers, Antoine Rein and Fabrice Goldstein, and I sat around a table talked freely about who we wanted. That might be the source of the mix of genres. One associates Jean-Pierre Darroussin with popular comedies and Robert Guédiguian's films, Denis Podalydès with more Parisian, intellectual films, Mélanie Doutey and Pascal Greggory with even more types of films... We indulged. None of us had any preconceived ideas of who was to do what. Everybody that read the project loved it, and the cast we got was the one we'd dreamt of.



*Did getting to direct such great actors make your life easier during the shoot?*

I could say that I was given a Stradivarius for my first concert, but that would be simplistic. These aren't instruments, they're actors. The director need only take a back seat and let them act. I knew they needed room and space, and I knew the scene would work. One mustn't force these things. With regards to what I had anticipated, there are fewer shots in the film, less breakdown, less staging tricks because all of them have such a strong presence.

*Did you give the actors many directions?*

I'm very attentive to the intentions and rhythm of the scenes. Even if you enjoy this or that actor's interpretation at a given moment, you must never lose sight of the film as a whole. At times, I have had to tell the actors the specific context or stakes of a particular scene-but never their character's psychology, for instance. They have constructed that on their own using the text. Once their intention is just right, I like for the shots to vary, and the actors were extraordinarily flexible.

*Like the characters in the film, was the rapport between actors and director also based on manipulation?*

Directing actors is a professional task. I don't feel there is any need to trick anyone in order to make a good film. Every actor has particular needs, whether conscious or unconscious. I try to meet them as best as I can. Manipulation presupposes a power dynamic and, thankfully, very few people like that.

You do not use a video monitor on the set to check the frame and watch the takes. You place yourself in front of them, at the foot of the camera.

Watching a scene we are shooting from behind a video monitor detaches me from the acting. With a monitor, I'm tempted to follow the frame, the lighting, the extras, and that isn't my role at that precise moment. When you are behind a monitor, you are not with the actors, you are not in the action. I need to be where things are happening. Certain actors also need me to be their first «audience», to be physically present when they act. Not everyone likes that. Some prefer me to be a little further away!



*NOTHING PERSONAL* takes place in a closed setting. What challenges must one overcome when making a first feature with as many constraints: unity of place and time, multiple characters, and the art of camouflage?

These are not really constraints. Already in the screenplay, I'd deliberately chosen to film this way because a single location at night makes for optimal shooting conditions in a studio. It is the most comfortable way to do it. It allows you to take your time with the actors, and to re-shoot certain scenes as you go along. There isn't that pressure that you have to leave the decor that day and, perhaps, never return, or the weather... As for the large number of actors, it was complicated to find a schedule that suited everyone, but we were able to do it in the end.



*Given the structure, what were your greatest obstacles and constraints during the shoot and, later, the editing?*

I had to constantly keep the two trajectories of the film in mind: the chronological order and the storyline. And, sometimes, the three layers of a scene. Like the sound engineer said, «a first film is like a Sudoku puzzle-only you chose Level 2.» The script supervisor did an exceptional job. And, the advantage of a very detailed script is that you don't have a thousand questions to answer. You can stick to it. Moving away from it would have created an infinite number of problems. The editing was simpler than we thought, and the film is quite faithful to the initial project.

*You frame the shots yourself during the shoot. Why?*

I only rarely frame shots myself. During a take, I'm only concerned with the acting. On the other hand, I carefully prepare everything with the Director of Photography, the same one I've worked with for the past fifteen years. For me, the frame is an integral part of the way a film is directed.



*There are many extras in the film.*

The classics of cinema are teeming with crowds, whereas they have deserted contemporary cinema. With video, they've made a comeback in big Hollywood productions, but they remain discreet in French cinema. So, initially, the choice was fuelled by my cinephilia. Crowds were part of the project. Of course, there are also other theoretical reasons for this: the desire to show a corporation as a living body. But it was first and foremost a question of organizing shots. Making a film is not limited to the frame and the direction of actors. I wanted to work in a single location taken over by a crowd. It gives the film a very unique identity.

*Regarding the music, there is some classical with Chabrier and some Johnny Hallyday in the film. Why the radically different styles?*

I liked the idea of the cynical boss who pays for the chance to sing in front of his employees, forcing them to listen to him. But that could have quickly become a caricature. I wanted this song to be really beautiful, and for the moment to be a moment that remained suspended in the air. My intention was to add a layer of depth to the character, and because beauty doesn't always come from where you expect to find it. I wanted him to sing something nostalgic, and in French. Chabrier was perfect. As for the Johnny Hallyday song, it was already planned in the screenplay. We asked ourselves what «Monsieur Barbieri» would sing. As a matter of fact, he belts out what he normally listens to. He probably met his wife to a Johnny Hallyday song; he sings it to remember the happy days of their love. I'm not a big fan of Johnny's, but I'm a die-hard fan of Bouli Lanners singing Johnny Hallyday! I like the eclectic side of it. The intentions are very different, but the scenes themselves describe the immense chasm between these two singers.



*What do all the morbid elements of the set represent during the cocktail party?*

When we began the screenplay, we set aside the question of set design. However, the world of the pharmaceutical industry caught our attention early on. The screenwriter and I sort of accidentally visited the Dermatology Museum in Saint Louis Hospital in Paris. It's a very disturbing museum of horrors. The curator told us about how private companies would rent the place for cocktail parties. That seemed revelatory to us. Once we filled the display cases with these objects, the decor took on another tonality. The theme of the museum shifted from medicine to the natural sciences. For me, a film that looks at human and social relationships, surrounded by skulls, skeletons, and flayed bodies is very symbolic.

*Was it a great triumph to get Pascal Greggory and Bouli Lanners to sing?*

They immediately accepted to sing themselves. That part of the work interested them. Bouli Lanners was a little apprehensive, not because of the song, but because of the scene. He didn't want it to be corny. We worked on it together. He was amazing. As for Pascal Greggory, I didn't want any lip-syncing for the scene, but «Sommaton irrespectueuse» is a difficult song. Right when we met, he told me about his past as a singer. I was very surprised and delighted. There were quite a few rehearsals, but the result is one of the most beautiful scenes in the film, in my opinion.

About the cast





## JEAN-PIERRE DARROUSSIN

(BRUNO COUFFE)

- 2008 LES GRANDES PERSONNES (dir: Anna Novion)
- 2006 ARMENIA (dir: Robert Guédiguian)
- 2004 A VERY LONG ENGAGEMENT (dir: Jean-Pierre Jeunet)



## DENIS PODALYDÈS

(GILLES BERGERAT)

- 2008 SKIRT DAY (dir: Jean-Paul Lilienfeld)
- 2008 SAGAN (dir: Diane Kurys)
- 2005 HIDDEN (dir: Michael Haneke)



## MÉLANIE DOUTEY

(NATACHA GAUTHIER-STEVENSON)

- 2007 TONIGHT, I'LL SLEEP AT YOURS (dir: Olivier Baroux)
- 2004 NARCO (dir: Tristan Aurouet, Gilles Lellouche)
- 2003 THE FLOWER OF EVIL (dir: Claude Chabrol)



## ZABOU BREITMAN

(CHRISTINE BARBIERI)

- 2008 THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE (dir: Rémi Bezançon)
- 2005 THE PERFUME OF THE LADY IN BLACK (dir: Bruno Podalydès)
- 2004 NARCO (dir: Tristan Aurouet, Gilles Lellouche)



## PASCAL GREGGORY

(PHILIPPE MULLER)

- 2007 LA VIE EN ROSE (dir: Olivier Dahan)
- 2006 THE PAGE TURNER (dir: Denis Dercourt)
- 2005 GABRIELLE (dir: Patrice Chéreau)



## BOULI LANNERS

(PIERRICK BARBIERI)

- 2008 LOUISE-MICHEL (dir: Gustave de Kervern, Benoît Delépine)
- ELDORADO (dir: Bouli Lanners)
- 2004 A VERY LONG ENGAGEMENT (dir: Jean-Pierre Jeunet)

# Cast

Bruno COUFFE	Jean-Pierre DARROUSSIN
Gilles BERGERAT	Denis PODALYDES (member of the Comédie Française)
Natacha GAUTHIER-STEVENS	Mélanie DOUTEY
Christine BARBIERI	Zabou BREITMAN
Philippe MULLER	Pascal GREGGORY
Pierrick BARBIERI	Bouli LANNERS
Marek	Frédéric BONPART
Damien	Dimitri STOROGE
Docteur VERCRUYSSSE	Samuel FERRET
Cloakroom manager	Richard CHEVALLIER
55-year-old executive	Michel TRILLOT
Young executive	Franck RICHARD
Assistant to Christine BARBIERI	Julie R'BIBO
Evaluator 1	Gautier ABOUT
Evaluator 2	Tadie TUENE
Coach Damien	Eric LARZAT

# Credits

Director	Mathias GOKALP	First Assistant Director	Mathieu VAILLANT
Writers	Mathias GOKALP Nadine LAMARI	Second Assistant Director	Amandine ESCOFFIER
		Third Assistant Director	Hélène CASANO
		Continuity	Caroline LELOUP
Producers	Fabrice GOLDSTEIN Antoine REIN Karé Productions	Sound	Laurent BENAÏM
		Boom Operator	Stéphane LE DALL
Associate Producer	Antoine GANDAUBERT	Sound Editor	Nicolas WASHKOWSKI
		Sound Mix	François GROULT
Director of Photography	Christophe ORCAND	Art Direction	Jean-Marc TRAN TAN BA
Editor	Ariane MELLET	Costume Design	Claire LACAZE
Composer	Flemming NORDKROG	Dresser	Charlotte DUBOIS
		Makeup Artist	Natali TABAREAU-VIEUILLE
Production Manager	Marianne GERMAIN	Hair Stylist	Milou SANNER
Unit Manager	Christophe GRANDIERE		