

LES FILMS VELVET PRESENTS

A FILM BY

STÉPHANE DEMOUSTIER



29. Venice
International Film
Critics' Week



OLIVIER
GOURMET

VALERIA
BRUNI TEDESCHI

CHARLES
MÉRIENNE

The greatest pressure is winning

40-LOVE

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(TERRE BATTUE)

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WITH

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SYNOPSIS

Jérôme, a senior executive, has just left his company. Determined to never work for anybody else again, he attempts to set up his own company, come what may, even ignoring the reluctance of his wife Laura.

Ugo, their 11 year old son, is a tennis player and budding champion. To reach his goal, he must make it into the Roland Garros national training center.

Just like his dad, he's willing to do whatever it takes to make it. Together, Ugo and Jérôme will come to realize that all rules can't be bent in the quest for success.

AN INTERVIEW WITH STÉPHANE DEMOUSTIER

Directing a first film often amounts to a recasting of personal matters, whether consciously or not. Was that the case for you?

Yes and no. An autobiographical film wasn't my goal, even if there are a number of situations in the screenplay that are very personal and bring me back to what I experienced and witnessed as a child; things that have remained with me to this day. That's why the film is a lot like me. But the actual idea for the film came from a widely-covered news item from about ten years ago: it had to do with a father whose son was a very good tennis player. [SPOILER ALERT] However, in order to guarantee that his son would win key matches, the father would dissolve a powerful sleeping drug in his opponents' water bottles. One of them died. That story made a great impression on me.

Why?

Because I was a serious tennis player when I was a child and played a great deal of tennis. I won the league championship title a number of times (I come from the Nord region) and I was a semi-finalist in the French national championships at the age of 12. It was the ante-chamber to pro tennis with a key question: whether to pursue a career or not? I didn't. However, I am well aware that the person I am today was shaped by this period in my life. And so, the news item spoke to me directly, even if in the end it just triggered the idea and afterwards I reinterpreted it to fit my story.

What was the original story missing?

Paradoxically, the news item seemed too caricatural and consequently didn't have enough depth to turn it into a full-fledged screenplay. The story needed to be given some perspective. It seemed to me that it wasn't about sports being a world unto itself, but the by-product of a bigger picture,

something like another, greater arena where domination is played out. I started with the idea that tennis could be seen as a reflection of our society, and the son's experience as a counterpoint to the father's. This film describes their respective paths: two characters who are very close emotionally, but who will need time to understand and come to terms with one another. This involves similarities and echoing trajectories as well as splits and disruptions that allowed me to develop themes that interest me such as transmission from one generation to another and success.



The movie starts off on a rather dark note: the father has just lost his job. He is nearing fifty and his future seems seriously compromised. And yet, he is smiling, practically radiant. How do you explain his attitude?

In part it has to do with the role society forces him to play, because it would be unthinkable to show any weakness. He has to be a winner and the character conforms to this societal expectation. Also, staying optimistic is his nature. In reference to his profession, his enthusiasm, passion and energy



are intact. That's what allows him to get moving again. He is already seriously contemplating the new business he is going to create, for which he immediately starts the footwork, as he is absolutely convinced it will work. I hope that the audience will want to believe in its success as much as he does.

We can also think that he lacks clear-mindedness, that he is naïve in a way...

The character is in danger but he cannot let self-doubt interfere with what he is aiming to achieve, so he reacts the only way he knows how in order to ward off any less than positive thinking. That's his response to the situation. We can look at it coldly and believe that he is blind or going down the wrong path. But what moved me and makes me believe in his redemption, is that the character isn't inert, he's proactive and trying to make things happen.

You outline the father's distress in touches, without using today's high unemployment rate as a social context, as if it were beside the point.

Indeed, it is beside the point. The father's distress is existential, not economic. He lives in a time period, and belongs to a social class for which one's social status is vital. He's been trapped for years in a vision of success as others see it. He's fulfilled the social model of the accomplished business man and family man. But what happens when this model starts to crumble?

What I felt was important and meaningful to this story was the way the protagonist and those around him perceive his social downfall - in other words, his drop in ranking. Hence the connection between the son's dream like a leitmotiv - to train one day at Roland Garros - and the father's breakdown when his own project fails.

The way you approach the business world rings very true. As though you did field research in order to write the screenplay. Was that the case?

I come from this same provincial milieu in the Nord region of France. Many people in my family, my father to begin with, worked for large retail companies. Often self-taught, success for them came at the end of a lengthy process. They climbed up from the bottom of the ladder, one rung at a time, nothing was ever a given. They had to constantly prove themselves and submit themselves



to the tyranny of the daily sales figures. There is a solid form of violence in the great psychological pressure they were subjected to. Yet my father loved it. He felt that there was grandeur to this profession. He sincerely believed that retail chain stores made consumption accessible to a greater number of citizens. I remember as a child, on vacation with my father, we would stop and visit shopping malls. They were his churches and museums!

Your film communicates this passion very well, as well as the blindness it can generate...

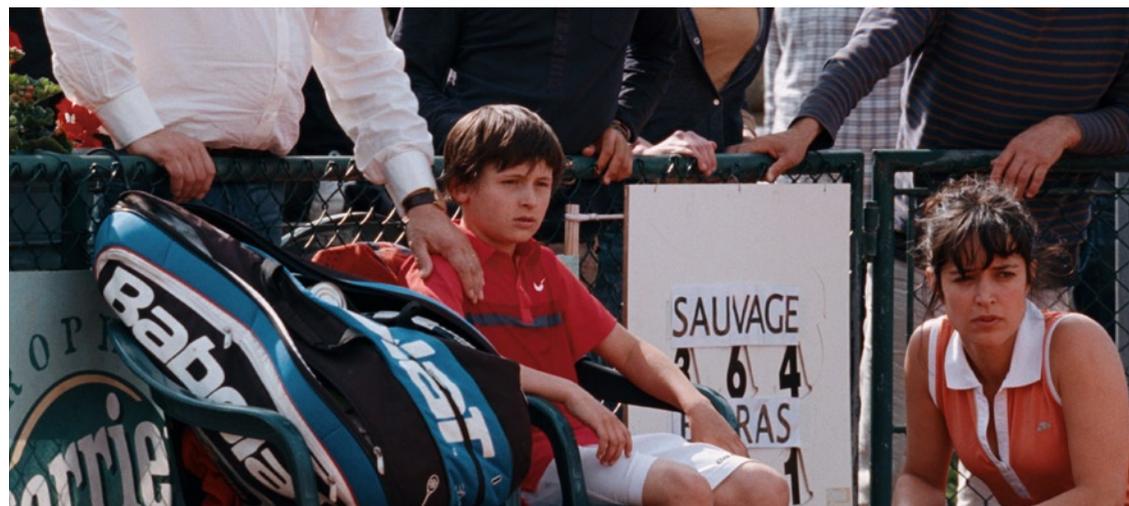
I hope my depiction isn't condescending. And I especially hope that the father doesn't come across as a victim of the system or as some nut case entirely disconnected from the real world. On the contrary, he has perfectly integrated the social codes. Jerome doesn't hesitate to resort to identity fraud in order to obtain the figures and statistics that are so important to him; he also turns out to be highly cynical when it comes to the future of the employees of the store he is getting ready to buy. I preferred to depict Jerome's boldness as well as his dark side. He isn't an innocent lamb faced with the big bad capitalists. That would be overly simplistic.

His son, Ugo, must face his father's failure and then his parents' separation. That's a lot to face and yet he seems to overcome these obstacles without suffering too much. Why?

Ugo's reaction is to protect himself. He immerses himself in tennis, where he excels. He is also caught up in an upward spiral of success, which in his eyes is the best way to thwart his father's downward spiral. I think children take what happens to them as a fact. At first, they simply take things in. Then they find a way to express how they feel, often through a gesture or an act, just as Ugo ends up doing so violently.

The parents' separation comes as a sudden twist. One day the wife announces out of the blue: "I'm leaving you." Why did you decide to treat it this way, as a complete surprise?

Her announcement is brutal, but everything that leads up to this decision is very real. It can be felt through snatches of situations where the audience understands that as her husband gets increasingly involved in this dead-end project, he forgets the existence of his wife. So she doubts herself, she worries, and finally she pulls away from him. An insidious rift slowly tears the couple apart. I used



ellipses or off screen techniques, which help the action move forward. I took this chance because cinema offers this possibility. It seems to me that after their separation, as soon as we see the wife again, we understand that she is liberated from this weight, that she has found a certain sparkle - she's living again.



[SPOILER ALERT] Contrary to the news item that was at the genesis of this project, it's the son, and not the father, who tries to poison his opponent. Why?

This configuration seemed more interesting to me because it better reveals how complex reality is. As for the gesture in itself, I think it comes about for a multitude of reasons. The child wants to win at all costs, that's the first explanation. But the fact is something radically violent had to occur for the father, who was completely lost in his own problems, to take a good look at his son, and come to realize the extent of his own errors. From that moment on, each individual will take the other into consideration, and try to protect the other by taking the blame. Without talking it through, they finally find each other again.

With Oliver Gourmet in the role of the father, the choice of who to cast as the son was capital.

A year before the shoot, I made a 40-minute-long documentary called «Les Petits joueurs [Young players]» about a group of 11-year-old children who were taking part in the French national tennis championships. It was akin to a preparation for the film, where I was confronting what I had written, essentially from my memories, with reality. During the editing process, I realized that these kids had several profoundly remarkable qualities in common: a solid sense of responsibility, intensity, and rigor. These children had interiorized the inherently violent side of competitive tennis, which requires that at the end of each match there is a winner that will continue on and a loser who is eliminated. A sole survivor. I had the conviction that in order to reach a certain reality, to approach this life or death-like intensity, I had to choose my actor from among the «apprentice-pro» tennis players. It happened naturally, as my wish to make this film was also linked to my desire to film tennis. So I needed a player.

How did you end up choosing Charles Mérienne to play the part of Ugo?

I had spotted Charles Mérienne in the documentary, where you only catch a glimpse of him. When I started the casting process, I wanted to meet him. There was something very obvious about the choice. But at the same time I wanted to pursue a casting process that would be as wide ranging as possible. I saw 350 young tennis players throughout all of France. In the end, I came back to my first choice. Charles is a very sharp-minded child with a great deal of character. I liked that he was both shy and audacious. He has an intelligent look in his eyes. I also liked that his face wasn't conventionally beautiful. During the shoot, he very quickly demonstrated that he was rapid, lively, and focused. Qualities that come from practicing tennis of course (he's the Burgundy champion in his category) and made me very happy with the choice I had made.

Oliver Gourmet as the father proves once again to be an exceptional presence that rings unbelievably true. How did you direct him?

I'd written the role for him. I was very lucky that he accepted. We didn't have any time to prepare because he came right off another film. And on top of it, he had injured his leg and was in a lot of pain, but it never occurred to him to give up the film. He needs to work and he

can't stop. This frantic need to work is something he shared with his character, Jerome. Olivier had perfectly understood the part and everything was very simple with him. Even his injury was something he used for the role.

He gave the character a human side, a depth, while others would have had the tendency to express it as ridiculous or depreciating. Two and a half months into the editing process, the rushes could still surprise me. He simply expressed flawless truthfulness and sincerity without ever overacting. And then in relation to "his son", he used such intelligence to strike the right balance with Charles. He had to earn his sympathy and trust, but also maintain enough distance so that the child remained focused during the entire film shoot. In that, Olivier went well beyond his role as an actor to be a constant ally to the project. For the rest, there is no doubt that Olivier's presence in the cast influenced the Dardenne brothers in their decision to coproduce the film. That also was a beautiful encounter. The brothers followed every stage of the process with great attention and kindness.

Valeria Bruni Tedeschi plays the role of the mother. It is just a supporting role with only a few scenes. Why this choice?

Although we see the mother very little, she plays a central role. The part required an actress who could make the audience immediately understand the fascination she could hold for her husband. An actress who immediately makes her mark. And I wanted someone who shines, but at the same time is fragile. And for that, Valeria was the ideal performer, both superb and fragile. She was marvelous at playing uneasiness or their rift, as well as the "renaissance" after their separation.

You pay special attention to the places and the scenery. They are an integral part of the story, further emphasizing its authenticity.

I had the scenery in mind from the moment I started writing the screenplay. I shot the film in Villeneuve d'Ascq, where I grew up. The house is the same as the one we lived in, on the same street. Most of the tennis courts and shopping malls also come from my childhood. I filmed in 35mm and cinemascope, in particular, to lend a certain lyricism to places that we usually pay no attention to because they are so visually unattractive (shopping malls) or marked by conventional televisual codes (tennis courts). Above all, what I wanted wasn't necessarily a beautiful image, but a truthful one.





Photo Bertrand Jacquot

Stéphane Demoustier was born in Lille, northern France, in 1977.

His short films have been selected by numerous film festivals and awarded prizes in France and abroad: **FILLE DU CALVAIRE** (2012), **BAD GONES** (2011), **DES NŒUDS DANS LA TÊTE** (2010), **DANS LA JUNGLE DES VILLES** (2009). In 2013, he made a documentary, **LES PETITS JOUEURS**, describing the sporting life of 3 children taking part in French tennis championships in the 10-11 age range.

40-LOVE (TERRE BATTUE) is his first feature length film.

CAST

Jérôme	OLIVIER GOURMET
Laura	VALERIA BRUNI TEDESCHI
Ugo	CHARLES MÉRIENNE
Sylvie	VIMALA PONS
Sardi	JEAN-YVES BERTELOOT
Gerets	SAMUEL LOUWYCK
Police lieutenant	HUSKY KIHAL
Police woman	SANDRINE DUMAS

CREW

Directed by	STÉPHANE DEMOUSTIER
Screenplay	STÉPHANE DEMOUSTIER
Screenplay collaboration	GAËLLE MACÉ
Cinematography	JULIEN POUPARD
Editing	DAMIEN MAESTRAGGI
Sound	EMMANUEL BONNAT JULIE BRENTA VINCENT VERDOUX
1 st Assistant Director	GUILHEM AMESLAND
Script	VIRGINIE PRIN
Casting	KRIS PORTIER DE BELLAIR
Casting (children)	LUCILE JACQUES and MARIE-STÉPHANE IMBERT
Production Design	PAUL ROUSCHOP
Costume Design	ANNE-SOPHIE GLEDHILL
Location Manager	FRÉDÉRIC MORIN
Production Manager	CHRISTOPHE GRANDIÈRE

Production

LES FILMS VELVET - FRÉDÉRIC JOUVE

Associate Producer - MARIE LECOQ

A co-production

LES FILMS DU FLEUVE - JEAN-PIERRE ET LUC DARDENNE

Executive Producer - DELPHINE TOMSON

ANNÉE ZÉRO - STÉPHANE DEMOUSTIER / GUILLAUME DREYFUS

ARTE FRANCE CINÉMA - OLIVIER PÈRE / RÉMI BURAH

RTBF (BELGIUM TV) - ARLETTE ZYLBERBERG

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