



ISABELLE MADELAINE AND ÉMILIE TISNÉ
PRESENT

EVA GREEN MATT DILLON



PROXIMA



A FILM BY
ALICE WINOCOUR

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INTERVIEW WITH ALICE WINOCOUR DIRECTOR

•Where did you get the idea for PROXIMA, a singular and ambitious project in the context of French cinema?

Since I was a little girl, I have been fascinated by space. I read very widely on the subject and I was attracted to the whole environment. I started meeting coaches who train astronauts, I visited training facilities, and I came to realize just how much work and how many years it takes to learn to separate from Earth. That is rarely seen in movies. As with all my films, I am drawn to a particular universe, and on the way there I realize that what's driving me is a very private feeling. To bring out the personal, I need to reach for very distant worlds. The private aspect here is the mother-daughter relationship, since I myself have an 8-year-old daughter. I wanted to explore the process of separation of a mother and daughter, which resonated with the separation of the astronaut from the Earth.

•Did you watch space movies over again, if only to do something different?

When I latch onto a subject, I usually try to see all the movies ever made about it. With regard to space, however, American movies have swamped

all others, and my goal was to make a European space movie. That explains our collaboration with the European Space Agency, to tether the film to a documentary base. In Hollywood pictures, the astronaut verges on superhuman, but my research with ESA showed me there was nothing more human and fragile than an astronaut. Going into space means experiencing human fragility and realizing just how attached we are to the Earth. In that respect, Tarkovsky was more important than Hollywood movies.

•Indeed, PROXIMA is more earthbound than spatial. For example, the film shows the very physical ordeal that the astronauts' bodies endure.

QuAt the core of my films, there is always the relationship with the body. I wanted to show the mother-daughter relationship in its physical dimension. For example, when they're swimming at the hotel, as if in an amniotic pool. Also, I wanted to show that the human body is not cut out to live anywhere other than Earth: in space, it grows 10-15 cm, our airways are not made for life up there. The intensive training sessions were a point of intersection between the documentary aspect and my cinematic obsessions: the body

as guinea pig, strapped into machines and centrifuges... At play here is the transmutation of the body, like in Cronenberg's movies. Sarah (Eva Green) must separate from the Earth and from her «normal» Earth body. She must become a «space person.» When we see her disinfecting her body with iodine, or when they make the mold of her body for her seat in the rocket, there is the sense of her becoming a space creature.

•PROXIMA is a distant galaxy and also what is close to us, like Sarah's daughter. The film seems to play on the contrast between near and far, the intimate and the cosmic, which are both opposites and mirrors of one another.

Yes. PROXIMA is in fact the closest galaxy to ours. In the script and on screen, I wanted to contrast the infinitesimally small and infinitesimally big. To bring space into daily life. Sarah is a superhero and mother, in a single body. The cinema does not often show those two states in a single person, as if being a hero and mother were incompatible. Female superheroes are always detached from issues of maternity or femininity in daily life. That's the feminist aspect of the movie—showing that a woman can be both

a mother and a high-flying professional. A woman at NASA told me that the best practice for becoming an astronaut had been being a mother. Because a mother constantly multitasks. A female coach at ESA told me that male astronauts talk very proudly about their children, whereas women astronauts tend to hide the fact that they are mothers, as if they are scared of losing credibility. There is this prevailing idea—a pure social construct—that a child is primarily a mother's responsibility.

•The film tackles head-on everyday machismo in the space industry.

Those scenes might seem to verge on caricature but they are still below real-life experiences female astronauts told me about. It's a male environment, conceived by men for men. For example, spacesuits are weighted on the shoulders because men have strong shoulders, whereas women are stronger in the hips. Women have to work twice as hard to gain entry to this man's world, but they mustn't make their presence felt either. The film pays tribute to women who have to reconcile all this, which is exacerbated, obviously, in the business of space exploration. In movies, heroines tend to be ethereal, except perhaps Erin Brockovich.



•**The final credits point out to the audience numerous female astronauts they have probably never heard of.**

On that point, I received lots of very moving messages from women working for NASA, saying how important it is that a film at last shows that it's possible to be a good astronaut and a good mother. When I started working on this project, people said there were no female astronauts. Or, if there were, they must be lesbians! We had a long way to go. PROXIMA is a film of liberation and conciliation: Sarah completes a journey in the face of personal obstacles as a woman and mother. She overcomes her guilt complex. Her little girl also takes flight. She frees herself from the maternal cocoon.

•**The documentary aspect in PROXIMA is impressive. How did it go with ESA in terms of getting permission to shoot, and working alongside real scientists and astronauts?**

We started working with ESA at an early stage. When I was still writing the script, I hopped onto a train to Cologne and settled in at their facility there. French astronaut Thomas Pesquet was preparing for his first flight. I met Claudie Haignéré, the first French woman astronaut. We joked that Thomas and Claudie were the film's fairy godfather and godmother. We met up regularly when I was writing. There was an obvious parallel

between the worlds of cinema and space exploration. In both instances, the preparation is very long, with the goal a distant dream, and the public sees only the tip of the iceberg. Just like on space flights, there's a whole crew of skilled people working behind the scenes on movies. We shot at real facilities—ESA in Cologne, then at Star City near Moscow. They are highly secure, almost military-grade environments. You need all the right passes way ahead of time. There are checkpoints everywhere. Our crew received the same accreditation as scientists working there. At Star City, we filmed in the prophylactorium, totally immersed in the places where real-life astronauts trained. They bought into it, sharing with us the reality of their daily lives during training. I was reminded of the Greek gods, who had superpowers and, at the same time, very human weaknesses that everyone can relate to. We also worked with male and female coaches. I wanted every line of dialogue to be spot-on. Everything you see in the film is based on real processes at ESA, which aim to improve the resistance of the human body to long-distance spaceflight. There are no models or reconstitutions. All the locations are totally authentic.

•**Star City and Baikonur seem slightly superannuated, with their old-fashioned decorations and faded carpets...**

Yet the Soyuz system is currently the most reliable method of putting an astronaut in space. American, Japanese and European astronauts all go there because that's where the technology is most advanced. Every space flight takes one Russian, one European and one American.

•**PROXIMA points out that international cooperation works far better in space exploration than the geopolitical sphere.**

That was one of the exhilarating aspects of the shoot, and the international factor was mirrored in the makeup of our crew, which mixed together French, Russians, Americans, Germans and Kazakhs. That mix of nationalities made us feel united in our shared humanity.

•**The liftoff scene, when the rocket takes off, is awe-inspiring. The audience has a physical sense of being wrenched free of the Earth. It's amazing to see it filmed so close-up.**

I wanted to make a physical film. We worked hard on the sound, too, to feel every sensorial aspect of the experience. Space exploration makes us realize how fragile we are, how much we



belong on Earth. Thomas Pesquet told me that when he saw the film and the liftoff, he felt emotions that he had not felt during his actual liftoff.

•If the documentary and scientific aspect is linked to the locations, machines and spacesuits, the personal, intimate aspect of the story is driven by the actors, most notably Eva Green. How did you choose her to play Sarah?

I did not want a mater dolorosa. Eva has a combative edge, which I liked. The screenplay was structured like the separation of the stages of the rocket: there are stages in the separation from the Earth as well as between mother and daughter. The real liftoff protocol includes confirmation of «umbilical separation,» so the metaphor is not a figment of my imagination alone. Eva's fighting qualities can be those of a mother, just not the kind of mother typically depicted in movies. Eva possesses a strange air that makes it no surprise to find her cast in Tim Burton movies. I like people like her, who don't fit the mold. I can see myself in them. Eva is also a bit of a «spacehead.» All the astronauts I met had a geeky side to them—they are «space people» even before they begin training. They are not like everybody else. They are out-there. And I liked the idea of going with Eva to a place where she had never been before. She is used to gothic environments, but here I whittled away

all that. Physically, in the way she moves, she makes a very credible astronaut. Eva is a fighting machine and that sat well with her character. Sarah and Eva's path in the movie is to open up to emotions. Like a director with her film, an astronaut lives only for the mission, even if it involves a wrench from the family. Eva/Sarah is in that equilibrium between mission and emotion, a precarious position to the extent that emotion puts the mission at risk at one point. We rehearsed very hard with Eva and little Zélie Boulant-Lemesle.

•Whose performance is astonishing, both childlike and aware of what is at stake for the adults. How did you find her?

After a vast casting operation, auditioning nearly 300 young girls. We needed a girl who could act, who had chemistry with Eva, and who could travel to Russia and Kazakhstan with us. What appealed to me was that Zélie also had that geeky aspect of a child who didn't fit any mold. I was reminded of the little boy in Edward Yang's *Yi Yi*. Like him, I wanted to pick out humanity in the tiny details of daily life. That was the cinematic gamble I took with this movie: attaining human truth through an immersive process rather than demonstrative effects.

•Another pleasant surprise is the presence of Matt Dillon, playing a not-always likable character.

That's the difficulty of his character. I didn't want to stumble into the simple dichotomy of hero and villain. Like Eva, Matt has an odd glint in his eye—in his general manner, actually. He has strange depth. I knew he could play the big macho at the beginning, while showing that it really wasn't him. That's another reality for astronauts: to reach these physical and intellectual heights, you need supreme self-confidence, arrogance almost. I knew Matt could make the character likable despite his flaws. Between his character and Eva's, an ambivalence emerges, affectionate friendship, and that's why I needed a seductive actor. I have worked with Vincent Lindon and Matthias Schoenaerts, and I realize that I like masculine actors who have that violence inside.

•Lars Eidinger conveys a softer, more open masculinity. Less cowboyish.

His character is a nod toward the genuine rivalry that exists between astrophysicists and astronauts, between those who stay on the ground and those who take off in the rocket. It's two different worlds, like cast and crew in movies. Astronauts have more bling, a greater public profile, while the scientists stay behind the scenes. When I called Sylvestre Maurice, the





astrophysicist with whom I wrote Lars's role, he'd say, «Can you call me later? I'm on Mars tonight.» These people are out-there, and fascinating to be around. For Lars's character, given that ESA is in Cologne, I needed a German actor. I had seen and liked him in plays directed by Thomas Ostermeier. Also, he knew Eva from working with Tim Burton.

•**Sandra Hüller has come to prominence in comedic roles, but you shine a more serious light on her.**

Sandra is an actress I love. It's so impressive, how she get across a whole range of emotions. Like Lars, her background in Germany is in theatre, whereas Eva is a movie actress and Alexei Fateev has a Russian theatre background. Several acting traditions coexist in the film. Sandra plays Wendy, who is a kind of godmother-figure. Like Matt's character, she needs to be loved, while maintaining the cold facade that comes with her job.

•**And the Russian actor, Alexei Fateev?**

I chose him when we organized auditions in Moscow. He played the police officer in *Loveless* by Andrey Zvyagintsev. There is something very gentle about him. In one scene, he reads a Mandelstam poem, and that's exactly what he was like on set—reciting poems, singing. He was a soothing presence, with a very Russian profundity.

•**You worked with your usual DP, Georges Lechaptois. Is it important for you to have a crew you know well?**

I like to work with the same people. It's like family. Very often, I have an array of images in my mind—in this case, ranging from *Yi Yi* to Tarkovsky—and prepping with Georges helps me to digest those references. Afterward, we're pretty free, adapting to circumstances on set. For *PROXIMA*, we had to work within a very precise timeframe, with daylight in Russia coming up early in the morning, and going down fast at night.

•**With Lechaptois, you came up with some memorable shots, such as the reverse shot of the liftoff, with Lars Eidinger's moved expression and Zélie Boulant-Lemesle's awestruck face—two emotional states that capture what the audience is feeling.**

We didn't shoot that scene in Baikonur because we didn't have all the extras we needed. We shot it on an airport tarmac near Moscow, with a huge boom lift taking up a light that gradually illuminates the watching faces until the darkness returns, like an actual liftoff. A rocket taking off provokes intense and paradoxical emotions: exhilaration, tears, reflections on the human condition... It brings to mind the Judeo-Christian notion of going to heaven, combining symbolic death with a real risk of death. I didn't make up the letter that astronauts leave behind

for their loved ones. It's part of the protocol, which stems from the idea of putting your life in order before you leave.

•**The final shot with the horses is very beautiful. Where did that idea come from? What was the thinking behind it?**

I had seen wild horses on my first location-scouting trip to Baikonur. I was fascinated, so I wrote that scene. On the shoot, it wasn't so easy. We were due to meet with Kazakh cowboys who received accreditation for the Cosmodrome, but they fell sick, so we had to find other cowboys outside of the Cosmodrome. Sitting on the bus with our camera, waiting for wild horses to appear, felt absurd. Suddenly, we glimpsed them in the distance and we rolled camera. The horses symbolize the little girl's imagination, and the idea that she remains attached to the Earth while her mother has just taken off for the stars. The horses are the Earth. They also represent a form of wildness, anti-conformism, that is sometimes peculiar to children. Finally, for the girl, the horses represent emancipation from her mother's hold. Like her mother, she has come a long way to accept her mother's departure. Her mother's mission was part of her daily life. She is pleased for her that the takeoff went smoothly. There is a kind of conciliation at the end of the journey.



INTERVIEW WITH EVA GREEN *ACTRESS*

•How did you join the PROXIMA project?

Alice just sent the screenplay to my agent. I was blown away when I read it and I immediately wanted to get on board!

•You had seen Alice Winocour's previous films?

Yes. I really enjoyed Augustine, and the singular, audacious world that Alice creates. Maryland was powerful and sensitive, too. Alice likes extreme, complex situations, and excels in exploring her characters' inner torments.

•What particularly appealed to you when you read the screenplay?

Its originality. With space exploration as the backdrop, it's a compelling environment, which the public only knows from the outside looking in. Above all, the film is a credible, moving, very human and very modern story, which shows the turmoil of a woman torn between her passion for her work as an astronaut and her love for her daughter. I found that tension and inner conflict really enticing.

•As regards the astronaut aspect, what prep did you do? Read books, watch films about space, talk with female astronauts like Claudie Haigneré, train with the European Space Agency? Or did you choose to arrive on set like a blank canvas?

That's not an option for a movie like this one. As far as I am aware, no other film shows the astronauts' pre-launch preparation with such realism. Like many actors, I feel compelled to immerse myself in my character's world before I arrive on set. Especially, in this case, since her world is so foreign to me. Alice guided me very closely throughout prep, giving me books to read and introducing me to female astronauts, such as Samantha Cristoforetti and Claudie Haigneré. They are both exceptional women, pioneers in a very male world, and they shared their experiences with me very generously, and also talked about their doubts and personal struggles. Being a woman, and being directed by a woman, gave our encounters a special strength. French astronaut Thomas Pesquet makes an appearance in the film, and he advised us on various technical aspects. Alice and I nicknamed him «our godfather.»

Also, I had the privilege of making several trips to the European Space

Agency in Cologne and Star City in Russia, which is an amazing facility—a full-scale town devoted solely to space exploration. I realized that it is a job that requires passion, willpower, mental faculties and physical aptitudes way beyond the norm. Astronauts are exceptional people, superheroes. «No pain, no gain!» I found their self-sacrifice—their relentless pushing back of their own limits—absolutely fascinating.

•How did you work on set with Alice Winocour? What direction did she give you on the astronaut aspect of the role?

Alice knows exactly what she wants. It was a genuine pleasure and wonderful stroke of luck to work with such a passionate, committed and exacting although sensitive director. We both share a love of a job well done. We are ultra-perfectionists.

I met up with little Zélie, who plays my daughter in the movie, on several occasions to get to know each other better and develop a real sense of trust, a real bond.

•And the private side of the character, as a woman and mother? How did you work on that with Alice and Zélie?

I must admit I was intimidated by Zélie at first, but the more we rehearsed before the shoot, the deeper we connected. Zélie is a beautiful soul, with fizzing imagination and a great sense of humor.

•What was the most difficult part for you?

Perhaps trying to reconcile the warrior side of the character, who confronts a very masculine, competitive world, with the tenderness of a mother. Isn't that the fate of a lot of women today as they try to combine career and family life, devoting themselves equally to each?

•Do you see PROXIMA as a feminist film?

Yes, in the sense that it highlights the audacity of a woman who dares to follow through on her passion. It is still taboo to take a year out from raising your child to fulfill your dreams. It is only acceptable for men, and even then...

•What was it like working with your international co-stars, Matt Dillon, Lars Eidinger and Alexei Fateev?

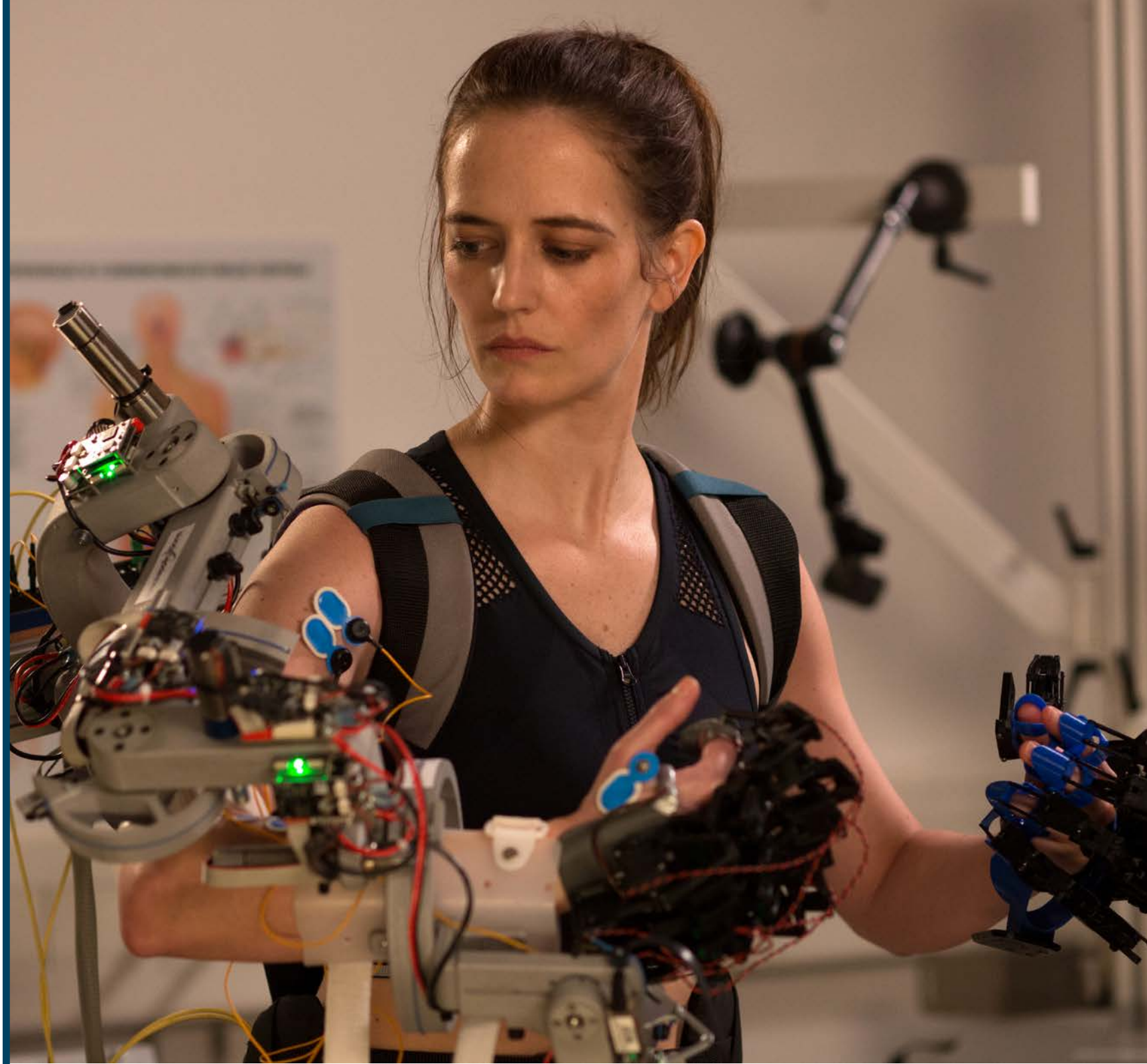
Matt, with his impressive, virile physique, was perfect for the role of Mike. He immediately put all his scene partners at ease on set. Alice was looking for a German actor to play my character's ex-husband. I had seen Lars in several productions directed by Thomas Ostermeier, and suggested his name to Alice. Stroke of luck, he was available. He's one of the best actors I know. I'm a huge fan. Alexei doesn't speak much English unfortunately, but he's a very fraternal, pure and humble man. All the Russians who worked with us on this project were incredibly welcoming.

•Did shooting in real-life facilities alongside astronauts and scientists, at ESA and Baikonur, change your perception of space exploration?

The job we do allows us to discover fabulous worlds. Shooting this film entirely on location, I was awestruck by the astronauts' training facilities at ESA in Cologne and Star City near Moscow, and by the Baikonur base where the rockets launch. It's an amazing environment, humans and technology combining in the greatest challenge of all time.

•You have worked in Europe, Hollywood, and independent American movies—both auteur and big-budget, and sometimes the two combined, like with Tim Burton. Did you get a sense, while shooting or watching PROXIMA, of this movie pulling together various film worlds you have encountered? Or as a totally new experience in your career?

First of all, it was a pleasure to act in my mother tongue, without the need for a dialogue coach, which adds pressure and restricts your freedom as an actor. Whether it's a small or big-budget movie, every film is a unique and new experience. My job as an actress remains the same, however, both prior to the shoot, in preparation and rehearsal, and on set. This film is up there as one of my most intense personal and professional experiences.





CAST

SARAH LOREAU	Eva GREEN
STELLA	Zélie BOULANT-LEMESLE
MIKE SHANON	Matt DILLON
ANTON OCHIEVSKI	Aleksei FATEEV
THOMA	Lars EIDINGER
WENDY	Sandra HÜLLER

CREW

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Alice WINOCOUR

Screenplay

Alice WINOCOUR

With the collaboration of Jean-Stéphane BRON

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Editor

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