

GAUMONT PRESENTS



ROSCHDY ZEM

DORIA TILLIER

GUILLAUME GALLIENNE

de la Comédie-Française

THE EDGE OF THE BLADE

A film by **VINCENT PEREZ**

DAMIEN BONNARD

VINCENT PEREZ

Duration : 1h40

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SYNOPSIS

Paris, 1887. In a rapidly evolving society, the duel is the last place where one can defend his honor. Clement Lacaze, the charismatic Master of Arms, and Marie-Rose Astie de Valsayre, an early-day feminist, battle side by side, paying no heed to the threats and dangers that menace them.

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR VINCENT PEREZ

Why this film about a duel?

I always wanted to make a film about duels. It was a long-standing dream, without ever finding a way to do it or deciding on a period. But the truth is that the crucial thing was being ready for it as a filmmaker.

In my acting career, I have fought more than thirty combats, with sword, saber and foil, most notably in *ON GUARD*, *LA REINE MARGOT* and *FANFAN LA TULIPE*. I've worked with Chinese, Russian and American stuntmen. Among them, excellent masters-at-arms like William Hobbs, who staged some of the most stunning cinematic duels - Ridley Scott's *THE DUELLISTS* and the famous *GAME OF THRONES*, just to mention two.

During a discussion on the shoot of *AN OFFICER AND A SPY*, Jean Dujardin said that I should direct a combat film. That reopened the Pandora's box that was still slammed shut. I realized that my desire to make a film about the subject remained intact. But I now felt ready for it. I immediately began to do some research.

I was rather surprised to find online "*L'Annuaire du duel, 1880 -1889*", a document that recorded the outstanding duels that took place over those nine years. During which time, they were actually enjoying a resurgence in France. Another publication was also very important for the film: "*L'art du duel*", written in 1886. It was the Bible of all French duelists. It was written by Adolphe Eugène Tavernier, who owned an armory and was simultaneously a collector, author / journalist and fencer. The book is a treasure trove of information about duels, their techniques, arms, rules, and protocol. At the time, "*L'art du duel*" dethroned the other essential reference book, written in 1836 by the Comte de Chatauvillard. It contains fascinating pages about the evolution of many dueling techniques. I had tremendous material to write a story...

So, then you had to write a screenplay...

Because the second half of the nineteenth century was, I dare say, the Golden Age of the duel, I first wanted to make a film about its men and the compulsory duties incumbent upon them: manly courage, pride, hiding fear, and the bizarre duty to defend one's honor. When young and more mature gentlemen felt that their valor had been disregarded, they did not hesitate to put their physical and moral integrity, even their very lives, on the line to obtain reparation.

I also had to consider the effects the Franco-Prussian war - and most notably defeat - had on them. I realized that I had to incorporate into the psychological makeup of these men the additional moral duty that they created for themselves at the end of the war to refurbish their identity and recover their lost honor. A duty that at times weighed so heavily that some – represented in my film by Colonel Berchère – only regained their lust for life when again facing death... as if unconsciously that was how they could rewrite History.

After all my fascinating research into these true, extraordinary stories about duels, the character who would serve as the pivot to my story finally emerged: a war veteran, taciturn and austere, who personifies the noble character of the master-at-arms, pure and untouchable. I imagined him devastated by the debacle in 1870 and the deaths of his many friends. This man, who lived through horrors, would become in his own way a kind of “Samurai”.

Handling arms was now his sole center of interest: he would devote his life to forming and training duelists, as much to teach them how to win and save their lives, as to inculcate a sense of honor in them. I called him Clément Lacaze in memory of my first fencing professor at the Conservatory, and I “fleshed him out” with all the masters-at-arms who had marked me, but also with the many film heroes who had fascinated me: the *SEVEN SAMURAI*, others in Kurosawa’s great films, and in the Westerns of John Ford and Howard Hawks. When “my” Clément Lacaze was entirely “ready”, I realized that he resembled the ideal hero of my childhood.

Why did you situate your film in 1887?

It was the ideal year. A watershed year. With the appearance of the first electric lights, the gramophone, motorized vehicles, the first floor of the Eiffel Tower... it was an extraordinary year, the world was truly changing. Certain signs – the tentative appearance of feminism - heralded the arrival of the twentieth century and its modernism.

But the era was still profoundly marked by the traditions of the nineteenth century, and most notably by its societal codes. Dueling was on the rise since 1881 and the promulgation of the law on the freedom of the press. Hacks of every political stripe, journalists and authors alike, were suddenly authorized to publish whatever they liked, with no risks of censorship. Provocations and demands for reparation multiplied. As a result, the great newspapers of record, *Le Figaro*, *Gil Blas*, *Le Petit Journal*, and many others, set up their own fencing rooms to form their journalists in dueling techniques. They also paid a bonus to collaborators involved in a duel.

At the beginning of the film, fencers in an armory talk about the murder of three women in the Avenue Montaigne. I evoke that affair because it is thought to be the first news item that sold papers and had all France on tenterhooks. It was a media phenomenon. The number of demands for reparation – and therefore duels – went through the roof.

Did Ferdinand Massat, played by Damien Bonnard, really exist?

Yes, Massat really did exist. He really did jeer at women, and he really fought. His and his colleagues’ misogyny would be unthinkable today. He regularly dragged Marie-Rose Astié de Valsayre — played by Doria Tillier — through the mud. And she really existed too.

Although your film shows a fascination with the duel, its protocol and aesthetics, it also denounces its absurdity, discreetly at first, and then flagrantly in the final scene...

During the shoot I was often asked if my film would be in defense of dueling, and I would say that I could not really answer that question. Because the subject of the film was dueling per se: what gave rise to it, how to prepare for it, how it took place, the rules it was subject to, what it says about the

violent nature of those who indulged in it and also, why it was so fascinating. That is probably the question that the film asks.

If you look at *THE EDGE OF THE BLADE*, you'll see that as it progresses, the more clearly it reveals the persistent and absurd nature of the phenomenon.

But at the same time, a part of me is still captivated by the fact that a duel settles a conflict between two antagonists once and for all.

I also see a splendid idea of courage and a certain philosophy that elevate the duelist to an almost mystical level. The duelist rises to a plane above other men, which is something that his contemporaries admired. Many great thinkers fought duels, among them Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Maupassant, Proust, Alexandre Dumas... The list is long and impressive.

Alexander Pushkin was killed in a duel with Georges d'Anthès.

This film, your fourth as a director, has the same tension and realism, cruel and sensual, as Patrice Chéreau's. You were his pupil, and then actor. Does this reflect that?

Unconsciously perhaps, but not voluntarily. One thing is certain, *THE EDGE OF THE BLADE* is the film closest to my heart.

To make it, I did staggering research, which resulted in 250 pages, illustrated by more than 1200 items (engravings, portraits, paintings...). I included what I wanted, and what I didn't want, orchestrated in sequences, like a mirror image of my screenplay. I made it available to all the department heads (props, set designers, costumers, make up, etc..). It was invaluable during our discussions about the predominant colors and textures of the film to come. At the same time, I pencil sketched all the scenes of the film. I wanted something to refer to, in case of doubt or forgetfulness. You imagine a film while writing it. I wanted to preserve my dream film and so I sketched it. I filled dozens of notebooks, I sketched a thousand drawings. It took forever.

A word about photography. It looks so natural...

I wanted to tell this story as realistically as possible, with no recourse to special effects. Or in any event, as few as possible. The idea was not so much to create something "beautiful" but to remain close to life. My DP Lucie Baudinaud and I focused on recreating the light of the period. At the end of the nineteenth century, the world was changing. Lighting kept apace. Gas lamps began to disappear, and electricity was being installed practically everywhere, awakening both wonder and fear. There were rumors that electricity could cause blindness, but it was accepted and radically changed street and interior lighting. Remember — gas lights caused dramatic fires, like the one at the Opéra-Comique, a gigantic disaster where most of the victims were women, trapped in gowns that transformed them into living torches. That is one of the reasons why Marie-Rose Astié de Valsayre fought for women's right to wear pants, still strictly prohibited by law.

Speaking of Marie-Rose Astié de Valsayre. Why, in this film about men, did you give such a prominent place to this woman?

That was unanticipated. I was struck by Marie-Rose's sense of honor — a boys' thing at the time! And her modernity.

She was a musician and composer, a widow and ambulance driver during the Franco-Prussian War. Despite a hard life, she devoted most of her (many) talents to fighting for women's rights, equal salaries, the right to respect, the right to vote, etc.... At the turn of the century, that was incredibly brave. When you read her writings, they sound like they were written yesterday. She dared to embody the future in a macho, rigorist and patriarchal society.

Why did you choose Doria Tillier to play her?

I never considered anyone other than Doria for Marie-Rose. Her cheek, wit, frankness, and independence... they both have that in common. They have the nerve to speak up. And Doria has a particular look, she physically resembles the real Astié. She is tall, beautiful, modern, and also very versatile: in one second, she can become wholly someone else. She had never been in a period drama before, so here we discover her in another guise.

Doria was a marvelous and attentive listener. She constructed her character from one take to the next, always in the same humble service to the film. I loved working with her.

Did you also immediately think of Roschdy Zem for Lacaze?

Roschdy arrived during the writing stage. As if in flashes, he gradually became the character as I imagined him. Roschdy is an intriguing actor. He is so charismatic that he fills the screen, even when not speaking or moving. There is something touching about him that I wanted to come across in Lacaze: behind the strength, determination, and calm, he exudes nostalgia and a great sensitivity. I was very nervous when I contacted Roschdy because I couldn't imagine anyone else in the role. I was very lucky that he accepted the challenge.

Not only is he the Lacaze of my dreams, but above and beyond all that, he also brings a modern twist to the film: he gives the impression of reinventing the role and period. With a Western touch.

It's not so easy to take up fencing. All the actors had to do it - Doria Tillier, Damien Bonnard, Noham Edje – and they will tell you: it's actually rather painful and frustrating. It requires a lot of work and humility! Roschdy had to work for several months to become the consummate master-at-arms that he plays.

Did you already have the entire cast in mind?

Aside from Doria and Roschdy, I cast it bit by bit. Besides, the film was postponed several times, and we had to readapt it every time. Roschdy suggested Damien Bonnard for Ferdinand Massat. I didn't know Damien. He turned out to be a diamond in the rough. He is a totally instinctive actor: you give him a hint, and he goes for it, with no safety net, and he's most often fabulous.

Guillaume Gallienne was not premeditated either. I was delighted that the great actor I met on *FANFAN LA TULIPE* brought his profound intelligence to the swashbuckling intellectual Adolphe Eugène Tavernier. Guillaume is a rare pearl: he elevates his dialogues and roles.

And then Noham Edje as Adrien, he came in to audition and seemed obvious for the role. He is very exact and was a joy to work with. Besides, he quickly became familiar with the language of arms.

Who initiated your “swashbucklers”?

My friend and master-at-arms Michel Carliez, whom I met on *CYRANO DE BERGERAC*. We made *ON GUARD*, *FANFAN LA TULIPE*, *TOMORROW AT DAWN* and so many other films... He coaches me on any film that involves swordsmanship. I met Michel while he was William Hobbs' assistant (*THE DUELLISTS*). Bill was the great English-speaking expert, a marvelous man who enjoyed improvising during combats.

Michel's technique focuses on training and practice. He inculcates control and precision at high speeds. He is the only rightful heir to the fencing in old movies. He is part of the noble school of arms and pursues the long road travelled by his ancestors and his father Claude Carliez. He knows the history of weapons like few others. Michel is precious because he is the memory of an endangered discipline.

To play Berchère, you too had to return to fencing...

Yes, I had to take it up again while preparing and directing the film. My first sword fight was in the theater, when Patrice Chéreau hired me to play Laertes in the *HAMLET* he was doing in the main courtyard at the Palais des Papes in Avignon. Raoul Billeret coached us in the fight scenes. His technique was exacting and brutal. It was an amazing experience, four months of rehearsals for one sword fight. We played every night and the show lasted five hours. After Avignon I must have done a hundred more performances. With brilliant Gérard Desarthe who played Hamlet and weathered the storm. We broke seven blades in our duels. They all went flying, left and right, on stage or into the audience. It was mad!

Fencing has been with me throughout my career, all the way to this film. Directing this one from behind the camera at the same time as fighting in front of it — especially the last duel with saber and on horseback! — was the most exciting challenge of my career.

It was the first time I acted in a film I directed, but since it had to do with a discipline I know so well, I would have probably felt frustrated if I weren't in it. Besides, Berchère has three duels to fight, and I knew how far I would be able to take them.

That being said, the experience was grueling. As a photographer, I am always in control of the image. Playing Berchère, that was impossible and that irked me. I felt like I was “losing my grip”. Strange though, at the same time I had the feeling that while performing I was physically “entering” my film. It was like stepping through the looking glass. But more concretely, playing with my partners brought me closer to them.

Is it frightening to direct actors fighting duels?

Actually, no. The level of risk was practically nil. Each combat was precisely choreographed. Of course, you may take a blow, but that only reminds you to stay alert. I've taken some hits in the past, but in this case, we managed to avoid any accidents.

We generally give sword fights a “pausal”, a breather, afraid that the audience might find them boring or repetitive. A fight begins, and we film: it's spectacular. Entertaining. But after a few moves,

we cut, to return just before the climax, and we continue the story. In my case, that was impossible, I had to film the entire back and forth because that was part of the story, and we wanted to show the reactions of those in the vicinity.

Michel Carliez, my DP, and our first AD James Canal thought about it a lot. We all needed to be on the same page, so that Michel and Lucie Baudinaud had total confidence in each other and were alert to each other even at moments of great tension. And all the more so since we only had 39 days to shoot. We only had two or three days to film each duel.

We needed to determine how we would edit each frame, and sequence them without asking too many questions in order to be able to shoot. We pre-filmed our five fight sequences during preparation using a small camera. Then our editor Sylvie Lager edited the combats. With each of them, we tried to remain as close to reality as possible.

Our work on sound was crucial because it contributes a lot to the audience's emotions during the duels. A foil whistles, a sword clanks, a saber slices. Scenery, flooring and the environment were major variables in how well the combat would work.

All the preparatory work required clockwork precision in order to breathe life into them and maximize the realism of the situations.

You wrote *THE EDGE OF THE BLADE* with Karine Silla, who is your wife. This is the third screenplay you wrote together. How do you proceed?

We respected the principle that when you write together there has to be a leader. When the project is Karine's idea, she occupies that chair.

For *THE EDGE OF THE BLADE*, she encouraged me from the start to embark on the adventure. She is responsible for the finesse and beauty of the dialogues. Generally, when I'm the leader, I make a proposal, she refines it, and comes up with gems... and then from one move to the next, we tweak, we get down to the essence of the dialogues.

Karine worked more particularly on the psychological dimension of the interpersonal relationships between the characters, which we refined from one draft to the next.

The danger was the musty smell of settled dust, of it being an old film before it was even born. We always needed to emphasize its modernity, and that is what guided me throughout its writing. The idea was to make a modern film that has resonance for our times. Our characters had to speak to audiences today.

How do you judge your film today?

It's too soon to say. I am generally very hard on my own work, but this film is an accomplishment that I am rather proud of.

The subject is fascinating. Duels have existed since the Middle Ages and only died out with the Second World War. The last duel took place in 1967, between Gaston Defferre and René Ribière. The phenomenon survived over a long time.

THE EDGE OF THE BLADE in its own way denounces the absurdity of violence and war. But it also explores the possibility of defending your good name. Seen from that angle, it is modern, because although a period film, it raises questions about respect and honor. The subject remains timely due to social media. The constant stream of “human-interest” stories contains manipulated elements that generate persistent rumors (aggravated by our proverbial fascination with car wrecks on the motorway). Speech at the time was alive and frontal, unlike the internet whose virtual, faceless speech gives people no opportunity to defend themselves. The idea of dignity is an interesting issue. Does it still exist? Can it be defended? Is it vital? If so, how do we defend it? With lawyers and legislation, or by more rumors?

One of my greatest satisfactions is to have paid tribute to a woman, Marie-Rose Astié de Valsayre. I hope that this film will bring her to audiences’ attention as one of the first female activists, ahead of her time, and who wanted to change things. At times by the sword.

INTERVIEW WITH ACTOR **ROSCHDY ZEM**

What appealed to you in this screenplay?

What appealed to me is, I believe, its historic character and how it presents and analyzes duels... Like many other little boys, I loved swashbuckling films and Westerns like Sergio Leone's films, in which there are a lot of shootouts. Some decades later, this very romantic story reawakened my childhood fascination with man-on-man encounters. I found it all the more interesting because it takes place in France at the end of the nineteenth century. Very eventful and conflicted, against a backdrop that heralds changes in society. I did not know much about it and had never seen it depicted in the cinema, at least not in this way. And then at the center of the story is the pivotal role I was being asked to play. Clément Lacaze, discreet, secretive, and austere.

Were you surprised that Vincent Perez offered you the role of Lacaze? Your career has never been associated with cloak and dagger films?

Let me start off by saying that I am still surprised when offered any role whatsoever. After all the time I've been doing this job, I still wonder how I manage to awaken desire in a director. That being said, for Lacaze, I think that Vincent needed an actor who looked a little - if you'll allow me - "run through the wringer". Lacaze is losing the full possession of his means, his quiet strength is beginning to fade. There is something poetic about the fact that he now has to show his weakness and fragility. Exactly the kind of character I increasingly want to portray.

Aside from his battered, if not devastated aspect, what did you like about Lacaze?

His complexity. Lacaze is nostalgic and an ascetic. He has an acute sense of duty and hates dishonesty and arrogance. He is a fine character. He stands out in the haughty bourgeois France of the nineteenth century. I immediately wanted to play him...

Did the fact that he was a swordsman intimidate you?

Not for a second. I had already taken up fencing in 2001 for *BLANCHE*. In that Bernie Bonvoisin film, I played one of Mazarin's spies. Since there were many fight scenes, I had to train a lot, and I loved it. My only regret is that some of the scenes were cut in the editing room. There was no risk of that in *THE EDGE OF THE BLADE*, since they were the crux of the plot. I was thrilled to take up fencing again. I love films that force you to take up physical activities that are new to you or that you haven't practiced in a long time. That pricks your ego because you have to remain humble. Fencing in particular because it is a very intense discipline that requires exceptional physical shape.

Was it hard to take up again?

I had a hard time, but I wouldn't say it was hell: physical pain suffered for a good cause does not faze me. I was well surrounded: there were the other actors, Doria, Damien, Noham and our professor Michel Carliez, who is the consummate master-of-arms of French cinema. Between him

and Mario Luraschi, the prince of equestrian consultants (Mario has more than 500 films to his credit, including *JAPPELOUP* and *THE THREE MUSKETEERS*), we were in the hands of some helluva experts. It was a little as if we were being prepared to drive a Ferrari: exhilarating and extremely enriching. Even though I never reached Mario and Michel's level of competence, "my" Lacaze certainly became more credible. For me, there is nothing better than physical training to ground a character – even better than the most sophisticated mental preparations.

Fencing is a dangerous sport. Were you wary of a wrong move, on your part or your partners? During the shoot weren't you disturbed by the proximity of the cameras?

Neither. With Michel Carliez as your professor, even if you are a beginner, a wrong move is implausible. The only risk is a psychologically "fragile" partner who may go haywire. But in our case, all our actors were perfectly stable (laughter).

The cameras were placed by Vincent, Michel and the DP, Lucie Baudinaud. The two cameras filming our duels were not a hindrance either.

A duel defends your "honor". What does that value mean to you?

It's a magnificent value, because it subsumes so many other estimable values, like pride, integrity and dignity. Today, we tend to settle scores in an exchange of tweets. Honor is on the decline, but at the time of the film – at least in certain milieus - it was one of the values instilled in boys when they were still in short pants. It even had a romantic dimension. I was delighted to work on one of the rare films to restore honor as a value.

I would like to add though that *THE EDGE OF THE BLADE* in no way exalts the nineteenth century male. As written by Karine Silla and Vincent Perez, it denounces the misogyny and patriarchy that held universal sway at the time. It is pacifist in its denunciation of war via Lacaze who was broken by it. And subtle in its way of announcing the social evolution that would take place in the centuries to come. I find *THE EDGE OF THE BLADE* complex, modern, and fascinating.

And feminist...

And feminist, of course! ... The idea of introducing Marie-Rose Astié de Valsayre into a screenplay that focuses on duels was a brainstorm. It reminds us that women's fight for their emancipation and equal rights is nothing new. Well before Simone Veil and Gisèle Halimi, women were in the forefront of feminism, at times demonstrating phenomenal courage. The proof: some of them, including Marie-Rose Astié (who really existed) bravely fought duels to defend their ideas and prove that courage is not a male prerogative.

Doria Tillier plays Marie-Rose Astié...

I got along very well with her. Doria has the talent - not at all common - of segueing from humor to rigor in a split second. She laughs, jokes, and in the wink of an eye, she is lost in concentration. She works a lot, she is humble, and she never takes herself too seriously. As a partner, she brings out the best in you.

Back to Lacaze. What bugged you most about playing him?

I like the word “bugged” because that is exactly how I felt. Lacaze rarely expresses himself. It is very hard to breathe life into a taciturn character, especially when he has nothing else to do. All actors will tell you: without the text as a crutch, you have nothing to hang onto. And even more so because in such cases, it is virtually impossible to gauge and analyze what you are exuding. You are leery of either doing too much, with the risk of betraying the character, or not enough, and remain inaccessible. That issue “bugged” me every morning, and all the more so because Vincent and I had agreed that at no moment would I try to awaken the audience’s empathy. I arrived on set, never knowing whether under my inscrutable mask I would be able to bring to life the Lacaze I had discovered when reading the screenplay.

Although some scenes are talkier. Did they allow you to indulge in your one guilty pleasure, improvisation?

No way! (laughter). Because “improvisation” implies giving free rein to your emotions and the words that convey them. It relies on a kind of linguistic modernity. In *THE EDGE OF THE BLADE*, every word written by Vincent and Karine was thought out, pondered, and carefully considered. Replacing them with other words risked the collapse of the entire, austere elegance of the characters, and consequently the film.

This is the first time you’ve worked under Vincent Perez’ direction. What kind of moviemaker did he prove to be?

Vincent is a sensitive director. He has a very calm, nuanced, even minimalist approach to directing actors. He belongs to that small coterie of directors who are able to create a climate of confidence with their actors. His whispered indications are so precise that paradoxically they leave you a lot of free room. He was a joy to work with. I have rarely felt so free.

In your opinion, who is the target audience of *THE EDGE OF THE BLADE*?

I hope that this film appeals to everyone. It is always interesting to see how history was made. Interesting to discover how things used to be. It lets us make comparisons and analogies - or not - with our own times. That is often the vocation of period films. Even when fictionalized, they allow for exploring the past, the better to understand the present. I had the same experience with a film like *DAYS OF GLORY*. It is important to look back to see how we got to where we are today.

INTERVIEW WITH ACTRESS

DORIA TILLIER

How did you become involved in this project?

Vincent, whom I didn't know, sent me the screenplay through my agent. I called him immediately after reading it. I have never agreed to do a film so fast. It was especially the character of Marie-Rose that convinced me. It is hard to define yourself, but I had the gut feeling that this woman was close to me, or at least, that I would be able to play her. Vincent had the same feeling, even though he had never met me: that was amazing.

And then, *THE EDGE OF THE BLADE* is a period drama. You don't get to work in many of those. It was a first for me. It was great fun.

Costumes, hair, figures of speech sometimes too... Some actors fear the constraints of period dramas...

I found it very stimulating. All of that helps you immerse yourself in the role. The only unpleasantness about Marie-Rose was that her gowns used very stiff corsets that were sewn in very thick material (by the way, that was one of her struggles, she wanted women to be able to move freely, to get rid of their corsets, slips and skirts). Since we shot in the summer, I was often very hot. But anyhow, it was fun to film in costumes.

Marie-Rose Astié really existed. Did you have any texts available to pinpoint her character?

Her biography is very succinct and there are practically no documents concerning her, but Vincent sent me two brief articles that she had written. One of them revealed her thoughts. Other than that, I can't say that I made any real attempt to immerse myself in her life. What did, however, help me a great deal in composing her character was the way Vincent and Karine wrote her: they had very exactly defined and drawn her. And since I felt that she and I had a lot in common, playing her did not require any great interpretive effort.

Were you surprised that a Marie-Rose Astié was able to make a name for herself in the France at the end of the nineteenth century, that was so macho and patriarchal?

No. I don't see why a woman would be unable to make a name for herself, even in a macho society. What surprises me is the shock that people feel today on discovering that.

In your opinion, is Marie-Rose the one who brings a contemporary feel to this period drama?

I don't know. I think that ideas of freedom and equality are timeless... I am always surprised when I hear that a period drama "sounds" contemporary. I usually don't have an opinion. That is the case with this film. I know that before writing it, Vincent read piles of history books and did serious and enormous research. One thing is certain: when the film begins, in paternalistic and conservative France, the freedom and equality that Marie-Rose defends are values that were only recently engraved on public building. What importance did gentlemen back then really attach to those

values? I don't know, but what I do know is that when history is recorded, even when as accurately as possible, there is always room for personal interpretation. Vincent is a man of the twenty-first century, living in the West, in France, where freedom and equality are now essential values. They naturally fit into his narrative. He is scrupulous and honest. I don't think that he was obsessed with sounding modern. He just hit the nail on the head.

What is he like on location?

Kind, nuanced, and attentive. Vincent is an actor and that changes everything. As thoughtful, intelligent and tactful as a director who is not an actor may be, he will always have a harder time putting himself in the actor's shoes and realizing what he is feeling. Moreover, Vincent knew exactly what he wanted, which did not prevent him from remaining open to suggestions. Being directed by him was an unalloyed pleasure. I had no scenes with him, but he is excellent in the role of Berchère.

How did you become a "fencer"?

I am not very good at sports or physical effort, so it was pretty hard for me. I rehearsed for three (long) months, four sessions a week: two sessions of fencing with Michel Carliez, who choreographed the duels, and two workout sessions with a coach who was supposed to help me build up the muscles you need in fencing. It was constraining, but it introduced me to an athletic discipline that I have kept up (more or less!) since.

In fact, other than for a few basic movements, I mainly learned the choreography of my duels. I thought that I would be afraid of my adversaries, but actually I was more afraid of injuring someone myself because of my awkwardness. And especially the DP when she got too close to me. But nothing ever went wrong.

Which scene moved you most?

As a member of the audience, the duel between Vincent Perez and Noham Edje. It lasts for a long time and shows how cruel a duel can be.

And which was the most problematic for you?

There were two, for different reasons. The scene in the barn with Damien Bonnard stressed me out, but it also excited me. We worked on it for three months. We rehearsed it a lot. I couldn't ruin it. So, I felt a lot of pressure.

There is also the scene in which I sing. Since the melody was not written out, I had to improvise, half singing, and half speaking. I was afraid I would look ridiculous. They told me no, but I have to admit I kept my ears shut while watching the dailies (laughter).

What is it like performing with almost exclusively male actors?

Very nice, thank you! (laughter) I don't see that much difference between men and women. Shooting with "male partners", or with "female partners" all amounts to filming with partners. The same goes for male or female directors.

It was easy for example to work with Roschdy Zem. A no-brainer: Roschdy is very professional and is immediately on the money. Unlike the role he plays, in real life he is not at all taciturn or austere. You can speak with him and straighten things out. He's very athletic – he boxes – and so his dexterity with the sword was amazing.

I also loved working with Damien Bonnard. He is a very special kind of actor. He managed to make his character a very complex man, simultaneously fragile and aggressive, funny and something of a blow hard, no doubt because he had to convey the fact that he is a homosexual.

As for Guillaume Gallienne, any actor will tell you: he is a joy to work with. Once he opens his mouth, truth pours out. All it takes is one line to feel in sync with him. I only regret that I did not have more scenes with him.

What was your impression when you saw the film for the first time?

A great success. *THE EDGE OF THE BLADE* is a film that dwells on several themes (duels, honor, pacifism, feminism, the press...), it offers food for thought, but without insisting on anything, without giving any lessons.

I also love the austere and elegant beauty of its direction and images. I actually wrote to the DP Lucie Baudinaud to congratulate her. It is rare to see images that correspond so well to the subject. Actually, there is nothing classic about this film: neither the subject nor its formal execution. I hope that it will awaken curiosity.

Did this film “enrich” you as an actress?

No doubt about it. No film is just another film, but this one even less so. Playing a character like Marie-Rose Astié and being directed by Vincent is a blessing for any actress.

INTERVIEW WITH ACTOR GUILLAUME GALIENNE

What got you interested in this film?

The richness of its screenplay. When I first read it, it seemed simple and crystal clear. Whereas in reality, it is full of contrasts, of behind-the-scenes happenings, all deftly navigated. It is subtle, serious, violent and refined. I also liked the elegance with which it talks about duels, a brutal phenomenon. I also liked the intelligent way it talks about the war-related traumas that plague certain veterans – like Colonel Berchère — ensnaring them in a stubborn warlike spirit, while others on the contrary, like Clément Lacaze, are disgusted by a nightmare that they never want to relive again.

And also, the chance to work with Roschdy Zem, directed by Vincent Perez.

Honor is one of the key words in the film. Is that a value that speaks to you?

It is a value that has always vibrated inside of me. I was brought up by a father who made me read Péguy very (too?) young. I will never forget a passage in *l'Argent*: “These workers did not serve. They worked. They had honor, absolute, as is proper to honor...” My education was more rooted in the nineteenth than in the twentieth century! (laughter!)

Today, I am still attached to the very notion of honor. For me it is a moral issue, a way of thinking and behaving. It has nothing to do with rigidity, inflexibility, or standing upright. It is not even self-respect that can lead to pride. The honor of principles. There is no derogation. My character, Eugène, is a man who does not jest with morality, even if it means risking a quarrel with his best friend. Which does not preclude his being troubled by Doria.

Precisely, talk to us about Eugène...

In the screenplay, this man — inspired by Adolphe Tavernier - is a writer/duelist who really did exist. He plays a role equivalent to the confidant in a classic tragedy. He listens and shares. He serves as an amplifier, a sounding board. His own perspective intensifies the tension or emotion of a scene. It is very strange to play. It requires a lot of self-abnegation, but it is also an interesting exercise, especially when working with actors like Roschdy, Vincent, Doria and Damien...

Doria, one of the rare women in the film...

Rare but vital. Unlike what its subject would suggest, *THE EDGE OF THE BLADE* is not just a film about men and duels. It takes place at a time when women were beginning to fight for their rights: for equality and more recognition. Although in the 1880s that was more common in England, some women in France were able to make their voices heard, despite social prejudices and unjust laws. Marie-Rose Astié, played by Doria, was one of them.

What I think is very interesting is that she made herself heard, without aping men, using the “rights” proper to her sex: femininity, gentleness, sensuality. And she was a smart cookie. Intelligent, impertinent, and... especially very courageous.

I loved the scene with the piano. It's very emotional. I must say that it was very elegantly written by Vincent and Karine. They make an awesome pair.

Why were you so eager to work with Roschdy Zem?

Roschdy is an immense actor, an actor who touches me. I dreamed of working with him for a long time. I love his inwardness, and his authority too: two traits which are completely natural in him. Roschdy never forces himself, he does not compose. He is always "real". That's what makes him so human. It was a great pleasure working with him.

Same question, Vincent...

First, I wanted to meet up with Vincent again, the brilliant "actor" I met on *FANFAN LA TULIPE*, in which I played La Houlette. And I was curious about working with Vincent, the nuanced "director" he has been for twenty years now. Mostly because of my emotional memories of his first film, *ONCE UPON AN ANGEL*. A magnificent film with Guillaume Depardieu that he directed with great sensitivity.

On location, Vincent is as delightful and elegant as he is in real life. He prefers to shoot from a distance, rather than close up, which might be more effective but would weigh down the scene. Since he is a photographer, he is meticulous about framing and lighting. And because he works so hard at directing, he manages to get things that were fixed on paper moving. Vincent never settles down. His camera is always moving.

Being directed by him is a joy, because like all actors/directors he trusts his players. Nothing boosts an actor's imagination more! (laughter).

Were you surprised that Vincent was making a film about duels?

Not for a second. Vincent is a champion swordsman. He fights very well. He even helped out the coaches!

Do you think that the film will touch audiences today?

I think that as long as it is treated correctly, any subject can be appealing. Trends do not have much to do with a film's popularity. I think that *THE EDGE OF THE BLADE* has everything it needs to draw and interest audiences. It is a period drama, but it talks about an eternal value, for both men and women: honor.

INTERVIEW WITH ACTOR DAMIEN BONNARD

Why did you agree to participate in this film?

Several things are required to make a film sound attractive to you, and to convince you to become involved in it: its screenplay, dialogues, construction, universe, plot, vision, esthetics, language, and cinematic grammar. The director, his personality, his previous work, meetings and discussions about the project, conversations that allow you to imagine the world you will be creating together, the cast and crew.

What I liked about *THE EDGE OF THE BLADE* was its voyage through History, dwelling on one precise period. Being transported to a place where two worlds have entered on a collision course: the world of yesterday and a world in the making.

It explores and investigates daily life in the world of the late nineteenth century. In 1887. Its mindset, philosophy, contemporary issues, mores, social relations, intellectual combats, causes, injustices and inequalities, and of course the duel: the art of the duel, and the restrictions on this illegal but tolerated practice. The universe of its masters-at-arms, its functioning, dimensions, protocols, motivations, issues of honor, and vengeance. Their causes and the damage they wrought.

The cast, who would be playing this or that role, actors and actresses I had never yet had the pleasure of working with. Among them was Doria Tillier who plays Marie-Rose Astié de Valsayre. Journalist, feminist, socialist, fighting for women's rights – the right to wear pants, equal salaries, access to studies and the professions, the right to vote – through her political fights and the duel. She was ahead of her time in a masculine world.

I was fascinated by the character I played, Ferdinand Massat. In the film he is the editor-in-chief of the *Petit Journal*. He represents a new generation in the press, shortly before freedom of the press was promulgated in 1881. The disappearance of censorship was accompanied by the birth of illustrated magazines in color, as well as several newspapers. And then came the appearance of human-interest stories and the fascination with them – most notably the murder of three women in the rue Montaigne.

Bringing this character back to life was very enriching. I truly enjoyed discovering him and resurrecting him, with all his contradictions and complexities. That meant wondering about how he lived, revealed or concealed himself. Ferdinand Massat was multi-faceted. There were things he was proud to show off, postures he adopted. On the one hand, he appeared to be brutal, aggressively masculine, misogynistic, provocative, and in dire need of recognition. He wanted to be respected, allowed to exist - most notably in high society - and perhaps to become a member of spheres far distant from where he started out. At the same time, deep within he was another man. The world was too small for him. He was at a loss to find his own freedom and discover what it actually consisted of. It was hard for him to accept his feelings. To acknowledge what he wanted to experience, to show himself as he really was, to take off or conserve the armor that protected him

even while it stymied him. And it was hard for him to accept his own deepest feelings about love, his sexual orientation and his attraction to men. That was hard to even think about in the society of his day. It was a fascinating job, showing him try to express all his contradictions, secrets, sufferings, and search for a way to evolve. At the end of the film, you may suspect that he will later join Marie-Rose in her attempt to change society.

Before reading the screenplay, what did you know about duels and the period the film takes place in?

Very little. I had heard about the last duel in France, fought with pistols in the gardens of a private residence in Neuilly-sur-Seine, between the Socialist mayor of Marseille, Gaston Defferre, and the Gaullist representative from the Val d'Oise, René Ribière. And I also had in mind - like everyone else - the duels in cloak and dagger movies.

I knew a little about the period the film takes place in, including the prohibition of women voting and wearing pants.

I learned a lot about the subject by reading the screenplay and talking with Vincent Perez, and also thanks to the archives I consulted.

How did you “nourish” your Ferdinand Massat?

First, in discussion with Vincent Perez. In our conversations about Ferdinand's personality. And then using my feelings and opinions about him, as I imagined him. And via costume and dress details, the scent I chose for him. And reading the history and newspapers of the period. I found copies of them, and most notably the *Petit Journal* which was one of the first Parisian dailies to use the term “*fait divers*” (human interest story).

Journalism was evolving at the end of the nineteenth century. Journalists had achieved or believed they had achieved a certain clout. They could at times “rule the roost” nobly and justly, and at other times arrogantly.

Investigating, exposing, making headlines harping on horrible violence, or evoking simple societal or political events to illustrate the evolving world. And debating ideas. Such conflicts could trigger challenges and duels. That is why all the big newspapers had their own dedicated fencing rooms: their editors and journalists were taught to fence, or how to defend themselves in a duel, in case someone deemed one of their articles humiliating or demeaning.

Did you use to fence?

Not at all. I didn't even know the purpose of duels, their rules, or even how to fence.

Vincent gave me “*L'annuaire des duels*”, a register of all the duels fought between 1880 and 1889, and *L'Art du duel*, a tome by Adolphe Tavernier which sums up all there is to know about the phenomenon: how to arrive in shape, how to prepare, how to limit damage, how to dress (as neutral as possible) to avoid distracting your adversary's attention, how to hold up without exhausting yourself... It even informs us that some duelists fought bare-chested, so that if wounded, there was no risk of a shred of cloth entering the body and provoking a possibly fatal infection. Because back then there were no antibiotics.

Alongside my reading, I learned and practiced fencing for several months. That took place under the guidance of Michel Carliez and his team. It was very exhausting and repetitive, as we learned the choreography of our combats. It was a pleasure to be initiated into the discipline, to continue to learn and evolve.

Was your duel the most difficult scene for you to perform?

Yes of course, because we had to come totally prepared on the day that we filmed it. But Doria Tiller and I had worked on it along with our stunt doubles. We rehearsed our duel to the exact millimeter, as if it was choreographed, so that we could play it ourselves as much as possible, while constructing the scene to combine our presence and moves with those of our stunt doubles. What I found touching was how Vincent and his DP Lucie Baudinaud conveyed the tension between Doria and me. By the way, that same tension marks all the duel scenes, especially the ones between Noham Edje and Vincent Perez and between Roschdy Zem and Vincent Perez.

What do you principally like about this film?

Its richness. *THE EDGE OF THE BLADE* is about several subjects. Feminism, personal freedom, pacifism and the psychological disorders caused by war: for those who wage them, for those who fight them, for those who die and for those who survive. The ravages of war.

But what I probably like most is the food for thought that the film provides on duels. Their practice, often chosen as the only way to redeem one's honor, and a way to avoid vendettas. Duels were often cruel and violent, but they often conclusively resolved a conflict between two people. The victor is right, but honor is restored on both sides, and the page is turned. As we see in the film with Marie-Rose and Ferdinand, the combatants might even become allies. Provided of course that they both survived. Which was the case for three out of four duels since they most often ended on the first sight of blood.

A word about Vincent Perez?

Our encounter was awesome. We had not known each other... We developed such artistic and personal complicity that I don't think we will ever be apart again.

I appreciated his passion, thoughts, knowledge and approach to dueling. His rigor and dedication, his director's eye and generosity in sharing all that. And his invitation to share in the adventure.

CAST

Clément Lacaze

Marie-Rose Astié De Valsayre

Eugène Tavernier

Ferdinand Massat

Louis Berchère

Adrien Lacaze

Gustave de Borda

Louise

Marguerite

Roschdy ZEM

Doria TILLIER

Guillaume GALLIENNE *de la Comédie-Française*

Damien BONNARD

Vincent PEREZ

Noham EDJE

Pepe LORENTE

Myriem AKHEDDIOU

Eva DANINO

CREW

A film by	Vincent PEREZ
Screenplay	Vincent PEREZ et Karine SILLA
Dialogues	Karine SILLA
Photography	Lucie BAUDINAUD <i>AFC</i>
Chief Editor	Sylvie LAGER
Original music	Evgueni et Sacha GALPERINE
Musical supervision	Varda KAKON
Sound	Lucien BALIBAR Nicolas MOREAU Olivier TOUCHE Olivier GUILLAUME
Head Set Designer	Jean-Philippe MOREAUX
Costume Designer	Madeline FONTAINE <i>AFCCA</i>
1st Assistant Director	James CANAL
Script	Rachel CORLET
Casting Director	Michaël LAGUENS
Stage Manager	Sarah LÉRÈS
Fight and Stunt Choreographer	Michel CARLIEZ
Production Manager	Pascal BONNET
Post-Production Manager	Aurélien ADJEDJ
Executive Producer	Marc VADÉ
Director of film production	Marine FORDE
Director of Development	Franck WEBER
Produced by	Sidonie DUMAS
A	GAUMONT production
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With the participation of	CINÉ+
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