

VINCENT CASSEL

Sauvage

**A FILM BY
ÉDOUARD DELUC**

TUHEÏ ADAMS AND MALIK ZIDI

RUNNING TIME: 1 HOUR 42 MINUTES

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SYNOPSIS

1891. Painter Paul Gauguin is already well-known in Parisian artistic circles, but is tired of the so-called civilized world and its political, moral and artistic conventions.

Leaving his wife and children behind, he ventures alone to the other end of the world, Tahiti, consumed with a yearning for original purity, and ready to sacrifice everything for his quest.

Impoverished and solitary, Gauguin pushes deep into the Tahitian jungle, where he meets the Maoris and Tehura, his muse, who will inspire his most iconic works of art.

INTERVIEW WITH ÉDOUARD DELUC

Where did your desire to make this film come from?

Édouard Deluc: It comes from my encounter with *Noa Noa*, the travel diary Gauguin wrote after his first trip to Tahiti in 1893. It's an adventure of incredible poetry, about the mysteries of creation, the love for distant lands, the absolute dedication to art, the need to create an oeuvre. But it's also a story about love and freedom. I discovered the book during my studies at the Beaux-Arts, and it had stayed in my library ever since, like the ghost of a possible film. In 2012, after a summer reading W. Somerset Maugham's *The Moon and Sixpence* (1919), another book with a rather crazy romantic strength, I dove once again into *Noa Noa*, that was lying on my desk. And something crystalized in me.

Why?

Gauguin is an extraordinary character in pursuit of a hedonistic dream, who wants to get rid of all conventions, to reconnect with "wild" nature, which had already led him to Brittany, Panama, and Martinique, and to find his muse, his "Primitive Eve," the woman who will distinguish him. In 1891, he makes a gesture and a move that's both sacrificial and powerful. He leaves Paris for Polynesia, where he will paint with fury, but facing general indifference, sixty-six masterpieces in eighteen months that will be a turning point in his work, will influence the fauvists and the cubists, will mark the arrival of modern art. Two sentences of his have constantly guided my work: "I can't be ridiculous because I'm two things that never are: a child and a savage." And: "I will come back to the forest to live the calm, the ecstasy and art." They both represent my entire project.

So Gauguin was a voyager in his soul...

At one year old, he had already spent six months at sea with his parents: his father, a Republican under Napoleon III, dies on a boat while fleeing France. His mother, daughter of the socialist and feminist militant Flora Tristan, takes refuge in Peru, a country that leaves a profound impression on his all-consuming quest for the "primitive". There, he lives surrounded by pre-Columbian sculptures and he learns the cut and the sculpture of daggers. The period I chose to address – 1891-1893 – focuses on all the intimate, artistic and political issues of his quest.

How faithful were you to the film's source material, *Noa Noa*?

I adapted it freely. To put it another way, everything you see in the film is true, but sometimes it's romanticized. In writing *Noa Noa*, Gauguin already revisited facts, building upon his legend. There are innumerable biographies about Gauguin that also interpret them too. And my position as a director gives me the power to do the same. For instance in *Noa Noa*, Tehura and Jotepha, the Tahitians he meets, do indeed exist, but they do not create this romantic trio with Gauguin, which underpins one of the dramatic stakes of the screenplay. The character Tehura is also a composite of many of Gauguin's lovers. And he probably never locked her up at his place as he does at the end of the film, driven by jealousy. But again, my artistic license as a filmmaker allows me to imagine it without having to justify myself.

The film opens in Paris, where Gauguin, unable to sell his art and short on money, works on the docks as a porter, a scene that you will later reproduce identically in Polynesia.

For instance, that scene is freely inspired from *Noa Noa*. Gauguin lives in Paris in absolute destitution, looking for a way of living that allows him to concentrate on painting, to find the silence within which to finally hear the interior voices that will guide his hand. Gauguin successively worked as a poster-hanger, money exchanger, dockworker, and he will do the same in Papeete for six months, before being repatriated as an artist in distress. The European patterns no longer satisfy him. Indeed, he says: "I'm suffocating. There is no landscape, no face that deserve to be painted here."

You filmed this pre-trip sequence with a harshness that reminds of Peter Watkins's film *Edvard Munch* (1974)...

Edvard Munch, like *Gauguin*, evokes our human condition. The two films examine creation with an ascetic logic.

In the goodbye party scene, with his friends and flamboyantly made-up crowd, what was your aesthetic intent?

The intent was to create a wild ball. This banquet, where Mallarme recites his beautiful speech, is definitely a party, but for Gauguin it's also a rupture. None of his painter friends with whom he created the tropical atelier (Laval, Bernard, Van Gogh, Maijer de Haan) follow him, despite the desire for traveling that occupies their minds too. Gauguin therefore proves his monstrous courage. But his solitude is palpable. On top of that, he leaves his wife Mette and their five children despite his love for them, that is reflected in all their correspondences. Because of his bad morals, Paul Gauguin has been blacklisted by some Americans although they are always eager to hang his work in their museums. Dragged down by the moral quandary, research on his work ceased on the other side of the Atlantic between 1985 and 2005. As if we could judge him by the moral standards of the twentieth or twenty-first centuries.

Your film uses the cinematic codes of a western more than those of a classic biopic. Are you challenging this genre?

There are some great biopics, but, without any snobbery, the idea of "playing" the performance did not interest me. I wanted to make an adventure film, a western, like in the scenes of the journey Gauguin makes on horseback in the island's interior, or when he arrives in the village of Tehura at night, to the sound of drums. I am possessed by American cinema and, before making *Gauguin*, I re-watched the features that enchanted me during adolescence, and made me what I am as a filmmaker: *The Big Sky* by Howard Hawks, *Hell in the Pacific* by John Boorman, *Jeremiah Johnson* by Sydney Pollack. But also *Still the Water* by the Japanese filmmaker Naomi Kawase, where nature, love, death, and transcendence play critical roles. And *The Piano* by the New Zealander Jane Campion, for its absolute necessity to create.

What role do these films play in your creative process?

All these films have influenced my directorial decisions as well as the film's tempo in an organic and subtle way. The camera had to trust the faces, the scenery, sticking close to Gauguin's gestures. The story, cowritten with Etienne Comar and Thomas Lilti, had to unfold in a refined way. The dialog had to be pared down. Events had to be "slight" in appearance while conveying big things.

One feels that you've almost made Gauguin's trip to the island evocative, in a manner similar to Terrence Malick – stripped down, without earthly anchoring or musical articulation...

This journey, the heart of *Noa Noa*, motivated me from the beginning. In Tahiti, Gauguin, who has just had a heart attack, must pay the hospital twelve francs per day for his stay. He knows that if he has the money, he'd rather spend it on his painting. If you're going to die, might as well do it "on stage." The Tahitians were still too civilized for him. He plunges into the island's depths to find the "primitive" that he didn't find in the city. He is also haunted by Tehura, this Eve whom he dreams of meeting, a young woman "given" to him by her parents in a scene of extreme simplicity, in the hope of seeing her rise socially.

The film is both political and peppered with questions of religion...

When reading *Noa Noa*, I was captivated by the fact that Gauguin's arrival in Tahiti coincides with the death of the last Maori king. Gauguin disembarked at the moment when a 2,000-year-old primitive culture died under the dictates of missionaries, surrendered to the arms of the French Republic. Tehura positions herself in the island's shift such that she's at the point of forgetting her beliefs and traditions: she wants to go to church. When he paints the face and the soul of Maoris, Gauguin documents a civilization that's in the course of deteriorating and disappearing. He paints something that is vanishing.

Financially destitute and rejected by the Tahitians who surrounded him, Gauguin gives the impression that he is constantly losing...

Even if – with his evocative power, his bold colors, the symbolic value of his lines – the modernity of his work remains, the film recounts indeed a defeat. With the meeting of Tehura, the Eve of his long yearnings, his creation comes alive. But it disappears as their love fades. Gauguin also wants to become a barbarian, a savage. But nature refuses his wish. Through faces and landscapes, he basically paints an imaginary world. Finally, the capitalist world bursts onto these small pebbles in the Pacific and infects the Tahitian culture. Gauguin is the first of it. To survive, he starts making sculptures of Maori idols and sells them in the port. But he also corrupts Jotepha, who begins to imitate him and produces these objects in bulk, hoarding the profits.

“Everything that I’d learned bothered me,” Gauguin explains...

“The only virtue is what we have in us,” he says to Jotepha to distract him from his imitations. Jotepha expressed his bitterness toward the white man, executioner of his civilization, who turned Maori idols – mystical statuettes – into decorative objects, and brought a gun to the island to try to fish with.

Many night scenes give the film an aspect both intimate and surreal. What importance do you accord to ghosts in this story?

They haunt all of Gauguin’s work. Each of his Tahitian pieces carry their share of ghosts and idols. Thanks to them, he attempts to reanimate a culture in decline. To resuscitate a Maori culture impregnated with animism that, since the missionaries’ arrival, doesn’t have the right to exist. Early on, I wanted to work around the tikka, these ghostly figures, somewhat in the style of Naomi Kawase in *Still the Water*, involving shamanism. Trying to celebrate the cinema like the art of making ghosts speak. At night in Tahiti, the air is charged with them.

Why did you choose Vincent Cassel to play Gauguin?

Which body, which face, which sensitivity did I want to film? In the only interview Gauguin granted, for *Figaro* in 1890, he was described as a robust man with bright eyes, who spoke frankly. Vincent, an iconoclast, curious about others and also obsessive, with a taste for the far-flung, was an obvious choice. He read the script synopsis very early on, and indicated he was interested in the project. Like Gauguin, he’s beyond conventions, revealing himself fully, even if it’s displeasing. We worked together. I gave him *Noa Noa*, the correspondences between Gauguin and his wife, and Octave Mirbeau’s text. He reviewed them, and went with me to the Musée d’Orsay to see his paintings and sculptures. He also had to slim down: Gauguin subsisted on breadfruit roots, we couldn’t skimp on that. Finally, he took courses in painting and sculpture, and asked for false teeth to recreate Gauguin’s decrepitude.

And Tuheï Adams, 17 years old, who played Tehura?

It was a gift from heaven – we found her on the second day of casting. From the first tests, she exuded a mix of grace and mad intensity. There was also in her something that emanated from Gauguin’s paintings and expressed Tahitian history: the fire, the boredom, and insolence, the unchangeable aspect of passing time, a way of being in the present, slow gestures, a melancholy. I hope the film reproduces some of the goodness, calm and dignity of the Tahitians. We can remain silent for hours next to them without trying to fill in the gaps.

Warren Ellis is the music composer...

I wrote the film while listening to the soundtrack he composed with Nick Cave for *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, by Andrew Dominik. A western marked by time dilation, and a source of inspiration for its way of creating action while preserving inner worlds.

You like faraway places, as your previous films show (the short *¿Dónde está Kim Basinger?* and the feature *Welcome to Argentina* were made in Argentina). What connects you, in a very personal way, to Gauguin?

If I had to choose between being a tennis teacher and a filmmaker, I would have chosen tennis teacher, a peaceful life. But Art comes of necessity. You don't become an artist because it's cool, but because you can't be anything else.

INTERVIEW WITH VINCENT CASSEL

When did you come to this project?

Vincent Cassel: Quickly enough. I read the synopsis and met with Edouard Deluc. I didn't know him before, but discovered a young, dynamic, and invested guy – and forthcoming with details of his life. They meshed with my aspirations, particularly my taste for faraway places, which is to say, this willingness to block out the world to concentrate on what you really want to do. Having made *Welcome to Argentina*, Edouard felt the same attraction for Argentina that I felt for Brazil. Raised in Peru, Gauguin the wanderer was always attracted to the far-flung; Tahiti, like a return to the origins. A quest for new sensations. A fantasy of Eden. There, I had a point of identification.

Do you consider the film a biopic or a fictionalized biopic?

True or fake biopic, it's of little importance and, in all ways, I'm wary of the genre. Ever since *Mesrine*, by Jean-François Richet, I was asked to portray so many: Montand, Salvador Dali and others I won't mention. But I don't like imitation, nor performance. With Gauguin, there weren't already filmed images to conform to, everything could be invented. Edouard's project was long-term; we began working upstream, together. What seemed crucial for me was to remove elements that needed a reference to be understood. We agreed on the essential: the viewer should not be watching "a rerun of the game." The action should be live. This principle shaped the film's ultimate form: laconic, simultaneously pure and lyrical.

What did you know of Gauguin?

Frankly? Not much. I knew a little of his Tahitian work but I sensed he was a troubled person, and that connected to me. With Edouard's advice, I started by reading *Noa Noa*, the basis of the film. Then, I went and viewed exhibitions and met with the conservators at Musée d'Orsay, who explained how he was revolutionary. I also worked with a painting teacher. I didn't want to look like an idiot on set, adding colors without knowing how. We quickly dove into the practice, and I began to paint – something I never believed I was capable of. I always considered myself a poor illustrator, although some of my paintings have a certain appeal, no? (laughs) At the beginning of each film shoot, I always make a sketch of the character I'll be playing. Strangely enough, the one I did of Gauguin reflects quite well what he is in the end.

The film details a defeat...

This includes the romantic defeat with Tehura: an impossible love that crystalizes the story and brings emotion even if actually Gauguin had multiple "muses." In fact he only loses. He sacrifices his family, his health, his career on the altar of his art. In researching what he calls "the primitive" or "the savage," he consumes himself. Everybody turns their backs on him, including Tahiti, a place where he would have loved to live, but which rejected him like an antibody. He seems at the same time a "monster" and an uncommon character. However, his paintings and his contrasting and vivid palette have created something profoundly alive without resorting to realism, and have passed into posterity. Somehow he was therefore right. I played him without judging him, even if he did things I would not do. He burns himself, but cannot help it. He had no choice. His desire is so absolute... I don't know if, as an actor, I would have had the courage he had.

You also had to transform yourself physically...

Yes, however, I always feel like I don't do anything. I often quote what Bruce Lee said: "I think of myself as water; I take the form I am asked to take." In filmmaking, it's necessary to melt away. I let my beard grow out, I lost weight with a nutritionist, since Gauguin constantly went hungry, I also wore false teeth. Yet it was actually quite fun – and I always have a hard time saying I'm suffering on set. His face is the mixture of my fantasies and reality. I learned Tahitian. I invented a walk for him. I went by strokes. Maybe my Gauguin is a little more boorish than Edouard and I imagined at the beginning.

Does this role leave anything particular with you?

All roles always do. But if the film must occupy a special place for me, it's first because of the adventure it was, and the encounter with Polynesia where I felt like I was in *Avatar*, in ecstasy. Edouard highlight it very well: nature dictates its law, places and people haunt you. With Gauguin, I also learned to appreciate painting, and that's quite something.

INTERVIEW WITH PIERRE COTTEREAU

ÉDOUARD

Our collaboration is the result of a long working relationship. For fifteen years, I've worked on all of Edouard's short films – with the exception of *¿Donde Esta Kim Basinger?* – and on his first feature, *Welcome to Argentina*. Edouard told me very early on about his discovery of *Noa Noa* and his project. I read the first few synopses. I followed the development of different versions, from the first – in which I recognized his taste for contemplation – to the following versions, that restructured the narrative issues through the love triangle. *Gauguin* is really the mix of these two approaches. More than retelling a story in the linear sense of the term, Edouard's idea was to go to Polynesia, to film the character's moods, his relationship with beauty, to show a man ready to dedicate his entire existence to art, a man whose only love is painting. Edouard has training in fine arts, and his relationship with Cinema comes first and foremost from that sensitivity.

GAUGUIN

Obviously, I consulted the writings by and about Gauguin, but in a transverse way: with Edouard, we maintain a continuous conversation, and my perspective must in no way interfere with his. The question really is: What does he want? Unlike Edouard, who is deeply touched by Gauguin's art – he likes modern art and its premises – I didn't know Gauguin that much. But this wasn't even a challenge, since what we had to do was to make the portrait of a character who was neither synthetic, nor sympathetic, and to reflect the states he was going through: absolute pain or quietude. And, of course, we had to evoke his paintings without giving the feeling that we were scribbling over his shoulder. In the film, I chose a mix of two color ranges: one for primary colors, trying to recreate the paintings; the other for the luxuriance and subtlety of these greens visible onscreen.

AESTHETIC

We never discussed it, or at least not in the way one usually does: the aesthetic of the film, it's above all the aesthetic of the director. And in Edouard's case, that was a certainty. I feel comfortable with his artistic direction, which permeates every detail of the filmmaking. He decides to emphasize what he shoots with simplicity. Everything he puts onscreen is important even if we never know beforehand how his staging will come through. A piece of decor, a landscape, a physique, the sequence? On this playing field, I put my own marks. We trust each other. I am very lucky to have the opportunity to experiment where I want to. If I suggest something he's uncomfortable with, that's because... I've simply taken a wrong direction. For principal reference, Edouard used *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*, by Andrew Dominik. On my side, I referenced photos from an article in the *New York Times* from the 1930s, about African Americans: it used a color treatment that I really liked.

NATURE

The story of Gauguin, a man alone in the nature and the journey he completes through the island reminds me of Edouard himself. This nature, he doesn't film it in an allegorical style, but at ground level, as humbly as possible. It's like of a fairytale: simultaneously the Garden of Eden and Hell. Matrix and original in the purest sense of the term.

NIGHT

The multiple night scenes were one of the challenges of the film. They didn't bother me – quite the contrary. A sequence we lit using day-for-night makes me believe in cinema. Here again, we filmed as nimbly as possible. For many of the interiors, we used a candle as the sole light source and a post color technique to get the hues I wanted. Gauguin was a man who didn't have a lot in his wallet. The most minimalist we could shoot it, was without doubt the best way to do him justice – we, too, had a similarly-small set of options.

INTERVIEW WITH WARREN ELLIS

What made you agree to compose the soundtrack to the film?

I saw the first edit of the film and I was very moved by Cassel's performance, and I was also quite touched by the denouement of Gauguin's life that brings him to his climax. I think my emotional response has something to do with my age.

Have you read *Noa Noa*? How did you research Gauguin?

No, I have not read it. I read the script but I couldn't envision the film only from that. I love his paintings, he's one of my favorite artists. I've been to many art galleries, and I'm always rediscovering aspects of his art. I liked the way he worked and revealed the landscapes of Tahiti, even under such difficult circumstances.

What were your biases?

I wasn't convinced about the genre – biopics generally bore me, and that made me hesitant to accept the project. But when I saw the film, and Cassel's performance, I realized it was much more than that. It was a poetic story about the dream of a life at the moment when that life seems to sink.

What guided your choices for the journey Gauguin takes across the island, and for his frantic night painting?

I listened to Edouard and Guerric [Catala, the editor] – they knew the film better than anybody. I created a sonic palette based on my discussions with them, with flute, piano and violin. It was a challenge to go into the studio and create each piece. I don't work from images or writing detailed scores. I composed in chronological order for each piece, and I had found the final melody by chance, before I had seen the film. It's one of those things you can't really explain.

How did you create the musical sound of his metaphysical anxiety?

I never think about it that way. I look for a musical language that finds an equilibrium and the right tone for each character. If I had thought about it, I'm sure that it would have been less spontaneous. I like to create music and see if it corresponds with the image. The fact that Edouard and Guerric found the music's location in the film helped me enormously. I had two weeks to compose the music, between a tour and another project, so I had to be precise and efficient. As I said, once we realized the violin was the representation of his internal voice, everything fell into place.

What was the influence of Tahitian music (drums, Tahitian choirs)?

There was no influence, it would have been dishonest and misleading. That said, in the film's final piece, I incorporate a Tahitian chorus that's featured earlier in the film.

How does one musically evoke painting?

Early on, I found out that the violin seemed to represent Gauguin's interior voice, and that it accompanied moments of personal revelation throughout the film.

It began in a fragile manner and became stronger and more and more lyrical, then melancholic.

For you, what isn't allowed?

Nothing is prohibited.

CAST

Vincent CASSEL Paul Gauguin
Tuheï ADAMS Tehura
Malik ZIDI Henri Vallin
Pua-Taï HIKUTINI.....Jotépha
Pernille BERGENDORFF Mette Gauguin

CREW

A Film by **Edouard DELUC**
Produced by **Bruno LEVY**
Screenplay by **Edouard DELUC**
..... **Etienne COMAR**
..... **Thomas LILTI**
..... **Sarah KAMINSKY**
Freely adapted from *Noa Noa: The Tahiti Journal of Paul Gauguin*
Cinematography..... **Pierre COTTEREAU**
Editing **Guerric CATALA**
Original Music **Warren ELLIS**
Sound **Pascal ARMANT**
..... **Gwennolé LE BORGNE**
..... **Alexis PLACE**
..... **Niels BARLETTA**
Musical Supervisor **Martin CARAUX**
Production Designer **Emmanuelle CUILLERY**
First Assistant Director **Ludovic GIRAUD**
Casting **Julie NAVARRO**
Costumes..... **Céline GUIGNARD RAJOT**
Executive Producer, Polynesia.... **Laurent JACQUEMIN**
Production Director **Sylvie PEYRE**
Production Coordinator **Julie LESCAT**