

DOMINO FILMS
PRESENTS



62^e SEMAINE
DE LA CRITIQUE
CANNES 2023

CLOSING FILM

NAHUEL
PÉREZ BISCAYART

CÉLESTE
BRUNNQUELL

NO LOVE LOST

A FILM BY
ERWAN LE DUC



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SYNOPSIS

Étienne is barely twenty when he falls in love with Valérie. They are hardly any more when their daughter Rosa is born. And then, one day, Valérie leaves and never returns. He chooses not to make a drama of it and builds a happy life for him and his child. Sixteen years later, when Rosa is about to lead her own life, Étienne recognizes his wife in a television report. The past brutally resurfaces, and father and daughter are propelled into one last chaotic family journey.

INTERVIEW

WITH ERWAN LE DUC



***Perdrix*, your last film, depicted the explosive reaction of two strangers meeting; *No Love Lost* is more about (if we stay with the chemical metaphor) the study of a precipitate. What happens after seventeen years of two beings living together?**

That's a good way of looking at it, and it happens via this seventeen year ellipse – an entire swath of this family life that is barely shown. In the movie, we only see a few shots of their life together. The sequence which starts the film is practically eight minutes long, I believe, with very little dialogue. An operatic gesture that serves as an introduction. This sequence works so well largely due to the music composed by Julie Roué. Before adding the music, the editor Julie Dupré and I had been looking for other ways of entering the film; we explored a number of possibilities. But I had dreamt about this introduction, the version we see today, and it's the music that made it possible. It is also conveyed by a short voice over, and the audience will perhaps realize during the course of the film that the character who gives the voice over is Youssef, reading what could be a fragment of his poem: "At the beginning, Etienne was 20, and he suspected nothing..." These few words launch the film.

How did you come up with this story?

It actually comes from the first intentions I had about a character in the film *Perdrix* named Juju, played by Nicolas Maury, who was Pierre Perdrix' brother. A single father who was bringing up his twelve-year-old daughter, surrounded by his family. We followed part of their story, and this question of separation came up as the daughter said she wanted to leave her father, but without abandoning him.

Next, my writing process starts from an idea, from a broader theme; after, I flesh out the text with fragments. I typically take many notes. It can happen that I write just one scene, sometimes a few lines of dialogue, sometimes just an image. I try to craft a story from this scattered material. I started writing the screenplay during the first Covid lockdown in March 2020. It was also at that moment that I stopped working as a journalist in order to fully embrace filmmaking. The lockdown enabled me to spend a great deal of time with my family, my daughter in particular. So the starting point is the father-daughter relationship, a story of unconditional love between a parent and their child. And also the influence and the hold that one can have over the other, and vice versa.

After depicting a family who is upended by a new presence, there is a family that is upended by an absence.

Without judging this absence (that of a mother who at a very early stage deserted both her child and the father of her child) as being something dramatic. I don't explain the mother's gesture, her departure. It's her free choice, and in fact this wasn't what interested me. I wanted to recount this unfortunate story without making it into something tragic. I said to myself that for Etienne, this traumatic event would not be the foundation of their life together, of their family which would now be made up of two instead of three individuals. When we meet Etienne and Rosa, they are doing well. They have constructed their identities growing together, side by side. It only becomes an issue when the character named Youssef, who is Rosa's boyfriend, points their situation out - because it intrigues him: the drama, the poetry, the sorrow. The desertion in of itself was of course upsetting, but it didn't destroy them. I was interested in having a kid who was 17 years old and capable of saying: "I never knew my mother, but it doesn't matter, and I don't miss her." And I want to believe her. Afterwards, it is up to everyone (or maybe for psychoanalysis) to interpret these words for themselves!

Because, naturally, there is all the same still something that hasn't been resolved. Maybe in five years, or ten years, if this thing that has always bonded them still hasn't been addressed, they will not be doing as well as they are. We are seeing them at the threshold of a pivotal moment, and the image of

Valérie that suddenly appears shakes up their existence. This image acts as a spark, shining a light on what has been inevitably happening implicitly: the father and daughter's separation. I wanted to simply tell the story of how a father and daughter who've grown up together manage to separate without losing one another.

How did the characters develop during the writing process?

They grow together, but not attached at the hip. They each have their own lives and a passion. A passion that gives each one of them a framework. Literally for Rosa, for her thing is painting. I wanted to film painting, and in particular the very act of painting. Early on in the process I looked for a young painter who would be Rosa's age. I went to the Paris Beaux-Arts art school to see the work of first year students who were approximately the same age as the character, and I contacted one, a young woman named Violette Malinvaud. We used her paintings, we even commissioned some. I was attracted to her painting because there was a raw and extremely colorful side to it. Her work has an energy that shows she is both confident about what she is doing, while also having great fragility. As well as humor. I thought this was important in relation to Rosa and all the more so because it allows for a different reading of the character, who appears to be a rather dutiful young girl.

As for Etienne, his passion is soccer.

Etienne reminds me of coaches I had when I played as a kid and a teenager in certain small soccer clubs; these educators and coaches who are always extremely engaged in their club; so much so, that they spend all their time there. An excessive passion.

What I like about soccer is the club, as a social bond, as the last place of diversity, blending all walks of life, which is also what Etienne explains when he passes his coaching certification. These encounters, this otherness is surprising and precious when you are a teenager. As Etienne is a coach in a small club, he's a municipal employee. He has a tiny income, a house inherited from his parents, that he has never left. He doesn't have a lot of needs and he knows pretty much everyone in town.



Is he a philosopher coach?

He tries to convey a uniqueness in the way of playing, thinking and seeing this sport. When he coaches the kids, he uses high-flown language. Some of what he says is actually from professional soccer players. For example: "... behind every kick of the ball, there has to be a thought," which (I believe) was said by Dennis Bergkamp. I think Etienne is someone who has collected these quotes sitting in his room, writing them down in his notebooks. He also quotes Churchill, and there's a Yiddish proverb that he writes on the blackboard. Football gives Etienne a framework. For him, what he "paints," and what gives him a connection with his daughter are the limits of the field, those white lines that he traces and retraces even when they don't need to be retraced. It's a gesture that reassures him.

Were you already thinking of Nahuel Pérez Biscayart early on in the process?

Yes, Aurélie Guichard, who cast the adults, and I had considered him at a very early stage. Beyond his talent, Nahuel interested me because he is not at all the archetype of a soccer coach, let alone that of a father. He's a very poetic actor who brings a world of his own to his roles. We met, we did a reading and what impressed me in particular was when I asked him to try something different, he went there completely. I remember a scene that he played singing all the words, for example. This type of freedom was so interesting to see, this ability to always propose something different - and it was during the screentests on top of it all.

He has a farcical element to him that comes from his body language, which appears almost choreographed...

Physicality comes easily to him. He has something reminiscent of a circus performer in his way of being. That was the intuition I had, which was confirmed and emphasized in my work with him. I'm fond of burlesque comedy and I liked that the character had a Buster Keaton side to him. We very quickly removed some of the dialogue to be replaced with gestures, which worked so well for this character. So, as soon as he could run instead of walk, or jump over something, we had him do it.

This taste for burlesque and slapstick is also visible at the end of certain scenes that evade realism, like when Etienne takes his coach's certification test, and all the examiners start singing a French nursery rhyme.

Yes, it's a sort of magical filter applied to reality that I'm looking for; the idea that something surreal can pop up at any time, in any way. There are also gags, purely visual scenes, like the one where the teens he coaches all get out of Etienne's car. We did it without special effects. We tested it: how many big strapping teens could we fit inside? There were fifteen or sixteen. We did it just for the fun of it, wondering if it would work, and then when it did work, and on top of it, it worked well with the story, we kept it during the editing stage.

I want to be capable of surprising the audience and using several different registers. It's a way of looking at the world. But it's also a way of shaking up the audience. I try to make sure that it is not pointless, and at the same time, I'm fine with the awareness that it can be seen that way, like a comma or a misstep. It's a way of making the viewer sit up in their seat, bringing a different emotion into the mix. And even if as the story goes it serves no purpose, the overall feeling that it arouses serves the film enormously, in that it helps with the attention the film is given and the way the viewer is engaging with it.

A way of playing with the viewer's perspective?

Yes, and this doesn't just occur through the narrative, but also through the staging, through the desire to invent other ways of filming. To surprise the viewer, but also to surprise myself, surprise the crew, with the way something is shot and made. For example, there's a shot of Rosa who is drawing in the garden. We start with a very simple, steady wide shot. It's good, just like we planned. But while we were shooting, I wanted something different, and without having discussed it with anyone beforehand, I went to see Alexis Kavyrchine, the director of photography, and I discreetly asked him to pick up the camera and walk towards the actress for a close up without cutting. Without a moment's hesitation, and that was wonderful on his part, Alexis grabbed the base of the camera, and then with the help of his key grip they picked it up and put it back down in an arbitrary spot in front of Céleste Brunnquell, who seamlessly went along with the new set up as well.

It became a sort of a random shot, a rather beautiful close up. But what interested me also, were the images between the two shots, the images taken while the camera was being moved. So when we were editing, I kept those images before the camera was placed back down and stabilized. As the camera stand is heavy, in just a fraction of a second we go from a sort of anarchic movement to a steady shot. It turns out that it depicts Etienne watching his daughter, and we can interpret this brief moment as his subjective point of view. But I'm also interested in the fact that this image awakens the eye. It happens very quickly, more on the level of a sensation, a pure, physical sensation, that for me would be a sensation purely associated with cinema.

How did you choose Céleste Brunnquell?

I had seen her in the French series *In Therapy*, and I had already found her to be a singular presence. We met during the casting process, along with Elsa Pharaon, who worked with me for the two young characters. Rosa has a lot of dialogue, sometimes real monologues, and during the screen tests, Céleste was very impressive. She gave Rosa a gentleness that I hadn't actually imagined, but without losing the character's edginess. Céleste gave the character an inner life, all the while staying light. With a look, a movement of her head, she is able to change the atmosphere of a scene, to bring about an entirely unexpected emotion.

You moreover gave Rosa and Youssef dialogue that is very written, almost theatrical, for example, respecting the grammar of the full negative forms.

Yes, I wanted the two young actors to speak beautifully, and especially for Youssef, with his poetic, romantic side. While searching for an actor for this role, I saw nearly one hundred videos of young men reading poetry, and standing out in the middle, there was Mohammed Louridi. I immediately told myself he was the one. I invited him for screen tests, and I was right. He's someone who came to acting late, who is in fact a theater student in Lille at the Ecole de Nord acting school. He had never played in front of a camera, and the crew and I had the moving impression of being witness to the first steps of a wholly unique actor. The very literary, or written side of the dialogue touches me a great deal; it is a reflection of the cinema that I love, I'm thinking in particular

of Kaurismaki, whose actors often recount in interviews that their characters speak a very refined theatrical Finnish, which doesn't necessarily correspond with their characters.

We get the impression that the young people are more serious than the adults. Did you intend to speak about generational differences?

That they are more serious, is something I readily believe. As for knowing whether this is a realistic portrait of youth today, you'll have to ask the young actors. There are traces of the time period, the fight against climate change, the students striking at the high school, burning things to get exposure and raise awareness. But the character of Rosa is rather ambivalent in this respect, she is dedicated to her painting, she isn't so much involved in the larger community. Indeed, I wanted characters who didn't engage much with the outside world - one who is passionate about poetry, the other about painting.

How did you construct the scene between Rosa and her father at the high school, which leads to Etienne's downfall.

It's a moment when Rosa lets out everything she's been keeping inside; she says things that are at once very cruel, and very sincere. I don't think she had been purposely hiding these things from her father, but it's a way of very candidly taking stock of things. She is also responding to what could be considered a provocation. He's the one who showed up with the photo of this woman saying: "It's your mother and we have to go see her." This questions everything he had been saying during the course of her childhood and adolescence: that they didn't need anyone else, that they were happy just the two of them, that Valerie's absence isn't something that is missing or lacking. Seeing her father thrown off by this image deeply irritates Rosa; seeing that for him, unlike for her, there's something still unresolved. She tells him: "You're pathetic." Which from my point of view is very violent for a child to say to a parent.

Is there a sense of tragedy in this scene?

I think the emotion first comes from the acting. Céleste was really very impressive. She brought a mix of harshness and fragility, her way of staying just



on the brink of tears without ever crying. This monologue is a wave of words and emotions thrown right in her father's face, which finishes with this kiss out of nowhere and marks a breaking point between them. There had to be something irreparable in this scene, that will get between them forever. Yes, it's a tragedy, this kiss isn't a kiss of death, but it denotes a separation, and before our very eyes an actress becomes a tragedienne.

And the second scene between them, in the hotel in Portugal?

She continues signifying the separation, in a gentler way. And with a sense of melancholy. They are each going to live their own lives. She tells him not to worry about her, that he can go to sleep without fear. She has this gesture of closing his eyes, which is practically a magician's gesture.

There's another woman in Etienne's life. Tell us about Hélène.

She's pretty magical. At the beginning, I thought of her as a cousin of the Lilac Fairy in Jacques Demy's *Donkey Skin*. She is practically at the margins of society. She drives a cab, but doesn't dress like you'd expect a taxi driver to. She's a kindly character who always carries the weight of other people's problems on her shoulders, who understands everything, and always has the right words. There is nothing tragic about her in fact, although she could be because she is in love with this man who, in passing, has someone else on his mind. I'm very fond of this scene where she reminds him of the letters they exchanged, she reminds him of that love, of what he might have felt, of what he might have written. She makes him face himself, and leads him away from constantly rehashing the past.

This magic can also be found in the scene between Etienne and Hélène in their bedroom, when they kiss. On paper, it was rather simply written, but Maud Wyler reinvented and transformed the scene with her little dance, inspired by a geisha dance that she had shown me two days before. Everything naturally fell into place bit by bit; a musical instrument, a kalimba that belongs to my daughter, was added to the scenery; an offbeat lighting of colored shadows was added, for example. Everyone brought a little something to the table to achieve this rather singular result.

Valérie is played by a dancer and choreographer...

This character had to be played by someone who had a very strong presence: she doesn't have a lot of screen time, but her presence haunts the film from beginning to end. In the same way that I knew I had to find a real painter early on (for Rosa), I knew I wanted to give a dancer the role of Valérie because there was this dance scene, this hallucination that had to be made very impactful so that it could find its place in the story. Mercedes Dassy is a dancer and choreographer. She had never made a film. We met thanks to Aurélie Guichard. I had her read a scene, and it was obvious that she was the person for the role. We worked prior to the shoot to create this dance that she choreographed to music by Julie Roué.

During the course of the film, her music is very present. What role does the music play?

I wanted it to be lyrical, a little dramatic, that there would be striking flights of fancy. I didn't want it to merely accompany the images, but rather bring an extra dimension to the film. For example, the music that dramatizes the scene where Etienne leaves for Metz to visit the Beaux-Arts school, a moment filmed rather simply, over which we put very lyrical violins. Later, in the Nazaré scenes, we played with the sensations and the sound texture, through slowing down one of the themes heard earlier in the film.

In the end, Rosa really is her father's daughter, but not just...

There's a scene in the film, when Rosa is 6 or 7 years old, where she asks her father if it's true that she was half made from him, and half made from her mother. He answers: "In the beginning, yes, and after you make yourself all by yourself." There it is, this "all by yourself" can be scary, but it can also be exciting. It's a double edged sword.

A photograph of a young man with dark hair, wearing a light blue quilted jacket, holding a baby in his arms. They are on a boat, with a blurred background of water and other boats. The man has a serious expression. The baby is looking towards the camera. The text 'ERWAN LE DUC' is overlaid on the left side of the image in a bright pink, bold, sans-serif font.

ERWAN LE DUC

Born long ago in faraway Les Lilas, Erwan Le Duc wrote and directed *The Bare Necessity*, a film presented at the 2019 Director's Fortnight, as well as several short films including *The Virgin Soldier*, selected for Cannes' International Critics' Weeks three years before that. Seven years later, in other words, just last winter, he directed *Under Control*, a series created by Charly Delwart, which recently won an award at the Series Mania Festival. Priorly, and sometimes even at the same time, he was a journalist for the daily newspaper *Le Monde*, and a Liaison Officer for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Culture. Selected for support by the Gan Foundation for Cinema in 2021, he is presenting his second feature film, *No Love Lost*, as the closing film at Cannes' International Critic's Week 2023.



CAST

ÉTIENNE
ROSA
VALÉRIE
HÉLÈNE
YOUSSEF

NAHUEL PÉREZ BISCAYART
CÉLESTE BRUNNQUELL
MERCEDES DASSY
MAUD WYLER
MOHAMMED LOURIDI

CREW

SCREENPLAY & DIRECTION

ERWAN LE DUC

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JULIE ROUÉ

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JULIE DUPRÉ

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MATTHIEU GASNIER, VINCENT COSSON

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CÉLIE VALDENAIRE

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