THE PRINCESS OF MONTPENSIER

A FILM BY
BERTRAND TAVERNIER
1562. In France, during the reign of Charles IX, the wars of religion are raging...

Marie de Mézières, heiress to one of the kingdom’s greatest fortunes, loves the young Duc de Guise, known in the annals of history as le Balafré, “Scarface”. She believes he loves her back.

To increase his family’s prestige, her father, the Marquis de Mézières forces Marie to marry the Prince de Montpensier, whom she has never met.

The Prince is summoned by Charles IX to join the war against the Protestants. With the whole country turned into a bloody battlefield, he sends his young wife to Champigny, one of his most secluded castles, in the company of the Comte de Chabannes, his friend and former tutor. The Prince asks Chabannes to complete the Princess’s education so that she can take her place at court one day.

In unhappy isolation at Champigny, Marie tries to forget the passionate longing she still feels for Guise. Fate and the changing course of the war lead Guise and the Duc d’Anjou, the future Henri III, to stay at Champigny shortly after Montpensier has joined Marie there. In turn, Anjou falls in love with the Princess, to whose charms Chabannes has also succumbed.

A violent, passionate rivalry develops with Marie as the prize.

SYNOPSIS
What appealed to you and co-writer Jean Cosmos in Madame de La Fayette’s novel?

It was the chance to tell a love story that would be both lyrical and expansive. When we started the adaptation, our major concern was to bring out, in the context of the period, the depth of feeling and passion in the book, in all its naked violence. After Life and Nothing But, Captain Conan and Safe Conduct, Jean amazed me once more with the inventiveness, humor and sheer beauty of his language. His dialogue brings the period to life. It stirs the imagination—mine and that of the actors, who made it their own in a very modern style.

You worked with a cast of mostly young actors...

That was another important reason for wanting to make this movie. It gave me the opportunity to work with the first time with many of the actors. During the eight weeks of shooting, every day I told Michael Powell, I was aware about some action. They are no longer a screen behind which the writer hides. They have become a musical instrument on which the actor plays an entrancing tune.

We are given a glimpse of joy and human suffering of which we were completely unaware. The director stops worrying about costumes and the shooting schedule. He gives free rein to his imagination. For a brief moment, he is simply happy. I was happy. Very happy. I never felt like I was directing the actors. I watched them. They inspired me, carried me, and thrilled me.

It was exhilarating.

Your princess is a rebel who questions the world she lives in...

Marie de Montpensier is a very young woman who must learn about life at her own expense, learn to tame and channel her feelings, and make difficult and painful choices even though she is still a mere wisp of a girl. Throughout the shoot, Mahdia Thény delighted and amazed me with her performance, her beauty, her doing, and above all the intensity of the emotions she brought to the character. After acting in a production of Baby Doll with Melanie, Marie Chaumette said to me, She’s a Stradivarius. She’ll go way beyond anything you ask of her. She was absolutely right.
Just like the Princess, Chabannes refuses to accept preordained ideas...

Chabannes is the spine of the film. He’s the catalyst of the emotion and allows us to glimpse the different aspects of Marie. He reminds us of the great heroes of some of the literature of the time—teacher and warrior, mathematician and philosopher, fighting intolerance in all its forms. To understand his humanity and commitment to peace, we need to see how he confronted with the brutality of war. Lambert Wilson possesses every facet of the character and it is through his eyes that we understand the heartrending decisions facing Marie.

You offer a radically new representation of the Duc d’Anjou, the future King Henri III...

I wanted to break with the caricature handed down by history: he was a brilliant general with an inquiring, intelligent mind. Somebody once said he would have been a great king if he had lived in a better period. Raphaël Personnaz played him with a lot of presence, elegance and charm, perfectly capturing the character’s intelligence, ambiguity and caustic wit.

Whereas Guise and Montpensier are soldiers...

Guise is an out-and-out warrior. He represents brute force, courage and religious intransigence, with touching moments of sincerity and doubt. Gaspard Ulliel impresses us all his strength, violence, sensuality and occasionally sincere love. Compared to Guise, Philippe de Montpensier is profoundly honest and less ambitious politically. He falls in love with his wife after they are married and is swept along by this passion whereas Guise is subverted by his ambition.

Grégoire Leprince-Ringuet brings a lot of inner strength to Montpensier, with spectacular and surprising explosions of violence. On the very first day, I could see that he transcended every conventional aspect of the character.

Overall, your point of view is quite feminist.

I clearly take Marie’s side. She is torn between her education and what is expected of her, on the one hand, and her passion and desire on the other. She refuses to be the submissive wife. She wants to educate herself and embrace the world. Her desire to learn empowers her and allows her to resist.

You never give the impression it’s a period movie.

I wanted to be as modern and natural in the story I’m telling as I was in Safe Conduct and in The Electric Mist. I didn’t want to reconstitute a period, just capture its soul. For example, I didn’t want any pseudo-16th century music.

Although Philippe Sarde drew his inspiration from composers of the time, such as Roland de Lassus, we ensured the arrangements and harmonies were very modern by using a lot of percussion.

In fact, we ended up with a completely original formation of three baroque musicians, four trombones, seven double basses and cellos, and five percussionists. And no violins!
What was your first impression when you read the script?
My immediate reaction was that it was a wonderful portrait of a woman and a magnificent love story in various forms—passion between Marie and Guise, tender affection with her husband, the Prince, a philosophical and intellectual bond with Chabannes, and a certain ambiguity with Anjou. The script was very faithful to the original text, although Mademoiselle de La Fayette’s novel is remarkably chaste. There isn’t the passion and the newlyweds’ discovery of sexuality, which are present in the film.

The Princess is caught between conflicting forces...
Absolutely. The Queen, Catherine de Medici, sums it up perfectly when she tells Marie that she is torn between her integrity, which makes her want to be a good wife, and her desire and sensuality, which she experiences with her lover. It’s a contradiction that constantly preys on her. For example, she never received a formal education, but she’s a bright young woman who needs to make sense of the world in which she lives. In order to exist, she needs to be able to express her ideas and opinions.

Would you say she’s manipulative?
I thought so at the beginning. I pictured her as a seductress who knew exactly how to get what she wanted. With the scenes where she learns to write, I thought it was to send love letters to Guise. Then I realized I was on the wrong track. In fact, she’s totally unaware of her beauty and powers of seduction. She’s never calculating.

What was the atmosphere on set?
What I found very positive was that there were two generations rubbing shoulders—big names and young actors. It could have led to different approaches to the dialogue, for example, but on the contrary, there was genuine harmony. Personally, I loved the rhythm and musicality of the dialogue, everything that seemed old-fashioned on the page became perfectly clear and self-evident on set.

MÉLANIE THIERRY
(MARIE DE MONTPENSIER)

INTERVIEW WITH

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FILMOGRAPHY

DUMAS
by Safy Nebbou (2010)

ONE FOR THE ROAD
by Philippe Garrel (2009)

CÉSAR AWARD 2010 FOR MOST PROMISING ACTRESS

ABYSS
by Mathieu Kassovitz (2008)

LARGO WINCH
by Jérôme Salle (2008)

PU-239
by Scott Z. Burns (2006)

DENY by Sally Potter (2013)

ONE FOR THE ROAD by Philippe Garrel (2009)

César Award 2010 for Most Promising Actress

BABYLON A.D. by Mathieu Kassovitz (2008)

LARGO WINCH by Jérôme Salle (2008)

PU-239 by Scott Z. Burns (2006)
How would you describe the Comte de Chabannes?

Chabannes is a man of action, an old warrior who sees the horror and barbarity of war at close quarters and withholds from all that. He’s not in an ivory tower reflecting on the state of the world, but he’s a very wise human being. The great thing about Bertrand’s approach to the film was that we began by shooting the combat and riding scenes. That gave me a hook to hang the character on without even thinking about his psychology, which is often a trap for actors. I was able to find who he was simply in the way I fought and held a sword.

What’s it like working with Bertrand Tavernier?

He tells you exactly what he expects. I have never before seen a director on set close his eyes to “listen” to a scene. He is relentless on the dialogue and the way he wants it spoken—with precision and humility. At the same time, he clearly loves being with the whole crew. I really admire the way he feeds off everybody’s energy and channels it back.

What is his relationship with his actors?

Bertrand has a passionate, almost physical relationship to the actors. They are the focus point of the way he directs, but he insists on keeping it simple, without affectation. He notices immediately when an actor veers toward grandiloquence. We actors tend to overact to ease our conscience when we get the impression we’re not doing enough, but the richness of the story works for us. Bertrand is always there to remind us of that.

FILMOGRAPHY

FLAWLESS by Michael Radford (2007)
PRIVATE FEARS IN PUBLIC PLACES by Alain Resnais (2006)
PALACE, HÔTEL by Patrice Leconte (2005)
MAURICE REVOLUTION by Audi & Larry Madai (2004)
SAME OLD SONG by Alain Resnais (1997)
JEFFERSON IN PARIS by James Ivory (1995)

INTERVIEW WITH LAMBERT WILSON (COMTE DE CHABANNES)
Gaspard Ulliel

INTERVIEW WITH

GASPARD ULLIEL
(DUC DE GUISE)

How would you compare your character, the Duc de Guise, to his rivals for the Princess’ affections?

The Duc de Guise was one of the main protagonists in the wars of religion, craving power and ready to do anything to open up a path to the throne, which was not available to him by birth. He is a natural, charismatic leader who constantly asserts his independence and liberty of action while rejecting any superior authority. In my mind, I had the image of a lion—the king of the jungle who does exactly what he wants. Compared to his rivals, I guess you could say that Montpensier embodies virtue, Anjou brains and Guise brawn. Marie is torn between the three points in the triangle.

How did you prepare for the shoot?

I trained for the fight scenes for two months with Alain Figlarz, a martial arts expert who mostly works on contemporary thrillers and action movies. Bertrand wanted the film to stand out from traditional cloak-and-dagger movies, so the action scenes were choreographed in a very modern style.

How does Bertrand Tavernier work with his actors?

On set, he’s the happiest man in the world. It’s very touching to see the sparkle in his eye. He’s tireless and generates the same bubbling enthusiasm in the whole crew. At the same time, you sense his experience and complete control over everyone: he’s precise and stubborn when he needs to be, while giving his actors plenty of freedom. He cuts to the chase because he knows what he wants, how to get it and when he’s got it. As a result, he works fast, doesn’t break scenes into tiny segments and doesn’t hesitate to move on to the next shot after a single take.

FILMOGRAPHY

NAURAL DESIR
by Peter Webber (2007)
PARIS, JE T’AIME
by Gus Van Sant (2006)
A VERY LONG ENGAGEMENT
SUMMER THINGS
by Michel Blanc (2002)
THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE WOLF
by Christophe Gans (2001)
Can you introduce Philippe, the Princess de Montpensier’s husband and legitimate love?

Philippe de Montpensier is a warrior of royal blood with a rank and reputation to maintain. So, he’s a fighter, but paradoxically it’s his marriage that makes a man of him. His relationship with Marie enables him to blossom and grow. I played him as a man battling with his unrequited love, and that allows the character to take on an extra dimension in the story. Obviously, his marital situation hurts him but the anger he feels is never mean-spirited.

Chabannes is a kind of mentor for him and there is a lot of affection between them...

When I read the script, I was fascinated by the way the authority in their relationship is constantly changing hands. When the Prince issues an order the Comte de Chabannes obeys, but he remains Philippe’s close advisor. I kindly-Julien Ogier. Lambert Wilson and I had a great time playing the confidence scene, in which their dialogue weaves a path between authority, suspicion and affection. It’s a rare pleasure to play a scene with so many facets and nuances.

What was it like working with Bertrand Tavernier?

Bertrand is extremely affectionate with his actors and his overall gentleness drives people to give the best of themselves. Let your muscles do the talking is one of the most simple, perspicacious and incredibly effective things any director has said to me. Bertrand’s other great talent is in developing genuine team spirit while creating healthy competitions. I really like seeing that I’m not alone in front of a camera. Bertrand listens to everyone and acknowledges people’s different skills and talents.
When you read the script, what image did you have of the Duc d’Anjou?
For a long time, he was considered precious, or even homosexual, because he liked to wash, eat at a table with a knife and fork and didn’t like to fight—even though he won two important battles by directing operations from his tent all the time. This kind of behavior from a noble of his rank was considered highly suspicious, but Bertrand Tavernier wanted to avoid caricature while retaining the sophistication of a man who went on to become King Henry III. By basing the character on historical fact, we made the Duc into a man of enormous restraint, but prone to occasional, spectacular rages that totally unnerve everyone around him.

Is it difficult for a young actor to get into the skin of a character living in the year 1560?
Bertrand keeps his actors on their toes because we know from the start that we’ll only get three or four takes tops. That forces you to be extremely natural and solid, while avoiding any kind of affectation. With Bertrand, the actors are never static, spouting lines, but constantly caught up in the action. As a result, the dialogue becomes fluid and you never get the feeling you’re in a costume drama.

Do you think the Duc d’Anjou is sincere in his feelings for the Princess?
I think so, yes, but he’s a reserved man, who conceals his feelings and sensitivity behind his wit and humor. He also has to shoulder crushing responsibilities at a very young age, which toughens him up. With Anjou, everything is wrapped up in the art of conversation, which he fully mastered by the time he became King of France. In that respect, he’s the complete opposite of the bestial violence embodied by the Duc de Guise.
For anybody who stays a while (and writing a film is a relatively protracted affair), the 16th century is boggy, bloody terrain, of which I personally only had hazy schoolboy recollections—the wars of religion, the St. Bartholomew’s Day massacre, Catherine de Medici, widow of one king and mother of three others. That was pretty much it until I read Madame de La Fayette’s short novel, in which I found the passions of the great names of France, Henri de Guise, Philippe de Montpensier and Henri d’Anjou, converging on Marie, a beautiful vibrant and secretive young woman.

These are not circles I usually frequent. How would I convey the delicate fluctuations of soulful tensions to audiences in the thrall of special effects? Especially as the protagonists are adolescents—a 20-year-old King, rivals of the same age—and, except for Anjou, all undisciplined but quick to draw their swords to avenge a sidelong sneer, while Catholics and Protestants are so essentially similar that only the color of their scarves tells them apart.

My only ally, an intermediary between the periods, theirs and ours, was François de Chabannes, twice the age of the others, more enlightened in the modern sense since he betrayed both fundamentalisms, and, in terms of reading and thought, on a higher plane although of lower rank.

It was through him that Bertrand and I, following on from François Rousseaou, who blazed the trail, found the linguistic and behavioral equivalences. It was through him that we adapted ourselves to the story, especially as his hopeless love brought us unerringly back to Marie, a prisoner of her caste, education and codes of respectability, and of her appetite for light and liberty.
La Princesse de Montpensier was originally published anonymously, in 1662, probably because informed observers recognized in this tale of passion the story of another liaison, between Henrietta of England, wife of Louis XIV’s brother and the Comte de Guiche. Nonetheless, in her first novel, Madame de La Fayette, took care to cover her tracks. She set the story not at the court of the Sun King but a century earlier in the reign of Charles IX, against the backdrop of a country torn apart by the wars of religion. All the characters had truly existed even if the author changed some of their names. All that she made up was the love story: a very young woman, Marie de Mézières, who has only respect for her husband, Philippe de Montpensier, secretly loves another man, Henri, Duc de Guise. For a time, she believes that the distance between them and the company of the loyal Comte de Chabannes will remove temptation. But fate brings Guise to her door and her virtue is powerless to resist.

Betrayal by the man she loves and the disaffection of her husband are her punishments. As for Chabannes, the discreet confidant and perfect friend, he eventually sacrifices himself for the woman with whom he too has fallen passionately in love.

Although Madame de La Fayette’s La Princesse Cléves has often been adapted for the screen, the same is not true of La Princesse de Montpensier. It struggled in the wake of La Princesse de Cléves in terms of book sales and impact on the collective imagination. When 19th century readers rediscovered a period, which under Bourbon rule had been renowned for its moral depravation, the court of Henri II, the focal point of the action in La Princesse de Cléves, seemed more glorious and more representative of the image they had of the 16th century than that of his second son, Charles IX, which recalled recent wounds that had not yet healed. By capturing the splendor and prosperity of a country at the peak of its glory, illuminated by Renaissance talents, Cléves represented the objective to aim for. Set in a time of division, intolerance and massacres, Montpensier depicted a past to be forgotten and a future to be avoided. In the 19th century, La Princesse de Cléves was reprinted 28 times, La Princesse de Montpensier not at all.
Although the 20th century went some way to repairing this injustice, it did so very late. Even so, Bertrand Tavernier and Jean-Cosmes’s decision to adapt this short novel did not stem from the desire to recast a forgotten story into its rightful place, and even less from the idea of using a historical setting to deal with contemporary issues, as Madame de la Fayette inadvertently had to avoid censure. By choosing this text, they sought first and foremost to tell a story of passion and love in both its most personal and universal form.

To make things easy, or artificially modern, they could have set the story in the present day. They chose not to vulgarize it, but this choice implied depicting a relatively unknown period without the film becoming a history lesson. La Princesse de Montpensier is anything but a history lesson. Bertrand Tavernier and Jean-Cosmes deliberately shielded away from dates and political events that constituted little or nothing to the story. Charles IX never appears and Catherine de Médicis, his mother, has only one scene. The film does not set out with the wild and self-defeating ambition of retelling the wars of religion. Although there are skirmishes and battles, they are there to illustrate the characters’ personalities and reflect on their passions. In La Princesse de Clèves, the focal point of the action in the film does not set out with the wild and self-defeating ambition of retelling the wars of religion. Nonetheless, the period had to be reconstituted and made visible. They achieved this by writing several scenes, which discreetly, without interfering with the story, provoke the impression of making contact with a way of life, a daily reality. Scenes like Marie de Médicis’s wedding ceremony at Chantilly, the tracker passing through, and Marie learning to write, efficiently underpin the portrayal of a society with its habits, pleasures, constraints, curiosities and violence. The weight of the sets never obstructs our view, the hose and farthingales don’t handicap the characters, but they offer us the spectacle of a world that the history books often hesitate to reconstitute and that Madame de la Fayette does not extensively describe either. A color here, a hint of a scent there, a gesture or a posture somewhere—treasures of subtle, multi-faceted messages which, beyond the strength of the characters, story and production, strangely and satisfyingly convince us that it’s possible to capture on film the essence of a period dating back over four centuries.