

LIE WITH ME

A FILM BY OLIVIER PEYON



Film Francophone
D'ANGOULEME

Adapted from Philippe Besson's book Arrête avec tes Mensonges, originally published in France by Editions Julliard in 2017, which won the 2017 Maison de la Presse award and the 2017 Psychologies Award for inspiring novels. English language translation, Lie with Me copyright 2019 by Ringwald Inc.



SYNOPSIS

Upon agreeing to be the brand ambassador for a famous cognac celebrating their bicentennial, novelist Stéphane Belcourt returns to his hometown for the first time in many years. Once there, he meets his first love's son, Lucas. Memories come rushing back to him: irrepressible attraction, bodies becoming one in the heat of desire, a passion that can never be revealed... His first love's name was Thomas. They were 17.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

What made you want to adapt Philippe Besson's novel?

When I was asked to adapt the book for cinema, I still hadn't read it. I thought it was simply a coming-of-age love story and I didn't see how I could renew the genre as so many films had already been made about the subject. Once I'd read the book, however, I thought the love story was as magnificent as it was tragic, but what especially caught my attention was the other part of the book which tells the story of Philippe Besson's encounter with Lucas, his first love's son. In the end, it is something that Lucas says that convinced me: *"You should have seen the look in his eyes. It is at this precise moment that I became certain that it had all existed: my father had been in love with a boy."* I wanted to tell the story of this son who is trying to discover his father's secrets and to make this encounter the main focus, the center of my film.



The book is turned towards the past while I wanted to highlight the present.

Despite the tragedy, there is something very soothing about your film.

I felt the same way when I read the book, but it is also true that I wanted to tell the story of an appeasement – or how this encounter will allow the writer and the son to put words to the father’s silence, and to complete the puzzle that both of them were holding missing pieces to, which would heal their wounds before moving forward.

How did the writing stage go?

Adapting this novel for the screen was fascinating but complex because Phillippe Besson’s writing is very introspective and action is reduced to the bare minimum: in his book, the encounter between the novelist and the son is practically a pretext for telling the story of what happened in the past. I had to dramatize this encounter and build a narrative for these

two characters so that what is happening in the present day would become the main storyline.

Although this part of the process took a lot of time, it was also a period that allowed me to free myself from the book as Philippe Besson had given me *carte blanche*: “*The greatest betrayals make the best adaptations,*” he’d told me. It is also true that literary codes and cinematic codes are very different. One sentence in a novel may need several scenes to be depicted in a movie, and conversely, a single look or expression can relate more than two pages of description. Although I asked Philippe Besson to read several versions of the script, he never interfered and above all, he never took away the trust he placed in me. In the end, all my betrayals in writing the script served to defend the spirit of the novel. Upon seeing the film, someone close to Philippe Besson said: “*It’s crazy how very much your movie is nothing like the book, while being completely like the book!*” That’s the best compliment anyone

could have given me.

Isn't it complicated to take liberties when a story is autobiographical?

It may be autobiographical, but that doesn't mean there weren't gray areas that I needed to flesh out in order to write my film. I read all of Philippe Besson's novels to understand the writer and especially the man behind the writer. Even though he asserts his taste for fiction, I realized that before *Lie with Me*, Philippe Besson had already told this traumatic love story in a more or less straightforward fashion over the course of his prior books – the most obvious being *La Trahison de Thomas Spencer* [*The betrayal of Thomas Spencer*] which I quote in the film.

When the novels weren't enough, I didn't hesitate to reach out to Philippe and ask him questions. It gave me the opportunity to hear him open up about things of which he had never spoken or written. Several of his anecdotes

ended up in the film (like the glass of pastis in the United States, even if I extrapolated the end). I also interviewed his former editor, Betty Mialet, who giggled when she said: *You're psychoanalyzing Philippe!* Paradoxically, all of this research allowed me to free myself from the “Philippe Besson character” in the book to invent and construct a real film character. That's also the reason why I changed his name in the movie, he became Stéphane Belcourt. This said, the name was not an arbitrary choice: it's the name Besson uses in his novels when speaking the most directly about himself.

The difference between the film and the novel is that at first young Lucas lies to Stéphane. We could also say to him “enough with the lies” like the French title of the movie.

The issue of lying – what we hide from others, but also from ourselves – runs throughout the film, maybe even more so than in the novel. In the book, Lucas meets the writer twice, with eight years in-between: when he is 20 and at 28.

The first time, Lucas is rather naïve and doesn't suspect anything while the second time he has figured out everything about his father's past. I very much liked this evolution towards truth and maturity, but I couldn't keep it in the film as I wanted the action to unfold over the course of a weekend. That is where the idea for Lucas' manipulation came in. At the beginning of the film, Lucas seems to be a sunny and innocent person, before revealing his true motivations and self in the second part.

Why did you choose Guillaume de Tonquédec? It's such an unexpected role for him.

First of all, Guillaume de Tonquédec has something that resembles Philippe Besson, a side of him we accentuated with the costumes and hairstyle. In terms of energy, they exude the same liveliness. And I know he is a great actor because I have seen him on stage. During the shoot, Guillaume never stopped surprising me with his brilliant acting and implication in the role. I think this film came at the right time in

his life, and vice versa. He was a true partner, something you rarely encounter. But what was particularly moving for me was to see his growing understanding and bond with Victor Belmondo during the course of the shoot. It was as if there were no longer any difference between what was happening on the sound stage and on the screen.

And Victor Belmondo ?

I was looking for a young man with a bright and cheerful disposition, someone modern, who is comfortable with the world he lives in, and who was also capable of seriousness and confronting his demons. I wanted to be captivated by the chosen actor just like Stéphane Belcourt is enthralled by Lucas. Nobody fit the bill until my casting director sent me a photo of Victor without giving me his name or any details about him. When I saw his photo I thought, "Of course!" In fact, I had already met him at a festival a little while before. He radiated something magnetic, profound, and intelligent.

I remember having spoken with him for about an hour before I realized who his grandfather was. It's rather strange: as long as I didn't know, I never thought of Jean-Paul Belmondo, but as soon as I knew, it was all I could see. Victor definitely looks like his grandfather, but at the same time he has his own universe, something that is well defined that can only be his. His screen tests blew me away, and he continued to surprise me during the entire course of the film shoot.

Where did you find the two young actors who play Stéphane and Thomas when they're 17?

We had a very long casting process. Jérémy Gillet and Julien de Saint Jean were very good in their individual screen tests, as were many others. It was especially when they acted together that this pair stood out from the rest. It was so obvious. I will always remember the moment when they met! And they proved me right because during the shoot, they never stopped expanding their range and their acting continually evolved in depth and nuance.

How did you tackle the love scenes that played a pivotal role in the story?

The novel is rather graphic at times, and I didn't want to water it down. It tells the story of learning and discovery, and how sex is part of this journey towards love. While the first scene lacks any kind of tenderness between the two characters, I wanted to follow it up with more sensitivity and joy; that we feel the desire of one body for another, the intoxication of pleasure. When these two boys are together, nothing else exists.

This was the first time I'd ever shot sex scenes – in fact, the first time I've filmed a love story – but I firmly believed that I would know how to shoot them once the actors were chosen. I felt that I needed to rely upon their energy to construct the scene and stage it. Yet the most important thing was also to include Julien and Jérémy in the staging process, explaining to them what I wanted to do and why, as well as welcoming their suggestions that were often fantastic. The freedom that I hope is felt in

these scenes stems directly from this mutual trust.

The irresistible Gaëlle, played by Guilaine Londez, isn't a character in the novel.

I wanted to create a character that would embody the problems of provincial life that are very present in the book: Stéphane Belcourt had to escape as soon as he was able to go live in a big city, but I wanted to show that it is possible to do otherwise, and in any case there is no such thing as an ideal solution, but rather whatever works for one person at a given time. What is important is how someone positions themselves. As Gaëlle says: *Staying doesn't necessarily mean being subjected to.*

I immediately thought of Guilaine Londez, a tremendous actress whom I've known for years. She excels in comedy where she is always able to hit the right note of sensitivity, but it's in Cyril Brody's medium length film *Mar Vivo* that I found her to be absolutely incredible in the role

of a single mother caught up in the complexity of her desires, a truly modern character. I wanted to give Guilaine a multi-faceted role so that the audience's opinion of her mirrors Stéphane Belcourt's: at first being amused by Gaëlle, even slightly mocking her, to then discover how profound she truly is.

Where did you get the idea for the story to take place in the world of cognac production?

In the novel, a seemingly insignificant sentence indicates that Thomas' parents are winegrowers for Cognac production. I had just finished a documentary for Hennessy Cognac's 250th anniversary. I'd spent quite some time with the people we see in the film: the brand's personnel, the Americans, for example. I felt that this milieu corresponded very well with the provincial lifestyle described in the novel.

The novel takes place during three time periods in three different places: Barbezieux (35 miles from Cognac), Bordeaux and Paris. As I wanted

to concentrate on the present, I decided to refocus the action over a weekend. I then just had to find the right environment to perfectly frame the subject matter. So I invented Baussony Cognac, a family brand that is more modest than Hennessy, the world leader, but I was lucky that Hennessy agreed to let us film on their property, in their storehouses and even at the Chateau de Bagnolet – the historical Hennessy family home – where they had never opened their doors to movie cameras before. I took advantage of shooting there to hire members of their staff to play their own roles: the guide, the storehouse workers, butlers, mixologist. I love to mix fiction and reality so that they feed off of each other. It's certainly due to my documentary background, which often seeps through.

Nor is Lucas' grandmother a professional actress.

That's correct. While we were scouting for locations, I met Marilou Gallais, 80 years old,

who gave us a tour of her farm (the one we see at the end of the film). It was during the visit that this seed of an idea was planted: Marilou had been a cognac winegrower. She lost her son shortly after she took over the farm. But despite what happened to her, she has a very strong survival instinct. She was part of a choir, and in her youth she dreamed of becoming an actress. Then she started talking to us about cinema and explained that her favorite actor was Jean-Paul Belmondo, without even knowing that Victor was in the film! Imagine the look on her face when I asked her if she would like to play the role of Victor's grandmother! Later, during the film shoot, she mischievously whispered to him: *Since I'm your grandmother, it's a little like I was Jean-Paul Belmondo's wife.*

This entire scene was improvised. Victor really opened up and listened to Marilou, and little by little, we could no longer tell the difference between truth and fiction. Was Victor really her grandson and Marilou really his grandmother?

That scene was one of the most moving moments of the shoot.

Is this your most personal film?

I don't know. All my films stem from the same need. Beyond their themes, which are all different, I realize that every one of them speaks about the blossoming of a filial bond outside of the classic family unit. Or, conversely, when there is a classical family unit, it's to tell the story of the need to reinvent oneself far from this unit. What is certain is that I understand very well what Thomas must have felt. I also could have spent my life hiding my true self, because coming out with my truths seemed insurmountable. But unlike Thomas, love helped me to move beyond shame. Perhaps I also was able to assert myself so that my children could never say one day, like Lucas: *"What hurts me the most is not that my father loved men, it's that he hid it his entire life, and that he was a coward until the very end."* But I deeply understand being torn apart like that,

and Thomas' tragedy is still very common today. Perhaps in the end this movie is a way to pay homage to him.



CAST

Stéphane Belcourt	Guillaume De Tonquédec
Lucas Andrieu	Victor Belmondo
Gaëlle Flamand	Guilaine Londez
Stéphane Belcourt young	Jérémy Gillet
Thomas Andrieu	Julien De Saint Jean
M. Dejean	Pierre-Alain Chapuis
Cyril Couton, the bookseller	Cyril Couton
Lucas's grandmother	Marilou Gallais

CREW

Director	Olivier Peyon
Screenplay	Olivier Peyon, Vincent Poymiro, Arthur Cahn, Cecilia Rouaud
Adapted from the book	<i>Arrête avec tes Mensonges</i> de Philippe Besson (Editions Julliard)
1st Assistant Director	Victor Baussonnie - Ara
Production	TS Productions
Producers	Anthony Doncq, Miléna Poylo & Gilles Sacuto
Cinematography	Martin Rit
Sound	Olivier Dandré
Editing	Damien Maestraggi
Production Manager	Julien Auer
Costumes	Oriol Nogues
Make Up	Flore Chandès
Set Design	Clémence Ney
Original Score	Thylacine & Bravinsan
With the Participation of	Centre national du Cinéma et de l'image animée, Canal+, Ciné+, TV5Monde, Région Nouvelle-Aquitaine, Département Charente - Pôle Image Magelis in Partnership with the CNC
In association with French Distributor	La Banque Postale Image 15 KMBO



TECHNICAL DETAILS

Ratio	2.35
Sound Format	5.1
Running Time	98'
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Country	France

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