Beloved

directed by Christophe Honoré
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France / 2011 / Color / 2.35 / 135 min
From Paris in the 60’s to London’s modern days, Madeleine and her daughter Vera waltz in and out of the lives of the men they love. But love can be light and painful, cheerful and bitter.

An elegy to femininity and passion with musical outbursts.
There are two love stories being told in Beloved: two generations, a mother and a daughter, both unable to contemplate a life of loneliness. The first story reads like a legend. It begins during the inarguable Golden Age of love: the 60’s, with the sexual revolution and women’s liberation movement. Followed by the second story, the 90’s, a life feared of commitment and the AIDS virus.

I belong to the second story. I belong to the generation that discovered love in the time of AIDS, a time when precaution was proclaimed a dogma and when death was a shadow that hung over all our moments of abandonment. I pictured a glorious era, an illusion no doubt, in which the people you fell in love with, the people you desired, had not yet become threats to you. For a long time I believed that only my parents had known true love, while I could only love halfway, crippled by mistrust and terror. But in the end, I decided my love stories were surely as valid as theirs. The impossibility of loving carelessly in no way diminished our attachment or passion… even if that passion was to adapt in uncommon forms. With Beloved, I would like to examine ‘that magical search for happiness that no one can escape’.

In my first feature-length film, I built a sequence around one song, Lola by Jacques Demy. It was a complimentary sequence, insignificant to the plot. It was my own self-indulgence as a movie fan, something that allowed me to pay tribute to Jacques Demy, the filmmaker I have to thank for introducing me to cinema. I have since then filmed Love Songs, in which I tried to find my own way of articulating a fiction around a series of songs. I love the spirit of musical comedies: No one ever whines or complains. There is always the possibility that a lyrical moment will come to redeem an every day tragedy.

Four years have passed and I have found an urge to apply a musical form to an emotional rich canvas again. It is a story that takes place over half a century ago. Again, I want to indulge in right-handed lyricism, as I follow these characters that are immune to nostalgia, draw their energy from actions and live for the moment. Their songs will either them moments of reflection, places of refuge where they can live their intense, fleeting emotions to the fullest, without being denied their on-going search for untrammelled weightlessness.

I am weary of historical reconstructions and would therefore rather race through the last half of the Century: hence the terse, rapid writing of the screenplay. Whether in terms of lighting or of direction, I want all the sequences to bathe in the charm of a ‘vibrant and beautiful present’. It is not my intention to mesh each individual trajectory with History, nor to recreate an Era that, when all is said and done, is so close and yet already so far away. What I propose is a search for lost time, a crystallisation of multiple moments. And while I do admit that this is more the approach of a novelist than of a screenwriter, I firmly believe that cinema has the power to transmute all those disparate elements into one single fiction, carried forward in a momentum of joy.

Christophe Honoré
The songs in this scenario are by Alex Beaupain. We have known each other since adolescence and he has been the one who has composed the score to all my films. He is obviously one of the essentials of this project. Writers Adam Thirlwell and Milan Kundera were indirectly the perfect companions to help write the screenplay.
Christophe Honoré on “Beloved”

The Title

We found the title, “Beloved”, fairly quickly as the film is centered on people in love. What makes them endearing - sometimes fearful - is that they’re constantly uncertain about the other person’s feelings. And the question of whether they’re “beloved” remains unanswered. This title wasn’t the first one we chose though - the one we preferred at first was “Imprudence”, but that was a bit too “Kunderian” - especially as part of the film takes place in Prague, and as the title of Milan Kundera’s book “The Unbearable Lightness of Being” would also have fitted the bill! The imprudence I’m referring to was like a token of freedom that was possible at a certain period. Madeleine, the mother, has been imprudent throughout her life and throughout her love affairs. Her generation was prepared to pay the price for that kind of imprudence, and she herself was ready to encourage her daughter Vera to follow the same path. Except, Vera was no longer allowed that choice, because, at a certain moment, the cost of imprudence became fatal.

The Time

“Beloved” begins in 1963 and ends in 2008. Yes, it’s a long time: forty-five years! This idea sprang from a desire to be more novelistic, to follow the characters over a long period of time, to throw myself into research - not of Proustian “time past” (!) but of the time that passes and obliterates nothing. Yes, the characters of Madeleine (Catherine Deneuve) and Vera (Chiara Mastroianni) both have a great capacity for love, but in a way they’re true to their love stories. And the film is true to a certain concept of French cinema, true to my way of working with actors - and working with some of them film after film, like Louis Garrel, Ludivine Sagnier, and now Chiara too. The beginning, in the 60s, is joyous and colorful - it focuses on women’s legs, accepting the reference to Truffaut’s “The Man Who Loved Women”.
The Time cont...

The question was how to communicate the passing of time through the characters and their feelings, without getting over-involved in reconstructing a period. That was a real challenge. The vintage style has a certain appeal, but can easily result in a sort of fashion museum. It was fun to portray the 60’s - the beginning is like a ballet, a kind of prologue that leads you into the film. After that - in agreement with director of photography Rémy Chevrin - I decided not to characterize each period. The 70’s, the 90’s, and the turn of a century are bathed in the same kind of light. Likewise, with costume designer Pauline Chauvagne and set decorator Samuel Desvres, we worked on things that don’t go out of fashion, things that are transmitted without us realizing it from one period to the next, in terms of clothes, furniture, accessories... The family memory of a “contemporary” house contains layers of different periods, from ten, twenty or thirty years before. For me, there was the idea of grasping the relativity of our relationship to time; the late 90’s to the eve of the year 2000, which was the last century but seems so close. We’re talking about a film that encompasses forty years, that accepts them fully, that deals with things that may still be distant but resemble our lives. This is a sort of “mixed-blood” relationship to time, a time that is a mix of lightness and sadness, a time that endures then moves on, so quickly. For all these reasons, we wanted the reconstruction work to be discreet, very discreet. It’s the women who reflect the change, the onward march of time is mostly apparent in their make-up and hairstyles. I wanted to work on blondness. I wanted Chiara-Vera to be blonde, like her mother Catherine-Madeleine. Then Vera’s hair is brown again, and that corresponds to a darker period. Something about blondness, lightness has been lost. In 1998 we’re in London, and then in 2001 in Montreal. There’s a leap in time, and we tried to communicate the fact that there’s no such thing as a representation of “today”. Today is always nourished by references to yesterday, that’s how I imagine my films. I like them to be nourished by previous films… I don’t carry the pretentious notion that “today begins this morning”.

The Space

Paris, Prague in the 60’s, London in the 90’s, Montreal in the early 2000’s…. These journeys breathe life into the film, but they’re not there for touristic purposes. When Madeleine arrives in Prague, she crosses a street where the Russian tanks are having a parade for just invading Czechoslovakia. She hardly sees them. She’s there to get her husband back… When Vera’s in Montreal to meet up with the man she loves, it’s an unusual, anxiety-filled night, the night of September 11th… Feelings travel through space, so we didn’t feel the need to show fourteen shots of Big Ben to signify that we’re in London - we’re in London simply because the people are speaking English! I didn’t want to fetishize about places - the film is fetishistic enough as it is! The shoe fetish was particularly important! Shoes - by Roger Vivier, in other words luxury shoes - are objects of covetousness for the young Madeleine, objects that are so precious in her eyes and so attractive on her feet that they condition her future to a large extent!
Before filming with her, I felt a fascination for Catherine Deneuve that was obviously related to my love of cinema, but we should remember that she’s not just an icon, she’s also an immense actress. I can attest to the many interesting suggestions she made and to how much she enjoys acting with others. Especially in this film, in which she worked with two partners who weren’t actors, partners who had the important responsibility of playing her husbands - Milos Forman and Michel Delpech, who were both petrified at having to measure up to her, who turned out to be excellent, and whom she spent her time reassuring. In addition to that, I had an unusual proposition to make to Catherine Deneuve: to present her at different ages in her life, and to ask an actress to incarnate the Deneuve of the 60’s. I already had Ludivine Sagnier in mind, I talked to them both about it at the same time, and they both agreed. Ludivine was overwhelmed by the idea, of course, but not Catherine with considerable panache, she readily agreed on having her younger-self played by someone else. When I gave her the screenplay to read and told her it was for the role of Madeleine today - without specifying which "today" - she said: "So when do I start?". The concepts of time and age were rather vague to her, and this sort of indecision, that was so much like "real" life, was sometimes very disturbing and beautiful. For example, Catherine said to me: "I’ve no idea how I’ll play this scene, Christophe", and I answered: "Don’t worry, it’s Ludivine who plays that scene". And I found it comforting that Catherine and Ludivine were aligned, in a sense, in their acting, in their complementary conception of the character of Madeleine, in the way they each played her, one of them bringing her youth to life, the other her later years. I think the transitions between periods and actresses happen fairly naturally - the character owns them a great deal. I took this "dual incarnation" to extremes by shooting a scene I was determined to include, in which Ludivine and Catherine meet, Ludivine being like the ghost of Catherine’s youth. The scene might have seemed cruel, but it isn’t, thanks to Catherine who manages to keep the perfect distance - an elegant vivacity in the face of nostalgia. There’s no fooling Catherine Deneuve.
Vera and Chiara

The osmosis between Ludivine Sagnier and Catherine Deneuve is further complicated—and completed, of course—by the presence of Chiara Mastroianni in the role of Madeleine’s daughter Vera. Yes, of course, Catherine and Chiara have a real mother-daughter relationship, with everything that implies! But as far as their profession is concerned, they really enjoy acting together, surprising each other… They were both hoping for a real encounter that would bring them together. An encounter of this kind had been experimented by André Téchiné, and especially by Arnaud Desplechin, but Catherine and Chiara had very few scenes together in “A Christmas Tale”, and I think this time they were finally given the “natural” encounter they’d been hoping for: being what they are—a mother and daughter—and acting that. And I’m glad to have been able to offer Chiara the role of Vera, because in “Making Plans for Lena”, I asked her to do something particularly difficult for an actress—to play a character who says “No”, who refuses. In this film, Vera asks but gives too—and gives more than she can receive. This allowed Chiara to play with her humor and sensuality, with her ability to switch from a delicious lightness in the scenes with Milos or Louis, and suddenly become a woman destroyed by love when she’s with Paul Schneider, ending up as a tragic character. The film is based on two main characters, Madeleine and Vera. The character of Madeleine was constructed on the personalities of both Ludivine and Catherine, each of which nourished by the other, whereas Chiara had to take on the many facets of her role by herself!

The Songs

After “Making Plans for Lena”, I really didn’t expect my next film to be a musical. I just intended to ask Alex Beaupain for one song, as a sort of “thank you”. He’d composed the songs for “Love Songs” prior to shooting, but in this case I called him while I was shooting a scene of “Beloved”, and said: “It would be better with a song”… but just one! Then just two, just three… that’s how we ended up with twelve songs! They fit into the continuity of the action—they replace written dialogues, which disappear to make way for them. The songs aren’t big, they’re more like inner monologues, they’re the force that opens the door to lyricism. When you make a film about love, which is the case here, what better way than a song to express the lyricism of intimacy. Especially as Alex and I know each other so well that his music is perfectly attuned to the way I want to convey feelings on screen.
The Feelings

I don’t believe in playing “clever” when it comes to feelings; you have to respect them, by constantly avoiding sinking into sentimentality, and deliberately maintain certain lightness in order to express the present moment. By using feelings, my aim is to talk (in what I hope is not too symbolic a way) about two generations – my own, and that of my parents – with their own vulnerability, oddly enough, tends to be an attribute of the younger generation. I wanted to show that they could crack, and – rather frighteningly – that the older generation is powerless to protect them. I’d feel very uncomfortable presenting a sociological discourse, holding forth the transition from the post-war boom years to the period of anxiety in the wake of 9/11. I’m recounting forty years of French society, but as impressionistic as possible, even though the film features the invasion of Czechoslovakia, the AIDS era, terrorist attacks, and the end of carefree days. In the epilogue, Madeleine says: “I don’t believe in happiness, but that doesn’t stop me from being happy.” Perhaps that’s what we all aspire to: not believing in happiness, but being happy all the same.
Alex Beaupain
Composer

Alex Beaupain, born in Besançon in 1974, is a singer-songwriter and film score composer. He acquired an early taste for culture, music, film, graphic novels and literature from his schoolteacher mother and railwayman father, and during his childhood spent holidays and camps in a children’s home, spent a year in Nancy before going to Paris to study at the Institute of Political Science. In 1998, he joined a number of musical bands including a band called ‘Les Ressorts’. He has composed songs and music for a number of films, including Christophe Honoré’s, including Seventeen Times Cécile Cassard (2002), In Paris (2006) and Love Songs (2007). He also wrote the score for Gilles Marchand’s Who Killed Bambi? His first album, entitled Garçon d’Honneur, was released by Naïve in 2005, and it inspired the writing of Christophe Honoré’s musical Love Songs, whose screenplay was built around it. Beaupain’s latest album “33 Tours” was released in October 2008 and, like the score for Love Songs, was produced by Frédéric Lo. Beaupain is also working on an operetta to be staged in 2012, and is currently working on a new album due for release in April 2011. The tour will be produced by ASTERIOS.

Christophe Honoré
Filmography

2002
Seventeen Times Cécile Cassard

2004
My Mother

2006
In Paris

2007
Love Songs

2008
The Beautiful Person

2009
Making Plans for Lena

2010
Plan de Rith

2011
Beloved
Crew

A film by
Christophe HONORÉ
Composer
Alex BEAUPAIN
Director of Photography
Rémy CHEVRIN
Production Design
Samuel DESHORS
Costumes
Pascaline CHAVANE
Sound Design
Guillaume LE BRAZ
Editing
Chantal HYMANS
Produced by
Why Not Productions
France 2 Cinéma
Sixteen Films
Negativ
With the participation of
Canal +

France

Cast

Madeleine 2
Catherine DENEUVE
Vera 3
Chiara MASTROIANNI
Madeleine 1
Ludivine SAGNIER
Clément
Louis GARREL
Jaromil 2
Milos FORMAN
Henderson
Paul SCHNEIDER
Gouriot 2
Michel DELPECH
Omar
Jaromil 1
Rasha BUKVIC
Vera 2
Clara COUSTE
Gouriot 1
Guillaume DENAME
Dustin
Dustin SEGURA
Madame Passer
Zuzana KRONEROVA
Frère Jaromil Prague
Václav NEUZIL
Mladka
Pavel LÍRKA
Zuzana ONIFRANOVA

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