INTERVIEW
JAN KOUNEN

***The Shrinking Man* is a project that was initiated by Jean Dujardin. At what point were you brought in to direct?**

It was in the spring of 2023. Producer Alain Goldman invited me to lunch one day. We had worked together on *99 Francs*, but hadn't seen one another for quite a long time. And over lunch, he suggested I direct a remake of *The Shrinking Man,* with Jean Dujardin in the title role. As it turns out, the original film had made a huge impression on me. I'd seen it as a teenager, and still remembered it in great detail. Alain explained that Jean had dreamed about making this project for years, and had an agreement with Universal for the adaptation rights. Plus, a script had already been written by Chris Deslandes. It was a fairly dizzying proposal.

Did you immediately accept?

I obviously asked to read the script. Then I read the Richard Matheson novel. Once I accepted, I suggested that Chris and I collaborate on a new draft of the screenplay.

You've systematically written or cowritten all of your scripts over the course of your career.

Yes, I always do at least one pass at adapting it, because I need to set my own imagination into motion. I also like working with writers. The screenwriter is my first collaborator; we discuss every aspect of the film. It's ultimately the same job I'll then launch into with the other members of the crew – the production designer, the DP, the editor, the actors. You ask about their perceptions of the story, you adjust, you seek things out, you adapt to one another.

What were you attempting to adapt in that writing process – the novel by Richard Matheson or the film by Jack Arnold?

Once I discovered the book, I realized there were some extraordinary elements in the book that Matheson left out of the screenplay he wrote for Jack Arnold. We kept the narrative structure of the film and added some elements from the book that had been cut. By synthesizing it in that way, I saw its *mise en scène*, the idea that guided its writing. It wasn't about creating "a shrinking man," but "a man who lives in a world that's growing every day."

Can you explain that nuance to us?

It had to express the way our hero perceives things. We'd remain at his scale throughout the entire film, as if the film crew was shrinking with him. So that we'd perceive that expanding world he lives in, right along with him. In that way, the film would become a sensorial journey. That's what guided us throughout the writing process, because we had to stay with our hero. Once he's separated from his family, there'd be no parallel scenes about what becomes of his wife and daughter. We had to remain firmly attached to him. So all those elements forced us to write a script that wasn't very talky and was constructed around the very notion of perception.

The original film chose to tell the story of a couple. This time the narrative focuses on a family...

Yes, as in the Matheson novel, which was heavily focused on the father-daughter relationship. The Jack Arnold film has some memorable scenes that take place in a dollhouse, but you never understand why this childless couple would even have one! Our writing was really inspired by both the novel and the film. Our project is an adaptation of both of them.

How does one anchor a fable that's so American, and so 1950s in tone, in a context that's not only contemporary, but also French?

There's something a bit vague about where this story takes place. The most attentive viewers will notice, for example, that the license plates are not French. Let’s say it takes place "somewhere in the western world." As for the time period, what interested us was to talk about today, the world in which we live. We didn’t want a period film, something "in the style of," because that would have distanced the viewer. That's also why we changed the "why" of the story. There's obviously a mystery. We never really know why the hero shrinks. But the book, like the original movie, suggests a link with the atomic peril or a radioactive cloud. It was linked to the fears of the time. Whereas we center on ecological issues.

Did you imagine an actual reason why the hero was shrinking?

It had to remain a mystery in the story. But there's nothing stopping you from imagining something. In fact, I, myself, imagined something... but I won’t tell you what it was.

Once the rewriting and adaptation process was over, I imagine you had to think about special effects fairly quickly. How do you make such a film with the tools at our disposal in 2025?

Mainly by respecting the allocated budget! I went to see my former collaborator Rodolphe Chabrier, owner of Mac Guff visual effect studios, and we started to think. That was the first time I questioned the "how". We could have filmed Jean against a green screen and almost entirely reconstructed his environment in photorealistic 3D. But that was expensive, way too expensive. I wanted it to have a physical, organic quality, because that aligned with the subject of the film. So we opted for a hybrid system, filming Jean and the sets separately. We also used a very particular shooting tool, motion control. It's basically a computerized system that allows you to control and reproduce identical camera movements. We shot Jean with a moving camera, then recorded that movement, so we could reproduce it identically when we were shooting the sets. Then you simply merge those two images.

It sounds almost simplistic, explained in those terms.

Yet, it's staggering in its complexity. In our case, we had to reproduce each movement, factoring in the change in scale. Assembling each shot became mind-boggling, and we did more than 400 of them in motion control. It’s labor-

intensive, complex, and expensive. We had to design an animatic in advance – a sort of animated 3D storyboard – which took us almost two months. That was a decisive step in pre-production. It made it clear exactly what we were going to need, in terms of sets, props, scheduling... and therefore helped us come up with a very precise budget. It also helped us figure out what to cut, if necessary. In French industry terms, *The Shrinking Man* is a big movie, but given the complexity of the process, we were really in a tight spot, budget-wise.

Once you were on set, didn't the motion control logistics inhibit creativity and spontaneity?

No, not really. First, you have to learn to master the tool. After the first few days, you can give yourself some freedom within that framework. It also forces you to refine your *mise en scène*, which was an interesting exercise for me. And then there's the work of the actors, on set. You give them space, and you can never really know how things are going to play out. They'll challenge you, improvise, suggest their vision.

At first, *The Shrinking Man* functions as a medical drama. A guy finds out he has a rare disease, he sees doctors, and they say there's nothing science can do for him. It's a fairly detailed, very psychological genre that's hard to imagine you working in.

The moment you decide to make a film, you put yourself at its service. Stumbling into a world you don’t know is always exciting. And then, I don't think I really have a style. There may be motifs or sensibilities that echo one another, from one project to another, but I like the idea of a challenge. Style is a gaze, a dexterity that has no function other than to adapt itself to the story you're going to tell. And I know exactly where mine comes from. It was seeing Martin Scorsese's *The Age of Innocence* in 1993. He's a filmmaker I had loved for his violent, urban universe. And there he was, releasing a costume picture about New York high society figures in the 19th century. The film is visually sublime, and it really moved me. At that moment, I realized that a director could step out of his comfort zone, out of his universe, and remain profoundly himself.

That first act prepares us for what will later become the film’s major dialectical question: the acceptance of death vs. the drive to live.

Yes, after the medical exams and the impotence of science, our hero finds himself alone in his cellar. He'll have to fight against what's to come and his programmed demise. The film really functions as a metaphor for those diseases that gradually deplete us, and the way we act in response to them. There's a moment in our existence when we'll have to give everything up. It’s what connects us all, we humans. At some point, we'll lose our abilities, be they mental or physical: we'll shrink. So what drives us to continue, under those conditions? Well, there's this life force, an inner feeling that drives us to keep moving forward, no matter what, as if dazzled, amazed, by the mere fact of existing.

There's that shot of a butterfly facing our hero at the end of the film. They stare at one another, and they, indeed, seem to be amazed by their mutual existence. It sort of recalls the image of the first dinosaur in *The*

***Tree of Life*, which also seemed surprised to be there, living on this planet.**

That scene in *The Tree of Life* gave me a sort of metaphysical vertigo. You strip away all appearances and look at the situation – pure, naked. And there's a beauty in that. For me, it's an initiation. I tried to put that sense of an initiatory tale into this film. A sort of "Once upon a time..." And in that sense, Alexandre Desplat's score is there to support the character and counterbalance the bitterness, or even the violence, of the story.

It's also a film about survival – at times breathless, at times frightening, and constantly confronting existential questions. From the moment he's locked in that cellar, alone, incredibly small, the protagonist acts only to survive, to stay alive, driven by that inner drive: life. So he drinks, he eats, he fights with a spider, he swims with a goldfish... And there are moments when the uniqueness of his situation allows him to see marvelous things, things no other human has ever seen. Little by little, he enters a new world and adapts. He knows that no one will come looking for him where he is, and he creates a universe so he can go on living. His path will lead him to realize that the infinitely small is also the infinitely large. By agreeing to die, we can merge with the universe we're a part of.

It’s a vision that inevitably evokes the fetus in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. As if your work continually comes back to that film.

The fetus in *2001* is simply telling us that humanity's great obsession is death. How can we fully accept that? How can we transform ourselves to live in peace with it? There are so many cultures in which death, looked at, square in the face, via an initiation, becomes a path of awakening. When fear of death is overcome, you enter into another space, another state. And that’s what Paul, my main character, will experience. It’s an initiatory journey. The final meeting of our hero with the butterfly is a bit like that, too. It's there to remind him that he's following the right path. That he's managed to accept and to see the beauty in his journey.

We're always better off if we fully accept the notion of death, if we accept our own death during our lifetime. We can enjoy life and the present much more. It’s a film about acceptance and transcendence. That was also what the first film adaptation and the novel were about.

In fact, the film is dedicated to Jack Arnold and Richard Matheson, as well as Jules Verne and Georges Méliès.

If Matheson hadn't written the book, Jack Arnold wouldn't have adapted it for the screen. And Jack Arnold would never have made this film without George Méliès, while Richard Matheson would never have written it without Jules Verne. It's a dedication that refers to DNA sequencing. A chain of inspiration and talents that led to the existence of this film. We must pay tribute to the ancestors. Despite its cutting-edge special effects, we tried to give the film a "classic" patina. It's an object that knows where it comes from, even if designed with the tools of our time.

INTERVIEW
JEAN DUJARDIN

So you're the one at the origin of *The Shrinking Man* remake. Can you tell us how a film like this comes to life?

I've wanted to get this project made for a good ten to fifteen years now. I saw the original Jack Arnold film when I was young, but had sort of forgotten about it. One day I was strolling through the Fnac store and stumbled upon a rerelease DVD of *The Incredible Shrinking Man* in a stunning jacket. I bought it and I remember watching it three times in a row! Certainly, the running time is barely an hour and 20 minutes, but that was clearly a sign that something had clicked between the movie and me. I could feel what a strong role that would be to play. I wanted people to have compassion for this minuscule guy who goes through hell in his cellar. I mentioned the idea of a remake to producer Alain Goldman, off the cuff, just to get a feeling. And miracle of miracles: we got the adaptation rights! So I started looking around for talented people who could bring this film to fruition. Chris Deslandes as screenwriter, Jan Kounen as director, Alexandre Desplat as composer, and Marie-Josée Croze as my wife. Then the special effects company Mac Guff signed onto the project. It was such a pleasure to plunge into that collaborative undertaking, to join all those forces to make it happen.

A French remake of a huge Hollywood classic — that never happens. Were you aware of how unprecedented this project was?

Yes, I realized that when the rights holders asked, "Why in the world do the French want to rework this idea?!" They were really intrigued. To me, it seemed completely natural. We could visualize a project that was both incredibly spectacular and incredibly profound. We're living at a time when men are asked to deconstruct who they are, and I found that this story of a father who shrinks to the point that he winds up all alone, in his own cellar and back yard, echoed our contemporary world. And I didn't want to treat a subject like that lightly. The shrinking is clearly an allegory for the sickness in our own times.

Yes, despite its spectacular nature, the film also looks death squarely in the eye – something Hollywood and contemporary cinema no longer dare to do.

Yes, it would have cost them $80 million to make this film, so it would have needed a happy ending and trumpets blaring. That's not what we wanted to do. There's this notion in the film that our life is ultimately somewhat similar to this little guy's life. You're forced to spend your time hiding, sleeping, eating, plus avoiding hassles. But for him, the hassle is that damn spider, which is there and growing in proportion to his shrinking.

The spider is the main antagonist, just as it was in the original film. But there are also two moments of pure euphoria and emotion, facing other giant animals – the fish and the butterfly. How do you work with virtual collaborators?

They're just mental projections, nothing else. There's something in our brain that's quite wonderful. A great tool that allowed me to constantly believe in something. And if I believe in it, it may show on my face. And if a director is skilled enough to capture it, it works. That's all.

When you're facing the butterfly – amazed, overwhelmed, completely stunned by its beauty – don't they give you some sort of replica to play off of, so you can believe in it a bit more?

There's no time, no. I'm just staring at an X. They say, "Look up. Again. Stop! To the left. Stop! Come back a little to the right. Stop moving!" I ask, "What kind of butterfly is it?" "We don't know yet! It'll have circular markings on its wings!" "Okay, about what size?" "A range of three meters." "Okay, thanks." And then they blow a gust of wind in my face... and "Action!"

What a fabulous job...

(*Laughing*) Yes, yes, it's a blast. It's a blast because it's quite unique, in fact.

Another wonderful moment in the film is when your wife falls asleep and you're in the palm of her hand. Despite the strangeness of that moment, we can feel that love persists. Despite everything...

There was a somewhat similar image in a short story by Bukowski, "The Most Beautiful Girl in the City," that had a huge impact on me. We see a man shrink and become his wife's little "toy", and she was perfectly happy with that. That shot made me think of that. There's a bit of King Kong, too, but we'd have reversed the genders. That shot is indeed very beautiful. It really expresses the balance the film is after, between pure spectacle and an almost hushed intimacy. I wanted it to echo our lives. I wanted to constantly find allegories. I feel confident that people will wonder, "Hey, what is this about, beyond recounting the story of a man who's shrinking?"

From the moment you begin to shrink – meaning very early in the story – you can no longer shoot any of your scenes with your "actual" costars, Marie-Josée Croze and little Daphné Richard, because it's become technically impossible. That condemned you to act alone 90% of the time...

Yes, but that didn't really scare me, on the contrary. It's the first time I've acted, not with what I could see, but with what I was thinking. I had great fun inside my mind, as there was nothing in front of me, other than a blue screen and a pole with a tennis ball taped onto it. The advantage of working that way is that you become attached to the few things you do have. I even got attached to that huge 20,000 square-foot studio, because that was my geography. I knew where my aquarium was, my box, my window – all key elements in the story. I was essentially very comfortable in my detention. In those moments, you forget about one another. That's what I like most about my work. Being on vacation from myself. So I have no problem staying in that environment, which may seem strange, and believing in it. I play, just like a child in the park on Sundays. It's nice in that world. And it's very easy to stay there.

Even when you were shooting that very intense scene, where the real estate agent goes down to the cellar, can't hear your character's voice anymore and we realize that you've left the human world forever?

I'm comprised of everything I've experienced over the past 53 years. So there are things we file and spit out very spontaneously, just like that. Anyway, at that moment, I'm alone in this huge project. I'm practically not acting at all, yet I know my face must be expressing a lot of emotion. I don't know if the tears will come or not, if there there'll be a scream. I really don't know what will happen. In abandonment, I think there's survival and distress. And distress can be filmed; it's photogenic, even. It feels good to be unhappy sometimes. We're often happy to be unhappy at the movies.

When they're shooting with such technical constraints, with all these blue screens all around them, actors sometimes say that they, paradoxically, almost feel like they're working in the theater.

Yes, that's exactly right. In any case, we find ourselves working in conditions that are so different from typical film sets. We have lights, tennis balls, blue screens, stuff we don't even know why it's there, all around us... It almost seems like street performance, in the end. The advantage, on this project, was that we could see the sets they were projecting me onto "live", thanks to monitors and a somewhat more rudimentary form of digital superimposition. That helped, of course. You know, three months before we started shooting, we still didn't know if we'd be able to make this film. Using motion control, this sort of big robotic arm that allows you to reproduce camera movements... that's still a very complicated thing. Some films use it for three or four scenes. For us, it was practically for the whole film! It was good that we did it now, improvising, being inventive and creative and taking advantage of today's technologies. In five years, we'll be able to design the whole film in ten days, using AI. We'll inevitably lose a lot in that exchange.

The idea of shrinking was already present in one of your previous films, *Up for Love*, where you play a guy who's four-foot-seven and falls in love with Virginie Efira. Isn't there a kind of obsession emerging from your filmography?

Lots of people have made the connection between *The Shrinking Man* and *Up for Love*. I can obviously understand that, but I'm also always a bit surprised, because those two projects are so different. When I did Laurent Tirard's film, I was simply thinking that, if we're making a romantic comedy with Virginie Efira, we might as well set one small impediment. Toss a monkey wrench into the works. So they shrunk me to four-foot-seven. That's also why, in *The Shrinking Man*, I never appear at that height. I go straight from five-foot-five to 28 inches. Because I didn't want to reproduce the same thing, the same format.

The two films, indeed, have nothing in common, apart from that motif. Still, we sense that the idea haunts you. Have any leads?

All I can say is that I often imagine myself getting much shorter. When I'm bored during a meal, I think, "Hey, could I hide in this plate? How would I manage it?" The infinitely small must obsess me a little. Is that why I liked to hide as a kid?

So why not shrink? I wanted to go into my pencil case, to disappear. And now, in 2025, I find myself making a film about a guy who disappears in his back yard by shrinking. He becomes a molecule. Which, in a way, is sort of our collective destiny.

Your filmography is peppered with films out of the past: the *OSS* films, *Lucky Luke*, *Zorro*... a swashbuckler, a silent film, and now a remake of an old Jack Arnold movie. Do you have a desire to reconstruct the cinema of your childhood or your adolescence?

Yes, that's possible. There is a "playroom" aspect to some of my choices. A video library aspect. I cross paths with my childhood. But I also have a real need to alternate, because I need to work on what I miss. I try to move forward and progress in this profession. I've always thought that actors really get good at about 85. (*Laughing*) When I saw Jean-Pierre Marielle on stage — his timing, his controlled gaze, voice, placement. It was incredible. It was about guys who had traversed films, traversed playwrights, traversed themselves. That's what we're looking for. Making *The Shrinking Man* meant something like that to me. Like, "Hey, maybe you're progressing here, learning something..." In any case, this shoot will always stand apart from the rest. Apart in my mind.

After about thirty minutes into the story, you practically don't have another line of dialogue to deliver. Well, it's certainly not the first time you've been in that situation. But do you ever feel at a loss for words?

No, not at all. Ever since *The Artist*, I've said, "If I could only make silent films, I would." I find that marvelous. Because, in fact, anything we can act, we don't need to say. I'm pretty expressive, so I feel like you can take viewers very far without sacrificing a thing. In fact, when I discovered all these great silent films, like Murnau's *City Girl* or Vidor's *The Crowd*, I was surprised by the extreme subtlety and depth of the actors. It was in no way pantomime, it was very sophisticated.

Beyond the absence of dialogue, there's a very physical dimension to this role. A bit like *Cast Away* or *The Revenant*. Did you have to do any super-intensive training to keep up the pace?

Not that much, in the end. First of all, I run quite a lot every day, and the film demanded that kind of stamina. Most of all, I didn't want to pump myself up into a superhero physique. It's about a dad who repairs boats and finds himself immersed in the infinitely small, with all his fears as a father. And as a man. So I really liked not playing the "hero". If I felt tired, I used that. Shortness of breath, the same. Although, it's true, I did have to climb that somewhat shaky wall my character hangs from about fifteen or twenty times. I was very tired, but I knew why. And deep down, it's kind of rewarding. It's weird, but I feel like when things happen physically, I become more deserving.

Do you prefer the physical work or the mental work?

When I'm in my "playroom", as we used to say, they're all very physical. For *Lucky Luke*, I know I had a hat, a horse, and I needed to make tracks. *Zorro* had a lot of constraints – a cape, a sword, a hat, a mask. We'd say, "What a pain in

the ass this get-up's gonna be!" But, in fact, it was fabulous. *OSS* was very physical, so was *The Brice Man*. There's a clownish side, like a comic book character who has to have fun within the frame and jump around. Then, from time to time, you have to be able to stop. Sometimes, I make films, like *November*, where I'm totally enthralled with a director, a screenplay. And I search out another density. That's one of the beautiful things about this profession.

INTERVIEW
MARIE-JOSÉE CROZE

Can you tell us what brought you to this project?

It was quite a delight and very easy. Which is unusual. I was in the midst of promoting a film, and I posted a small photo of myself on Instagram, announcing the release of that film. Within minutes, I received a response from Jean Dujardin: "Hi, what are you doing from May to September?" So I replied, "Well, I think I'm shooting with you!"

So, are you very close?

No, we'd barely seen one another since we worked together on Nicole Garcia's A *View of Love*, in 2010. We'd just crossed paths at film events or parties. But we always stayed in touch, especially via the social networks. I've always had a great deal of affection for Jean, and I think it's mutual.

And what happened after your Instagram exchange?

Well, that's when Jan Kounen took over and asked me to meet him at a café. At that stage, I had absolutely no idea about the nature of the project. And I really liked going into it, like that, completely blind.

But you knew Jan Kounen, I imagine?

His films, yes, of course. But I had never met him. So we met at this café, and he explained that he was working with Jean on a remake of Jack Arnold's *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. So I started screaming! Right in the middle of the bar! (*laughing*)

But, why?

Because when I was little, that was my favorite movie! I watched it over and over, dozens... maybe even hundreds of times. It was constantly on TV in Quebec over the holidays. To be honest, I had two favorite films — that one and Franco Zeffirelli's *Jesus of Nazareth*. I wanted to watch them all the time. They really transformed my life. So finding myself in a remake of one of those films is a coincidence I'll never get over!

What did you like so much about the Jack Arnold film that you found in this version?

The subject matter, of course. A man confronting himself, his own mortality, his life force. I think, at a certain point in the story, the hero no longer really knows what he's living for. He's living because he has to live. And that's a question that's always fascinated me. Someone who intentionally leaps off the top of a building, their first reflex is to flap their arms in the void, as if their body were refusing its own death, while the brain is determined to bring it about. It's staggering, when you think about it. It's the idea of expressing that survival instinct, which we all have in our bodies, through a fable about a shrinking man that bowls me over in the Jack Arnold film. And that bowls me over, all over again, in Jan Kounen's film.

Between those two versions, the hero's wife character, whom you portray, has evolved considerably.

Yes, and fortunately. She didn't have much to do in the 1957 version. Here, she's much more combative, present, troubled. Plus, she's a mother, so that changes her perspective of what's happening. She has to protect her husband, but also their daughter. Soon realizing that things will not end well for him. She has greater perspective. So she supports him, taking great care to hold back her sobs.

It's her sense of courage that essentially distinguishes her, isn't it?

Yes, completely! In fact, courage is what bonds them. It's probably the cement of their relationship. When we were in preproduction, Jan, Jean and I clearly imagined these characters as very active people, who might share a passion for extreme sports, for example. They're good at facing adversity. That's why there's no pathos in the film. In the 1957 version, when the woman realizes that her husband is gone forever, she starts to scream and smash everything. My character absolutely couldn't react that way.

Were you immediately aware of the highly technological nature of the shoot?

Quite quickly, yes. They explained the composite and motion control systems they'd use to shrink Jean. So I also realized that we'd be shooting very few scenes together.

From the moment he begins to shrink, you would no longer be performing in the same space, is that correct?

Yes, precisely. We worked in two different studios, and were "reunited" in postproduction. We shot our scenes together until the moment Jean's character realizes that his shirt is a bit too big for him. Which happens quite early in the story. While we were shooting that scene, Jean and I were like kids, so happy to be reunited. We couldn't stop fooling around between takes. Then, after that, we had to approach our scenes in a completely different way.

So, most of the time, you were delivering lines to a figurine?

Often, yes. But Jean was also on the set, feeding me his lines. But he was out of frame, so I couldn't look at him. He'd get there two hours earlier every morning,

so he could be with me while I was shooting. And so we could rehearse a bit beforehand.

It must be hard to be in sync, under those conditions. What do you rely on to be able to do that?

It’s very technical. It demands skill. In general, your scene partner's response is the very ground you stand on. Scenes are like a staircase you climb. In this case, we had to find other strategies. Remembering my rehearsals with Jean was a good crutch, so I dove into that. Then we varied the tone a lot, from one take to another, so that Jan could synchronize our performances afterwards. Under those conditions, you modulate a lot. You try things, make suggestions. It was fairly exciting to explore, but it also allowed my worst flaw to appear...

Which is...?

I tend to never want to stop. I'd always like to do another take. And in a film as technically onerous as this one, time is always a precious commodity. The flip side is that it puts a very positive pressure on your shoulders. You know you won’t be able to do thirty takes. In a way, it reminded me of the energy I felt shooting my first films. Because back then, we shot on film, so we never did more than five takes! (*laughing*) *The Shrinking Man* was obviously shot digitally, but it sort of reminded me of another time. And that was quite exciting.

Which scene was the most complicated to shoot?

The "long take" we cheated, when Jean shrinks by about a yard in his armchair, as I rush around the living room, calling doctors. It's obviously an assembly of several shots, but it was done with such technical precision that it was extremely stressful to shoot. They constantly had to recalibrate the cameras, so everything was in sync. And then change costumes, hair, posture, tone. I was constantly wondering "What the hell should I be playing? Exhaustion? Determination? Impotence?" I was asking myself so many questions, I was afraid I'd lose my spontaneity. Then, when I finally saw the finished film recently, I was completely blown away by that moment.