

GAUMONT PRESENTS
A QUAD AND TEN CINEMA PRODUCTION

PIO
MARMAÏ

NOÉMIE
MERLANT

JONATHAN
COHEN

A DIFFICULT YEAR

A FILM BY
ERIC TOLEDANO & OLIVIER NAKACHE

MATHIEU AMALRIC GRÉGOIRE LEPRINCE-RINGUET LUÀNA BAJRAMI

QUAD

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After UNTOUCHABLE, C'EST LA VIE and THE SPECIALS

**PIO
MARMAÏ** **NOÉMIE
MERLANT** **JONATHAN
COHEN**

A DIFFICULT YEAR

A FILM BY
ERIC TOLEDANO & OLIVIER NAKACHE

Duration: 1h59

GAUMONT PRESS DEPARTMENT

Quentin Becker
Tél. : +33 1.46.43.23.06
quentin.becker@gaumont.com
Vana'a Edom
Tél. : +33 1.46.43.21.51
vanaa.edom@gaumont.com

Press material downloadable from
www.gaumontconnect.com



SYNOPSIS

When Albert and Bruno, both compulsive spenders and in debt up to their necks, turn to community workers to get a grip on their lives, they run into a group of young green activists. Lured by the free beer and crisps rather than by the ideals of these eco-activists, Albert and Bruno find themselves joining the movement without much conviction. ■



AN INTERVIEW WITH ERIC TOLEDANO AND OLIVIER NAKACHE

HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THE IDEA FOR THE FILM?

Eric Toledano: We stopped working on a screenplay during confinement because we had questions about the whole world being put on general hiatus. On the one hand, we were thinking about Season 2 of EN THERAPIE, which was to talk about the direct impact of the pandemic and confinement on the French psyche. But we also wanted to raise bigger issues, while listening to everything being said about this famous “world to come”. What new world to come? It would supposedly no longer be the same as the world we knew. Images were conjured up automatically: empty streets, shuttered shop windows, planes grounded, people at their windows every night applauding at 8pm...

and other images that appeared to contradict the void we were then living in, evocations of the excess in our societies in permanent growth. We found a video on social media of young demonstrators trying to prevent hordes of customers from barging into a department store on Black Friday. We considered it a snapshot of our times: two visions of a world in conflict. That is how the film is designed, two blocks in shot reverse shot, in two beats, like a waltz.

Olivier Nakache: Struck by that dichotomy, we wondered who those people were who were pushing their way into the store, and those pushing back. We did research, we investigated. We met with people to understand them better. The subject of over

indebtedness soon reared its ugly head. We had been interested in the subject for some time. It says something about our desire to keep up with the Joneses, and the greed of lending institutions that trap quite a few people and drown them in debt. We did a deep dive, discovering all the steps, at times long and laborious, needed to have that insolvency effaced by the Banque de France...

On the other hand, who are these new environmental activists? And especially the female activists, because during our research, they impressed us most. We met with more than one Cactus! In fact, when we began our investigations, it was a Cactus who welcomed us. We modeled the character played by Noémie Merlant on her. Noémie actually spent time with her to prepare for the role.

E. T.: Let me through. No, I push back. There was physical movement to film here. Like a waltz of ideas, when you don't know what to do with your feet.

We grew up in the 1980s. Ours was a generation of unbridled consumerism. And then, one day you wake up, your own children are talking about a wall, collapse, and the need for change. Young people are becoming increasingly eco-distressed.

That is also why the film is obsessed with bridges. We wanted to conjoin two subjects, like two riverbanks – over-indebtedness and ecology. On the surface they do not appear to have a lot in common, but still, empty apartments have several stories to tell. The recent visit of a repo man, minimalist decor, or degrowth.

You do not come out of four years of *EN THERAPIE* unscathed. For us, today's gravity and violence need to be compensated for with shared laughter. We desperately need comedy. Laughter when we should surely be weeping. That is how we were able to approach the same reflections and observations with derision and humor. Comedy is an ideal lookout point, a social barometer that also triggers a true examination of conscience.

LIKE THE BEGINNING OF THE SPECIALS, A DIFFICULT YEAR STARTS WITH SEVERAL CHARACTERS CONVERGING ON ONE PLACE. DO YOU LIKE FILMING POPULATION FLOWS?

O. N.: What was certain is that what we wanted most was energy and movement! And that style of direction motivated our choice of subjects. Black Friday or the strongarmed tactics of environmental activists: human activities that are exciting and inspiring to film. It was also a reaction to four years of *EN THERAPIE*, focused on filming close ups and shot reverse shots in a therapist's office. We

inevitably needed to break free, to look for new challenges. But above and beyond those actions, beyond the activists, there was the "eco-anxiety" that we wanted to show.

E. T.: Besides, those kinds of scenes are rarely filmed. Creating new images is part of the pleasure we take in cinema.

LIKE THE BEGINNING OF THE SPECIALS, A DIFFICULT YEAR STARTS WITH SEVERAL CHARACTERS CONVERGING ON ONE PLACE. DO YOU LIKE FILMING POPULATION FLOWS?

E. T.: True. Subconsciously we must have wanted to talk about society on the march. How people on opposite sides of the spectrum can ultimately converge. That is one of our permanent features. The opening sequence in our films often announces their pace and general movement.

O. N.: In this film, people run to or from... excess.

ITALIAN COMEDY HAS ALWAYS MORE OR LESS MARKED YOUR FILMS, BUT HERE YOU UNABASHEDLY ASSUME ITS BLACK HUMOR.

E. T. This is our eighth film. The seven previous ones formed a cycle in which our heroes were pretty likeable. The greatest risk was redundancy,

repetitiveness. This time we wanted Italian-style comedy to be more than just a vague source of inspiration. We wanted it to be a model. Using irony, satire, and farce to help us to get a better grasp on our subject. To make the deluge more tumultuous, with more currents and counter currents; to jostle, disturb, overrun, to describe a changing and deconstructing society. In Monicelli's *BIG DEAL ON MADONNA STREET*, with its violent social fabric, there is still an old man who discreetly devours a baby's food!

O. N.: Romain Gary wrote: *"Humor is the proof of man's superiority over what happens to him.* From Ettore Scola to Dino Risi, the genius of Italian cinema in the 1970s was to laugh at the ordeals we go through in everyday life. Yves Robert or Claude Lelouch adopted that same spirit in *L'AVENTURE C'EST L'AVENTURE* for example. On tour during previews, a member of the audience told us that we "had fun with misfortune".

EXAGGERATING THE BLACK HUMOR A LITTLE, DO YOU ACCEPT THAT YOUR CHARACTERS ARE NOT ALL THAT LIKEABLE?

O. N. : Yes, in Italian-style comedy, the lethal weapon is the character: sly, sometimes dishonest,

irresponsible, down on his luck, a braggart, in search of human dignity, social recognition or a love affair. The challenge was to make these losers likeable in an apparent chronological disorder that normal linearity would never convey.

Here we unabashedly accept that our heroes start out at point A to arrive... at point A.

E. T.: We sort of tried that in our third film, *TELEMENT PROCHES*, which describes tense family relations, marked by love, contempt, and dependency. And then again, we're getting old. We may be less optimistic than before! The question of ethical responsibility arises, and it is no longer possible to say "*après moi, le déluge*".

HOW DO YOU BALANCE THE WEIGHT OF CHARACTERS FROM TWO OPPOSING CAMPS: THE CONSUMER MANIACS AND THE RADICAL ENVIRONMENTALISTS...

E. T.: By remaining behind the camera, using our POV to entertain as much as to provoke. Because the two camps symbolically represent the contradictions of our times. By considering the varying points of view non-judgmentally, without favoring one or the other, and without imposing a moral on the story.

One of the masters of Italian comedy Dino Risi said: "I hate sanctimoniousness. For me, no light comes from the screen to tell the audience what to think".

O. N.: By trying to describe the ups and the downs, the pros and cons... by immersion, by spending a long time with the Crésus association that provides assistance to overindebted individuals. Or Extinction Rebellion, observing their mantras and codes...

E. T.: For example, the pseudonyms in the film: Quinoa, Cactus, Antilope, are all authentic, they are real code names used by the radical environmental sector. Because in that milieu they all reject judging an activist based on a first name that might betray a social or ethnic origin. Exactly like in the commissariat scene when Noémie Merlant has to hand over her ID card, we only discovered the true identities of these people when they came to work on the film.

"CAME TO WORK ON THE FILM", MEANING?

O. N.: Everyone we filmed around the principal actors are activists whom we recruited for the scenes at Fashion Week, in front of the planes, and the demonstration in front of the Banque de France. They said: we do this for people to talk about us,

you're talking about us, so we're good. We love mixed casts, professionals and non-professionals. Each one has a challenge to meet. It was funny because the young activists often thought that our satire was too wishy washy!

HOW DO YOU FILM AT ROISSY OR IN FRONT OF THE BANQUE DE FRANCE?

E. T.: Reactions are usually positive to film shoot requests, and we're usually authorized to shoot, but this was a little more complicated... We were refused pretty much everywhere. No shopping center would let us recreate Black Friday, and the airports were reticent before we were able to negotiate with Roissy and Châteauroux. As for the Banque de France, it's not... the Banque de France.

O. N.: It's a building that looks a lot like it...

E. T.: It's the Académie du Climat ! Wearing a little makeup...

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE CAST...

O. N.: Pio Marmaï was with us from the start. He stimulated our writing. We thought of pairing him with Alban Ivanov. Alas, Alban had some problems shortly before we began shooting and did not feel

up to working on the film. That same day we met Jonathan Cohen in a café, and the rest is history.

E. T.: He felt extremely flattered, but insisted on warning us that he had just worked non-stop for six months and that he was on his last legs... We said, that could not be more appropriate for a character named Lexo: all he had to do was come as is, three days stubble, and completely wiped out! In some scenes, we tried to slow him down, do something pathetic like Vittorio Gassman...

LIKE FOR EXAMPLE THAT TOUCHING MOMENT WHEN HE SAYS, "I SMELL YOU" TO HIS EX-WIFE... DO YOU FEEL A THRILL WHEN YOU COME UP WITH LINES LIKE THAT?

E. T.: That comes from a very personal anecdote with one of my children. I'm glad that Jonathan sublimated it like that. When he says, "I didn't say I love you, I said I smell you", we can tell that she is still almost touched by her ex-husband, even though he ruined her life. She might even take him back ... And that's the hero Italian-style: he's not likeable, but hard to get rid of. A magnificent loser. .

O. N. : Because he doesn't know that he's a loser. The moment Jonathan joined the club, we rewrote

things for him. In fact, Pio ended up with Alban's role and Jonathan with Pio's.

AND NOÉMIE MERLANT? DID YOU THINK OF HER FROM THE START?

O. N.: Our cinema is bursting with male twosomes. We wanted a trio with a female heroine. We appreciated her in Céline Sciamma's film, and in Jacques Audiard's *PARIS, 13th DISTRICT*. We were sure of the power of her acting. She graciously agreed to come in for an audition, and one minute later, we knew she would be magnificent. Then during our preparation, we saw Louis Garel's *THE INNOCENT*, where her gift for comedy comes to the fore. Her precision is a source of fun. She found a place for herself in our film and shines alongside Pio and Jonathan, who were very complicit and supportive. She is at the center of the poster and there is a reason for that. If only for her voice calling Pio "Sweetie", her acting delivers marvels of precision and exactitude.





AN INTERVIEW WITH PIO MARMAÏ

We wanted to work together for a long time, which materialized with *EN THERAPIE*. And then he offered me this film.

At first, I was meant to play the role of Bruno (now played by Jonathan), but the last-minute change was, I believe, very inspiring. I brought a whole other energy to Albert.

To embody him, I had to play on two registers at once: survival, because socially my character has his back to the wall. Debt after debt, he has sunk into a kind of marginality. But at the same time, I had to provide comic relief, because he remains in touch with the real world via his slyness and cunning. Even when in denial, he never gives up. He moves on, he is constantly on the go, in time to the rhythm imposed by Eric et Olivier's language.

I liked that perpetual movement, even if it's clumsy. And it works as a mirror image of Noémie's movements: they are both driven, he by his survival instinct, and she by her

activism. Albert's denial is also a kind of sincerity, which makes him so touching.

There is no improvisation with Eric and Olivier. You play the text! Some moments may look improvised, but everything is there, written in black and white. They do a lot of takes, milk situations for all they're worth, and sometimes give us free rein, but they balance it all out perfectly: Olivier will direct, and then Eric, but there is never any tension between them. I am fascinated that their partnership works so well, with so much mutual consideration and curiosity after all the films they've made together. Until now, I had never been directed by a duo and I never imagined it could be so sweet. The pleasure they take in cinema comes across in the way they direct.

Jonathan and I had a lot of laughs. We joked around a lot but there were never fits of giggles on set, because Eric and Olivier insist on a very studious work atmosphere.

But our joking complicity off screen obviously contributed to our goofy Three Stooges shtick.

As for Noémie, I met her during the waltz rehearsals, so the distance between us soon evaporated. What is great is that for her character I embody the devil, but our two different ways of looking at things finally meet and harmonize. When working on such a touchy subject, having such partners and directors is reassuring and a real delight.

Moreover, the collective energy was real since our partners were authentic activists. We rehearsed their operations, and they explained their methodology to us: I was interested in learning about and recreating their “performances”: the human chains, sit ins, which are a kind of artistic blockade. I was touched by their poetic and political dimensions. I talked with them a lot and they felt comfortable about revealing their tactics, their group protocol during demonstrations and speeches, things I was totally unaware of.

The scene in which Grégoire Leprince-Ringuet screens the film for the group and takes advantage of the opportunity to reveal my character’s duplicity was even more heart-wrenching to play since Eric and Olivier were filming chronologically. All my pleasant memories

of group actions passed before my eyes, and then a rude awakening humiliated me in front of all those people who had become partners.

We had been shooting for a long time, and I had learned to love and respect my activist-partners, and so of course the looks on their faces when they acted deceived upset me even more. I felt like I had betrayed them! That little film in the film summed up something very private. Like a light-hearted making-of that ends on a sour note... A great idea of Eric and Olivier’s!





AN INTERVIEW WITH JONATHAN COHEN

Eric and Olivier called me just as I was finishing post-production on *LE FLAMBEAU*. I would have obviously liked to work with them, but I was wiped out! I told them: guys, I'm a wet rag! Olivier answered, that's exactly what we're looking for! All right then, bingo... And I never looked back.

My character sees no way out. He has lost everything! Death is the only escape. But little by little, thanks to friendship and gambling (because he pretends to be someone else in this association), he comes back to life. At the end, when he stops the plane with his activist comrades, he shouts: "We're the ones who decide". He has taken responsibility for his life and decisions. That is the beauty of activism: it offers life-saving energy, and not only for the planet.

Eric and Olivier were so intelligent in positing surfeit and penury as connected vessels: some people trying to fill theirs, while others believe in destitution. That is what is left of a world facing its future.

As actor's directors, they gave me some references to

Italian comedy, such as *BIG DEAL ON MADONNA STREET* or *I VITELLONI*: I was supposed to "do a Gassman", or "do a Mastroianni ". Find the poetry, the lyricism that endures even in misery. I play a dodgy character trying to preserve some panache through thick and thin. That breath of life, that persists against hell and high water, is what creates comedy. Like Pio and my character versus Noémie: two guys who land in a context that is alien to them. Hostile even.

With *Sirène*, my goose is cooked! At first, in the screenplay, I was supposed to end up with the investigating magistrate who appears with the judge during my hearing for insolvency. Then more finely scripted irony gradually took over: in fact, everything leads to my winding up with *Sirène*! It was a disturbing choice because I spend the entire film embarrassed and turned off by the moves this woman is putting on me, but I end up seduced by her warmth and goodness. My last words in the film make that very clear: "she opened her arms to me". Of course, he has a hard time accepting

this relationship, but that sums up the human paradox. It is very human.

This time, I don't play an overly self-confident idiot like Marc in *LA FLAMME* and *LE FLAMBEAU*, but a man who refuses to accept his social position: his wife is not from the same social milieu, he cannot afford to offer her the life he dreamt of, and so he creates an illusion. He lies to himself and so of course to others, and the house of cards comes tumbling down. He's not a bad dude, he is a man who refuses to accept his condition. The phrase "do I need this, do I really need it?" does not have the same meaning for him, because in a certain way, he really does need exterior signs of wealth to compensate for his frustration.

The film is also interesting on the subject of masculinity, which has been related to social success from the dawn of time. Here too we are going to have to step back and change paradigms.

TALK TO US ABOUT YOUR PARTNERS.

I literally became a Mathieu Amalric groupie while watching him perform. He works magic. He is always surprising, with his peculiar way of timing his lines. He will try anything! I have admired him since his days with Arnaud Desplechin. I felt privileged to perform with him. Noémie had a very difficult role to play. But she did

manage to make her character so endearing; brava! I had a ball with Pio. We vaguely knew each other, but our complicity became immediately apparent on location and in real life. We were constantly fooling around, but not while shooting because Eric and Olivier demanded that we be fully immersed in the situations and text – *"come on guys, easy on the jokes, let's concentrate!"* I've rarely encountered such workhorses.

They were able to transport me to an emotional zone that was new to me in the sequence where I whisper *"I smell you"* to my ex-wife. I didn't want to go overboard, but they pushed me. They overcame my reserve. Many thanks.





AN INTERVIEW WITH NOÉMIE MERLANT

I feel particularly touched to be on the roster for this film because Eric and Olivier are our two contemporary masters of comedy. I was blown away by *UNTOUCHABLE*. Not to mention their next films. They know better than anyone else how to mix tonalities: humor and social interest, emotions and humanism. And how to reach the widest audiences while remaining challenging. The fact that they thought of me, even though my career did not yet have 'a comic touch,' moves and honors me.

I didn't feel very sure of myself during the casting sessions! Although I never feel comfortable during auditions... but they immediately put me at ease, with their special knack for forging bonds.

I was moved by Valentine's contradictions: she is multidimensional! Committed, radical. Her eco-anxiety is real, she represents so many young people of her generation. She is also very touching. To construct the character, and try to reveal her weaker zones, I spoke with, among others, a young

woman who works with the group Extinction Rebellion. It may be difficult to understand the action of such groups through what the media shows, but when you meet with activists, who are often very young, full of anxiety and contradictions (some work in advertising!) everything becomes clearer. The most important thing is that they are never lukewarm: they roll up their sleeves to fight for their convictions! I tried to paint Valentine like that.

The sequence in which I make a speech before the assembled activists stressed me out. Eric and Olivier knew I was leery of that scene in which I feared I would not be totally sincere – it would have been disgraceful to compose something artificial in front of that audience. They were able to reassure me and showed me a montage of activists' speeches they edited to help me prepare. In my text, it says that the 40° bar would be reached in a few years, and it was 40° out on that very day...

I hope to have endowed Valentine with a certain poetry and sense of burlesque, thanks to my - so benign- directors. They

made her into a dreamer, wanting to remain in touch with nature. In terms of acting, I had to find a rhythm different from Pio and Jonathan's. My character is not inherently comical, so I had to find my own way, using another tempo: a little static and melancholic, before plunging into action. It was a constant balancing act, stop and go. Like arrhythmia of the heart. And I constantly had to stifle my laughter, because between takes there was a Jonathan and Pio festival of tomfoolery! I learned a lot from them, even though their energies are so different: Pio's is frantic, much like Patrick Dewaere, while Jonathan's gift of the gab reminds me more of Belmondo.

I like the fact that the film begins by poking gentle fun at the characters, even getting carried away at times, before revealing their endearing nuances. Eric and Olivier go over the top, much like in Italian comedy, which makes for fun, and for gravitas. I think that the film talks less about ecology, and more about overconsumption, the trap we have all fallen into; and the permanent dissatisfaction that society has been encouraging us to fall prey to for decades now. It's a fascinating approach.

Valentine's apartment, completely empty even though she is financially well off, is a magnificent mirror image of Jonathan's character's house, empty against his will. Some people yearn for abundance, while others prefer emptiness. Valentine searches for meaning. *A DIFFICULT YEAR* is a film

about relationships: my character leads Pio and Jonathan to an awakening. Face to face, this pas de deux between polar opposites is a vector of the human condition. Eric and Olivier often make a parallel with movie theaters, where people of diverse origins and different preoccupations come together to commune about a common subject.

When on location, it's crazy how they ascribed a place to each actor, activist and technician. The set was crowded, but they knew every person's name! They could tell an anecdote about a person they just met! I am fascinated by their ability to listen, the sincere interest they take, although, frankly, on a film shoot directors have other fish to fry. They advocate for dialogue in their films. They also encourage it in their work. And they know... how to party, they celebrate every day, demonstrating that even though the film is important, it is not all there is. Some filmmakers talk about morals in their films, without applying them in their own lives. Eric and Olivier are the opposite: *A DIFFICULT YEAR* never moralizes. It raises questions. But they themselves behave undeniably humanely.





AN INTERVIEW WITH MATHIEU AMALRIC

The producers at Les Films du Poisson, with whom Eric et Olivier made *EN THERAPIE*, frequently told me that they would like to work with me.

I couldn't resist: those guys are sweethearts! Truly beautiful people. And their films have always amazed me: who else uses comedy to venture into rough territory as well as they do? Just think of the beginning of the film, when we are caught up in these young people's energy, in their enthusiasm: they introduce a very serious subject with a completely baroque Black Friday scene, and with Jacques Brell!

To embody my character, I did not think comedy. I needed to give a literal rendition. I played the compassionate older man who has already gone through the wringer, who has known the abyss. I imagined that he worked in a large bank, and that he had been made redundant.

Comedy is a question of impact, especially when filmmakers offer you a role in gold to play. My greatest difficulty was not laughing at those two hilarious nincompoops, Jonathan and Pio! Those guys are incendiary, and Eric and Olivier

created opportunities for them to shine.

My character is a kind soul, a savior, but complex human nature complicates things: he has his demons too. The running casino gag came very late and, when reading the script, I realized that my character was much more interesting and burlesque. I play the straight man. We and the costume and make up departments made things up as we went along, constantly adding new details like the phony mustache. Eric and Olivier whooped for joy, like little kids: "yeah, let's do it! They're workaholics. But they love it so much that they carry you along ...

I had just worked with Nanni Moretti and had to dance. Eric and Olivier are like him, card-carrying members of the family of filmmakers who say: "More... And still more!", to reach the apogee of hilarity, and pleasure is their guide. Have some dreams been forced on us? This film encourages us to reclaim our own dreams!



CAST

Albert
Bruno
Cactus
Henri
Quinoa
Antilope
Sirène

Pio Marmai
Jonathan Cohen
Noémie Merlant
Mathieu Amalric
Grégoire Leprince-Ringuet
Luàna Bajrami
Sandrine Briard



CREW

A film by
Screenplay
and dialogues by
Original music
Executive producer
Production manager
Director of photography
Chief editor
First Assistant Director
Script
Cast

Head Set Designer
Head Costume Designer
Hairdresser

Head Make-Up Artist
Location Manager
Post-Production Manager
Sound

Musical Supervision

Eric Toledano and Olivier Nakache

Eric Toledano and Olivier Nakache
GRANDBROTHERS

Hervé Ruet

Bruno Morin

Mélodie Prél

Dorian Rigal-Ansous

Quentin Janssen

Christelle Meaux

Elodie Demey A.R.D.A

Marie-France Michel

Mila Préli

Isabelle Pannetier

Gérald Portenart

Margo Blache

Sandrine Monnerie

Charles Zemer

Ana Antunes

Pascal Armant

Sélim Azzazi

Jean-Paul Hurier

Josette Music Club

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and International sales

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Nicolas Duval Adassovsky
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ETOILE 20, INDÉFILMS 11,
CINEMAGE 17

DEVTVCINE 8, INDÉFILMS
INITIATIVE 10, CINEMAGE
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