

PLAYTIME PRESENTS
A DIAPHANA FILMS PRODUCTION

JULIETTE BINOCHÉ

 **69^e** Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
**Berlinale Special
Gala**

Who You Think I Am

A FILM BY
SAFY NEBBOU

FRANÇOIS CIVIL NICOLE GARCIA

BASED ON THE NOVEL BY
CAMILLE LAURENS

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(Celle que vous croyez)

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Synopsis

To spy on her lover Ludo, 50 year-old Claire Millaud creates a fake profile on social media and becomes Clara, a beautiful 24 year-old. Alex, Ludo's friend is instantly enamored. Claire, trapped by her avatar, falls madly in love with him. Although everything is played out in the virtual world, the feelings that blossom are quite real. A beguiling story where lies are entangled with reality.

Interview with Safy Nebbou



Who You Think I Am is adapted from the eponymous novel by Camille Laurens. How did you discover the story?

I discovered the novel's pitch in Gallimard's newsletter, and I instantly expressed my wish to read it before it was even published. Then I devoured it. I was thoroughly taken with the novel, and while I was reading, I immediately thought of Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon*, where everyone in turn told their version of the story. I also thought about Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, where James Stewart is in love with the vision of the ghost of a woman. Marivaux's *False Confidences*, as well as Choderlos de Laclos' *Dangerous Liaisons*, but also Borges and Pirandello's stories came to mind... Michel Saint Jean, my producer, was just as enthusiastic as I was. So we decided to set to work and write a screenplay. *Who You Think I Am* is our third film together, after *Mark of an Angel* [*L'empreinte de l'ange*] and *Bad Seeds* [*Comme un homme*].

It's not your first adaptation of a literary work; Bad Seeds was based on a novel by Boileau-Narcejac, for instance. How is this one different from the others?

The challenge was highly stimulating, as Camille Laurens' novel was both complex and inexorable, much like the structure of a clock. The fact is that it is a sequential narrative, with a first story interlinked with a second one, both revolving around an identity issue. Lying, cheating, truth, manipulation, and love: such are the delightful ingredients that carve out this narrative's maze. Beyond its romantic aspect, which makes numerous allusions to the thriller genre, it also includes a powerful societal dimension. In short, this convoluted novel with multiple entries, and told through several voices, offered thrilling adaptation prospects for a film. After all, isn't a movie theater a place that enjoins us, for the duration of a feature film, to take fiction for reality?

Though we can easily understand what tempted you from a formal standpoint, what about the content? Your film reflects a deep connection with Claire, the lone-some leading character who creates herself a fictitious online persona ...

Claire seeks to solve a conflict by becoming someone else. What touched me about her, at first, was her status as an invisible woman – emblematic for most women over the age of 50. Yet my purpose wasn't to protest outright or go for a head on, militant approach. For me, Claire is a sort of "anti-heroine," who is both complex and paradoxical. Her tragic dimension, therefore, is tinged with destructive guilt. However, she overcomes her humiliation and sorrow by expressing her life force through another, imaginary woman. Let's say that she is a distressed person, partly the victim of our society as it is today. In any case, the feeling of being past one's

"prime" or rejected, in other words the awareness that time has gone by and that it can push us to the sidelines, isn't limited to women, it is universal...

At any rate, you partnered with a woman, Julie Peyr, to co-write the screenplay...

Yes, but beyond her being a woman, it was her qualities as a screenwriter that guided my choice, and her work with Arnaud Desplechin in particular (*Jimmy P., My Golden Days* [*Trois souvenirs de ma jeunesse*] and *Ismaël's Ghosts* [*Les fantômes d'Ismaël*]). Well, this said, I never imagined for a second writing this film with a man! Parity was an imperative. What is amusing is that Julie Peyr lives in Los Angeles; we therefore had to work long distance for over a year using Skype and WhatsApp. In a way, we were already immersed in the film's context!

Indeed, Who You Think I Am is a rather fascinating reflection on the human – and romantic – resources offered by social media! Is this the new terrain where dangerous liaisons will henceforth be played out?

Absolutely, though often rather less romantically so! But the expression "dangerous liaisons" is quite apropos here since Claire works as a professor of comparative literature at the university. How not to think of Laclos' text when dissecting the power play and manipulation games that have become commonplace in social media today? Under cover of the virtual world, it is easy to invent a new identity and a new life: the one we would like to live... Social networks offer an endless number of possibilities to promote, cultivate and fuel various forms of "dangerous liaisons." Most probably, these new technologies will also spawn new pathologies...

We get the feeling that this subject is particularly close to your heart...

Yes, it is, because I too was duped by a woman on social media! A woman who was Claire's age and pretended to be younger, just like Claire. This affair, see I'm talking about an "affair," happened to me while I was writing the adaptation of *Who You Think I Am*. Isn't that incredible? I exchanged with this "catfish" for three months before I discovered the unpleasant truth. Like Claire, she'd used someone else's picture. I must say I drew a lot of inspiration from this experience to write the screenplay, even re-using some of my own exchanges with her.

Reality is intermingled with fiction on many levels in this adventure...

Yes, it's somewhat crazy, but also rather logical at the same time! For we could say that Claire, much like the woman who tricked me, is a screenwriter in that she writes her own life, assigning herself a role, as if she were an actress or a film director. This is where the main point of convergence with cinema, and with my film in particular, is found. Moreover, and this probably isn't entirely by chance, *Who You Think I Am* is the most cinematic of all my films, with a few, modest allusions to Hitchcock in the first half and to Truffaut or Sautet in the second.

Also, your narrative approach is highly visual, multiplying shots of French windows, mirrors, screens...

The film has a "genre" dimension that I'm entirely ready to acknowledge, far from naturalistic writing. You need to accept this choice to fully enter the story. We're in a symbolic, playful and metaphoric form of expression the entire time. The computer screen, for instance, aims to make us face ourselves (reflecting our own image) but

also conceals reality (by immersing us in a virtual world) at the same time. The film plays with this mirror effect. In addition, the narrative constantly goes back and forth between Claire's real world and her online persona's virtual life. We specifically worked to achieve this with Gilles Porte, the director of photography, and Cyril Gomez-Mathieu, the artistic director, seeking similarities and correspondences not only in the images but also in the lighting and the pacing. This is why matching icons or screens appear continually. Also, we wanted the visual expression of everyday life to be suffused with the notion of perfection. Moreover, we favored a contemporary vision of Paris, with recent architecture and urban areas staging the body and its surrounding space in a very conscious way. I'm thinking in particular of Claire's apartment: she lives in a modern high-rise, surrounded by windows, a sort of glass box. When night falls, her reflection appears in the picture windows and her double can thus come into play... the image nearly taking on a ghostly dimension.

This makes for a perfect transition to talk about Juliette Binoche, your ideal Claire/Clara... Did you think about her right from the start?

Right away! I thought about her while I was writing the screenplay, and when I sent it to her, she read it in 3 hours and instantly said "yes." We fine-tuned the screenplay in a simple and constructive way. Concerning the narrative, Juliette has a viewpoint that is at once all-encompassing and extremely sharp, she ceaselessly proposed ideas. I can truly talk about self-evidence between us, and trust. I could feel that there was something, beyond the story and the role that spoke to her as a woman. On set, she's a Stradivarius, yet with a rare honesty and moxie. She hasn't lost the flair of the little girl who used to play at being an actress.

She is generous and never seems to fear endangering or exposing herself. She faces her age squarely; this is the reason why she is so radiant, and also why it was such an extraordinary pleasure for me to film her.

François Civil, in the role of the young deceived lover, and Nicole Garcia, playing the part of the therapist, also fill the screen with a beautiful intensity...

François is a budding actor who is extremely talented. I wasn't really familiar with his work in a more serious register. He agreed to screen tests and he also became an obvious choice to me. He stepped into the character quite humbly and with great sensitivity. During the first half of the film, he has to express a lot of emotion through phone calls and that isn't easy at all! To create conditions as close as possible to the actual situation for Juliette and François, we shot these sequences following the film's continuity, live on the set, without their having met, and it worked quite well. As far as Nicole Garcia is concerned, this was a dream for me, for she is both an actress and a talented director, which is sadly still too rare. The fact is that her mere presence imposes her role as the therapist in the film. Yet, beyond that, she added a fragility and subtlety to the character, who gets caught up in a transfer, as this therapist becomes dysfunctional and over empathizes with her patient. I like the idea of female solidarity.

The third main theme that fuels Who You Think I Am is obviously love, essentially in its fantasized form. Is it once again a matter of projection?

Yes, it probably is... In the first half, the love between Clara and Alex is a love that is impossible and rests solely on lies. But while their bond is fictitious, it is nonetheless real. In the second part, the love between Claire and Alex exists but it is, still, fictional!

I'd like to quote Antonioni, with a sentence that is also in Camille Laurens' novel: "Love is living in another person's imagination." That's it... I tried to talk about love a little, through the imaginary life of this multi-faceted woman.

Could we go as far as saying, to replicate Flaubert's famous (apocryphal) phrase about Emma Bovary, that Claire is you?

In her own way, Claire rejects the idea of passing time in refusing to renounce her desire. So yes, I do hope that Claire is me, you, all of us...



Interview with **Juliette Binoche**



*Were you familiar with the novel by Camille Laurens from which **Who You Think I Am** was adapted?*

I only read it once I'd read the screenplay. I'd found the structure of the story breathtaking and I wanted to see if the book brought on the same emotional spiral. I was surprised to see how much freedom Safy had allowed himself, as though he'd appropriated the story. I also fished out a few precious moments from the novel that he enthusiastically agreed to integrate into the screenplay. Betraying a book is necessary in order to actually transform it into a movie, but rereading it during the film shoot is a brilliant source to recall the context, an emotion, a tone, or an inner landscape that fuels the acting, for something that feels alive must remain. Words should work like leaven; they aren't just ideas, they are matters and thoughts that we need to bring to life, that should arouse people – and not just intellectually. I enjoyed meeting Camille Laurens, who was instantly open, sincere, and kind. And then later she came to the set, though ever so discreetly, to give us her support.

What did you find the most enticing at first in the screenplay? Its (breathtaking) format or the (double or even multiple) role itself?

It takes more than being enticed to make a film, especially this one, given how passionate and dangerous the story is. The unknown stirs your curiosity. For me, it meant diving into a world that I wasn't really familiar with, that of Facebook and its possibilities! The structure of the screenplay allowed me to gradually enter the emotional and psychological state of my character as she embarks on this adventure, with distinct periods: the time with the therapist, the time as it is in the novel and then her life, which we follow as the film unfolds, and which is transformed along the way. This woman is of several ages, or so she believes, in any case. You wonder how it is possible for a woman who has studied literature for many years and who works as a university professor to suddenly be glued to her iPhone like a teenager. She seems to live contradictory lives. In spite of all her scholarly knowledge, one of childhood's fundamental needs persists: to be reassured and to be loved. The feeling of being abandoned seems to act as the trigger for her loss of identity. What I found surprising was to see that out of disappointment or revenge, she uses a fake profile and manages to forget this lie by fully immersing herself in this new life. Consequently her numerous facets enabled me to explore complex notions such as desire, the fear of letting one's youth slip away, the power of the imagination, and also to understand how one can create a whole world that we live for but that also smothers us at the same time. Claire has the ability to come back to life when everything has been destroyed... This is what the movie is depicting.

In fact, Claire is a character who collapses, picks herself up, stumbles again, etc. Someone lugging around her misery, really...

In the end, it's when you've reached rock bottom, when you've lost everything and can no longer return to a past situation that another state of awareness appears. True misery is when you experience an episode close to death – it can be devastating, but it makes you more human. Pride alone can no longer save you; you have to give up your beliefs, your values that seemed so very essential! When misery doesn't crush you, it can become a true inner guide. At the beginning of the film, Claire is rejected by two people – her husband and her young lover. After such crushing setbacks, creating this online persona allows her to keep her head above water, to assert herself as undefeated. She dares to be the conqueror: she can feel her strength, her power, her pleasure, yet when forced back into the dead end of her deceit, she has to stage the suicide of this illusion. The alleged suicide of her fictitious lover announced by her first lover (played by Guillaume Gouix) vouches for the importance of their love. It is a proof of love that comforts, but also destroys her. She then sinks into a depression that enables her to reconnect with her own true self, even though she remains in denial for quite some time.

Isn't it doubly perplexing for an actress to play a woman who, at some point, can no longer tell the difference between fiction and reality?

It's not the first time! In *Clouds of Sils Maria* [*Sils Maria*] (by Olivier Assayas), *Certified Copy* [*Copie conforme*] (by Abbas Kiarostami) and *Code Unknown* [*Code inconnu*] (by Michael Haneke) for instance, I played between reality and fiction...It's a theme that directors are fond of and is a lot of fun for actors, for you need to maintain a cer-

tain distance while being fully involved, a little bit like in real life. Perhaps it is because these stories within the story hold out a mirror to us, help us understand what we are doing, how to play by the rules. We all tell ourselves stories, don't we? Subjectivity is the foundation of our lives although we somehow know that "Reality" is somewhere else, we can sense it, and we can make it out. Yet we don't quite know what "Reality" is, where its outline lies. The film gives us several different perspectives on the story. The character of the therapist also seems quite moved by this woman questioning her about life, femininity, desire, and time that slips away.

Everyday sexism is also one of the themes addressed in this Russian-doll-like film. When Claire creates an online persona who is half her age on Facebook, it's hard to see this as a mere coincidence, isn't it?

Yes, of course, her online persona is young and beautiful, and she uses this as a magic weapon. This alter ego is her number one enemy but she's also her ultimate power, allowing her to manipulate, have fun and be a part of this society that has pushed her towards the exit. There's also a form of irony when she posts the photo on her fake profile, the irony of the fate reserved for women her age. The point is not only to be young once again through this photo, but to use this youth to reclaim one's dignity and strength for a while, as well. It'll take some more time to actually regain her true strength – that of the most deeply rooted independence, freed from her fears and what is expected of her. Accepting to lose is a strength that comes with maturity and allows for a new inner space where happiness is experienced differently.

Another leading theme in the film: social media and the dangerous liaisons they imply...

Personally, I have an Instagram account; it's a fun and direct way to share my preoccupations, my films shoots, my photos, and some poetry with people all over the world. This cosmopolitan connection reassures me. Communication has been changed entirely by all the social networks – we're much more skeptical about everything that classic media is trying to make you believe. Information proliferates in every corner of the earth and we have the impression that everything is going very fast. Refocusing on one's own energy requires wisdom and awareness, for we are being watched and contaminated from every which way.

Who You Think I Am is your first time working with Safy Nebbou in a creative collaboration, as far as we can see. Is this something you commonly do?

We started with a shared enthusiasm to make a film that is dangerous and fearless; our trust in each other was earned along the way. We were both open to questioning each other as well as ourselves – the feeling of freedom was mutual. At first, I must say he was a little cautious, because of the coaches I work with. I think he felt I was going to slip between his fingers!

Meaning?

It surprises me to see that in France an actor's preparation before the shoot tends to scare producers and directors; it's an interesting thing to observe. On the contrary, it should be reassuring to have an actor who prepares beforehand, as the director does with his director of photography and his set designer. An actor who does prep work has more freedom and is more available; above all, and that's what's interesting, he

or she knows the project from inside-out, and fully participates in the creative process, fertilizing the project, fostering inspiration for the director, and possibly for the team.

In the end, Who You Think I Am is a shrewd perception of the female psyche...

It's the portrait of a complex woman who isn't, however, burdened by complexes! Safy knows how to approach the feminine essence of his characters, that's not something he's afraid of: he's fascinated by it, even though he's not certain that he fully understands it. What I mean is that he doesn't turn them into some kind of "alien thing," even if it's beyond his grasp. I think that his love of Bergman's films has helped him comprehend the complexity of his perception!

You give the impression that you're touching upon something personal – and significant – through Claire. Is it the case?

When you play a role in a story, the character allows you to explore a new part of yourself. Every time. For me, the idea of putting yourself in danger, touching upon an area of discomfort, cannot be dissociated from creation. On the other hand, it is true that Claire is one of the roles in which I most dared to lose my footing and come to terms with my own ageing. There is a moment when Claire is disfigured by sorrow and she lets herself go, her gray hair doesn't bother her anymore. Right there, you understand the journey she's been on, the physical and emotional states she must have been through. The contrasts in Claire's various lives were fun for me to embody, even if the scenes with the therapist were taxing. Towards the end, I just wanted to be done! On the one hand, there is Claire, 50, abandoned, ageing, understated; then Clara springs up, filled with desire, and desirable; then Claire

from the novel is created, self-confident and handsome, while on the other side of the mountain, there's Claire, 50, with her gray hair, who no longer cares; and finally in the end, cleansed, walking out of the turmoil, there's Claire, freed from her old fears. It was quite exhilarating to be able to show and be so many different faces at the same age!

Isn't it paradoxical, though, to have such a feeling of letting go in a film as precisely structured as Who You Think I Am?

It's true, there is something very straightforward and blunt about it... even though the film is a game of hide and seek! Thankfully, the structure was there, but being able to let go, on both sides actually, came from the trust that Safy and I shared. The sheer joy of working together took over, and I feel that the crew, as well as the production team, were driven by this flame that we were sharing. There's nothing more beautiful than this undefinable thing that overwhelms you and is well beyond you but makes you feel connected.

Safy Nebbou



Safy Nebbou is a writer, film and theater director.

He was firstly an actor and theater director before directing a few short films that received a number of awards around the world: In 1997, *Pédagogie* with Julie Gayet, in 1999 *La vie c'est pas un pique nique*, in 2001 *Bertzea*, and in 2003 *The Scarf* [*Lepokoa*].

He made his first feature film in 2004: *The Giraffe's Neck* [*Le cou de la giraffe*] with Sandrine Bonnaire and Claude Rich. In 2007 *Angel of Mine* [*L'empreinte de l'ange*], with Catherine Frot and Sandrine Bonnaire. In 2008, the segment featuring Elsa Zylberstein in the collective film *Enfances*. In 2010, *The Other Dumas* [*L'autre Dumas*] (Selected for the Berlinale) with Gérard Depardieu, Benoît Poelvoorde, Mélanie Thierry, Dominique Blanc and Catherine Mouchet. In 2012 he made *Bad Seeds* [*Comme un homme*], with Emile Berling, Charles Berling and Kevin Azaïs.

His fifth film, released on June 15th 2016, was an adaptation of Sylvain Tesson's book, *In the Forests of Siberia* [*Dans les forêts de Sibérie*], with Raphaël Personnaz et Evgueni Sidikhin. The film received the César for best music, written by Ibrahim Maalouf.

He then wrote the theater adaptation of Ingmar Bergman's *Scenes from a marriage*, that he staged with Laetitia Casta and Raphaël Personnaz (Theatre de l'œuvre February 2017).

Who you think I am, his latest film, is adapted from Camille Laurens's book of the same name with Juliette Binoche, Nicole Garcia, François Civil, Guillaume Gouix, Marie Ange Casta and Charles Berling. It will appear in the Special Gala selection of the Berlin Film Festival 2019. Domestic theatrical release: February 27th, 2019 (Diaphana Films).

He is currently preparing a new feature film, *L'œil du loup*, adapted with Marie Desplechin from Daniel Pennac's eponymous book, produced by Nord Ouest productions and Axel Films. The film is scheduled to be shot in October 2019.

Safy Nebbou also directs numerous advertisements for national and international brands.

Cast



Claire Millaud	Juliette Binoche
Alex	François Civil
Catherine Bormans	Nicole Garcia
Katia	Marie-Ange Casta
Max	Jules Houplain
Tristan	Jules Gauzelin
Gilles	Charles Berling
Solange	Claude Perron

Crew

Director	Safy Nebbou
Screenwriters Based on the novel written by	Safy Nebbou & Julie Peyr Camille Laurens ©Gallimard 2016
Producer	Michel Saint-Jean
Director of photography	Gilles Porte
First assistant director	Louna Morard
Script supervisor	Christine Richard
Art director and set designer	Cyril Gomez Mathieu
Costumes creator	Alexandra Charles
Production director	Frédéric Sauvagnac
Location manager	Sébastien Delepine
Editor	Stéphane Pereira
Sound	Pascal Jasmes, Alexandre Fleurant, Fabien Devillers
Original music	Ibrahim Maalouf
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International Sales	Playtime