

UNITÉ DE PRODUCTION PRESENTS



# PEARL

A FILM BY **ELSA AMIEL**

2018 – FRANCE, SWITZERLAND – DRAMA – ENGLISH, FRENCH – 80'

## SYNOPSIS

Three days before the final of an international female bodybuilding championship. Lea Pearl is set to compete for the prestigious title of Miss Heaven. But her past catches up with her, when her ex-lover shows up with the 6-year-old son she hardly knows.

## INTERVIEW WITH Elsa Amiel, Director

### ORIGINS

#### **How did this project come about? Why did you choose bodybuilding as your frame of reference?**

There was a desire to explore the theme of the body in greater depth. How the body is portrayed, but also the discovery of Martin Schoeller's portraits of bodybuilders. The way Schoeller shoots his female bodybuilders is very intriguing because the women possess a quality that mixes uncanniness and femininity, while arousing a feeling of malaise mixed with fascination: the white background, the harsh lighting, the frontal chest shots, eyes staring directly into the camera. But what unsettles the spectator is their vulnerability, which is completely unexpected when thinking about this discipline. This new perspective gave me the keys to explore bodybuilding.

Here, I discovered a world of appearances and self-denial that intrigued me through its paradoxes. It's a world of extremes that is constantly confronted with human limits, which simultaneously fascinates and disgusts. This is a world where the body is king. A world that's often denigrated and could even be described as an "underground" discipline which brings together very few participants; to the point where it's relatively unknown. That's when my long fascination with the world of women's bodybuilding began. I was immediately struck by the fragility of these women and men who were obsessed with mastery and controls, who were labouring towards a physical ideal that was, by definition, unattainable. There's a permanent friction between dreams and reality, the human and the idea of the superhuman. I find this to be complex and a terribly cinematic subject matter, one that makes me question social norms through a female character; the heroine for our time.

#### **PEARL is your first feature-length film, but you have directed two shorts and worked as an assistant director in the past. How did this experience help you in making your first feature?**

I was lucky enough to work with exciting directors who were all very different from one another. I didn't go to film school and learned everything on the job, which resulted in a very raw approach to *mise en scène*. I've been an assistant for more than 15 years. My familiarity with a film set, the importance of prep, and an understanding of technical aspects are like weapons in your arsenal when you shoot a film – especially when it's a fast shoot. But once you direct, it becomes completely dizzying. It's part of the creative act.

I started working with Mathieu Amalric on his film, *Le stade de Wimbledon*, with a tiny crew, for a film that was written day by day. It was a very free film; I've always had an affinity for that kind of cinema. The three films I made with Emmanuel Finkiel were definitely in this style. No rules and no routine, which taught me how to look films and strive for realism. Bertrand Bonello

works in a completely different way. Similarly, *mise en scène* is key, but creating a dreamlike atmosphere and fantastical set were a priority above all else. My work with Noémie Lvovsky has also taught me so much. First, because she's so passionate about acting and her approach is quite singular. But also, her tenacity and unwillingness to compromise was very instructive. It's safe to say that these directors continue to feed my approach to filmmaking.

## **BODYBUILDING**

**The film depicts bodybuilding as a sacrifice, as emotional or physical suffering (cramps, the process of "drying out"). How exactly do you see this discipline?**

My point of view on bodybuilding continues to evolve, and I have always tried my best to get away from the preconceived notions and clichés surrounding this discipline. No "meatheads" checking themselves out in mirrors, no flexing inflated muscles. The second I was in contact with these athletes, and particularly with women, I was immediately touched by the chinks in their armor, their suffering and this absolute ideal that they keep trying to achieve.

But this quest comes at a cost. In my opinion, the price they pay is loneliness. Bodybuilding is partly chosen to protect oneself from an all-too-violent world. There's the constant desire to go against the norm and burn bridges with reality. You sacrifice for survival. When nothing seems to be big enough, strong enough, or beautiful enough, there's only one motivation: to always go further, to go "bigger than life."

It's amazing to see the sacrifices and suffering these athletes endure – an aesthetic life that some will simply see as a narcissistic and self-centered ego-trip. But, I see the heroes of a classical tragedy. I wanted to avoid anything resembling a documentary or psychological character study, instead make a physical film. The construction of the body, effort and artifice, erasing all pleasure in favour of a satisfying result where the effort itself becomes an addiction. For me, emotion is what drives them to punish their bodies. That's why I chose not to explain why Léa / Julia started bodybuilding, I started from the outcome.

**The public sometimes sees these athletes as "freaks." How do you see them? Is PEARL the study of a certain "monstrosity"?**

Anyone who isn't "normal" is associated with the monstrous. Since the norm isn't applicable to her, she's seen as a monster. She's a woman who has chosen to build up her body, and who could be said to take on male features: muscle mass, erasing any feminine forms or curves, transformation to the point of being gender-neutral. But it says more about her freedom than anything else, of her choice to be different. Moreover, none of the athletes consider themselves to be athletes as such. Their concern is aesthetic. An excessive body is their definition of beauty. It's their ideal.

It's impressive to discover what is at work underneath a body molded to such an extreme. We move beyond the narcissism specific to bodybuilding and impose one of the film's challenges: embodying an objective to surpass oneself and inscribe another image of women.

Coming back to Léa, she ultimately goes against social norms: she refused to be a wife or bow to someone else's desire to be a mother. Abandoning your child is, in a certain way, unacceptable. By putting this question of the child at the heart of the film, I speak about women, their choices, obligations, their contradictions and their complexity.

## **PEARL**

**PEARL paints a complex, extraordinary portrait of a woman. Can you elaborate on this relationship to femininity?**

This sculptural body reveals both a renunciation of Woman and Femininity, as well as an almighty figure that could confront men and be his physical equal. Bodybuilding is an asexual world where a new gender seems to have been invented – that of superhuman. In a world of appearance *par excellence*, there is obviously an intensification of feminine artifice: excessive make-up, bleached and brushed hair, sequins, athletes who are asked to pose in a "feminine" way.

Between writing the script and the final film, the world of female bodybuilding has changed; the bodybuilding category no longer exists for women. It was removed under the pretext that it offered a negative image of women. After being as free as they liked with their bodies, women once again find themselves reduced to what is expected of them. We've simply returned to the old clichés: men must be strong, women must be beautiful. That was one of the big issues of the film: accepting Lea Pearl's body. I'd often hear "women should never look like that" during production. To my knowledge, this figure has never been represented in cinema. It was important for me to relate this journey and this construction.

**The 3 men in Pearl's life define her as a body, a woman, and a mother. Is the heart of the film her choice between these identities?**

I wanted to start with the body, which is the essence of Pearl's identity. First, there's the man who made Léa: Al, her coach. They're a couple whose fulfillment exists in constantly surpassing her limits. The work of building the body does not leave them any room to discover themselves otherwise. I wanted to treat Al as a predator, always on the lookout, always tense, wild and impulsive. Al is the figure of the fallen man – the one who rubbed shoulders with the gods and who returned. I've always had a fascination for people like him because they belong to a world that no longer exists.

Then there's the man who brings her back to her past, before Pearl's metamorphosis: Ben, the ex-husband. All of Ben's ambiguity and complexity resides in his thoughtlessness, which makes

him endearing, but also dangerous and manipulative, while systematically being a total loser. He's always got the wrong idea at the wrong time. By being impulsive and out of control, he clashes with this world, which is obsessed with control and success. Ben brings Pearl down and restores her to her true identity as Julia, her place as a woman, and her status as a mother.

Finally there's Joseph, the child that Julia/Pearl was unable to love, disregarding all of her female instincts at the time. Ben and Joe arrive, and her entire past reappears, with its emotions, memories, and violence. It's the return of human material, the flesh of her flesh. I like the idea of rebuilding a family with an atypical mother. It suddenly becomes possible for her instincts to return. There is finally room for the mother and son to get to know each other. Something very animalistic develops between them. It calls out to the realm of instincts. The child nourishes Lea's character. From that moment on, there is a natural movement between a mother and her son.

**You mentioned that Léa displayed a certain "societal monstrosity" by abandoning her child. It's a taboo subject for many people. Why did you choose to make this situation – which also defies norms – Pearl's genesis moment?**

When we ask questions about the representation of femininity – the question of maternity is also immediately raised. So, I found it interesting to explore the idea of a woman who had never wanted to be a mother, who didn't have that predisposition in her. It's so rare to find such figures in film, so I wanted to question it. PEARL is the story of a woman who's trying to find herself through a metamorphosis. The film tries to reconcile a woman with herself. For me, she won't renounce anything. She will be all of these things. In her current body, she can find an explanation for her rejected past, in her need to escape social norms, in her total commitment to her training.

## **DIRECTING**

**What was your approach to filming/representing the body? Does your use of sound also participate in your portrayal of the body?**

Léa defines herself as a body in the first part of the film and I wanted to gradually reveal this through a selection of shots. The film's first shots give spectators an image of a body that is so fragmented it becomes abstract. It then exists through its definition and function (training). Then, little by little, the body begins to speak (blood, cramps). It remains a fantasy (Al's hallucination), then finally becomes the competitive body that collides with the mother's body, which results in the crucial question of choice. The body fades away to the film's dramatic situations, and finally explodes in the last part of the film.

In practical terms, the film was first organized around Julia's schedule. We had to respect three training sessions per day, or approximately six hours of work. It was obviously impossible and inhumane to ask Julia to keep a sculptured body throughout the entire shoot. However, some sequences required a competitive body. Julia trained all the more intensively and followed a

draconian diet in order to be ready. We also had to adapt to the schedule of competition season so the athletes who came on set would be in top physical shape.

Regarding the use of sound, we tried to find the sounds these bodies would make – which, in reality, are very subtle and often drowned out by noisy exercise machines. The soundtrack is very rich: cracking bones, rubbing skin, painful moans, different metals and machines. I also wanted to play with different rhythms, going from silence to saturation. One of the most difficult things to get right was the breathing. Since all these athletes are obsessed with control, they're constantly posing and flexing their muscles, which requires a herculean effort, where only the tiniest breath would ever be audible. It was necessary to get as close as possible to the sound, to recreate it.

Music was also an essential element. I worked with Fred Avril, who first saw the film once it was finished and set about finding a way to musically accompany this universe. It seemed obvious to us that we had to shift the film in its tone, to support it in its fragility and sensitivity – two words that seem incongruous with bodybuilding.

### **Anything you'd like to say about the setting (hotel), or the costumes?**

It seemed interesting to situate the film in a closed world: a hotel, which is a metaphor for the role bodybuilders give themselves. I searched high and low to find a hotel with an old-fashioned charm and modern amenities. I wanted this world to be beautiful and luxurious, but also in some peripheral place. A world apart. The hotel we found had all these qualities, as well as a wonderful location right next to an airport runway.

We then worked with the head decorator, Valérie Rozanes, to create a competition atmosphere, then choose the places where we could build everything at our leisure. There was also this major element in the set: the plastic on the walls. They were to act as a double wall that, on screen, would look like a second skin. But this isn't something we just dreamed up, it's also a reality. These plastic sheets are used to protect the walls from the spray-tan used by bodybuilders.

It was essential for me not to locate the film geographically, not to have any reference points, and to have the audience be immediately immersed in a universe. For the costumes, Yvett Rottsheid mainly focussed on the main roles (Lea, Al, Joe, Ben, and Serena) and worked with each athlete to ensure certain realism while blending everything together. In the end, beyond the uniforms (judges, staff) you'll see that all athletes are in swimwear. It was necessary to accentuate all the hyper-femininity, excess, glitter and showiness because, ultimately, the bodies were also part of the set.

### **How interesting was it to work with Julia Föry (non-professional actress and bodybuilder) and Peter Mullan (multi award-winning actor)?**

Peter Mullan arrived very early on the project. I'd always dreamt of working with him. He read the script and never stopped supporting the project despite the three years that elapsed between our meeting and the shoot. I felt he'd be a great AI and a valuable, patient and understanding partner with a woman who'd never acted before.

As far as Lea's role was concerned, it wasn't nearly as simple. From the beginning of this project I knew, along with my producers Caroline Nataf and Bruno Nahon, that finding Lea Pearl would be the most complicated part. It would be impossible for an actress to reach such physicality without intensive training, the result of which is irreversible. It seemed obvious that a bodybuilder's truth had to be part of the film itself, if not the film's *raison d'être*. So, for a long time I looked for a woman in this category who could be moving to spectators and willing to open up for the role.

I met Julia two years before prep started. At the time, she had not yet been in the Women's Physique category. But I'd been struck by her smile and our exchange. After combing Europe, the United States and Canada, I went back and looked at all the athletes I'd met again. I contacted Julia, talked to her about the project in very broad terms and offered her an audition. I was very impressed by her intelligence and sensitivity. It was a gamble, but we both respected it to the end.

Julia and Peter met on the first day of shooting. They formed a duo where one's knowledge encountered the other's innocence. As for me, I was trying to straddle reality and fiction.

I directed each actor in a very different way from the other. Partly because each had different training and cultures; Julia is Swiss German, Peter is Scottish, Vidal is Swiss, Arieh is Belgian, Agata is Polish.

### **In conclusion, what would you like the viewer to remember about PEARL?**

*Pearl* is the journey of a woman who learns to no longer be subjected to the things that oppress her and re-establish what made her who she is. When a female athlete fights to achieve excellence, she also represents a woman's fight to simply BE.



## INTERVIEW WITH Julia Föry, “Léa Pearl”

### ACTING

#### **You are a professional bodybuilder. When and why did you start bodybuilding?**

I started bodybuilding in 2012 and I was doing my first competition by 2013. The "why" is a big question which covers pretty much all of my life and interests. I've always been fascinated by the human anatomy: a perfect and beautiful machine which achieves so much if the mind allows it... This fascination was the main reason I studied and worked as a Fashion designer before moving to Bodybuilding. I really wanted to look at myself like an anatomical drawing. That idea of perfection was fascinating to me. I just wanted to experience all of it. And there was a love element to the story as well which was important to me.

#### **Did you consider acting before PEARL?**

I had never considered acting before PEARL.

#### **How is acting similar to a bodybuilding showcase?**

I would say there is real emotion in both and this is important. It is the thing I seek most in everyday life. It's what brings most sense to everything.

#### **Is your relationship with your public different (as an athlete and as an actress)?**

Yes it is different. An actresses's relationship to her audience is much more intimate for many reasons. Especially in the story we are telling in PEARL where we show weakness, sadness, pain, conflict.. On stage you simply show that one moment of perfection, when everything has already come together. This audience doesn't see all the other aspects of being a bodybuilder.

#### **How was it to work opposite Peter Mullan?**

Working with Peter was a great experience. He's a wonderful actor, very down to earth and enthusiastic. He was always trying to explore the best way to interpret each scene. I guess his approach encouraged all of us on set to keep tapping into that right emotion. Honestly aside from his fantastic acting, I'm just seriously in love with his wonderful scottish dialect and his exceptionally great voice.

## **MOTHERHOOD**

**The film questions the themes of femininity, motherhood and self-sacrifice in bodybuilding. How did you identify with Pearl ? Do you share the same struggles?**

I definitely identify with Pearl. And whilst some aspects are different, I do share her struggles. That's the reason which finally made me really want to do this film with Elsa. I felt that her research, her approach on this theme and the way she translated it into the story of PEARL was so incredibly real. There were so many moments which just felt like out of my own life.

**Your character initially chooses her career over her child and feels no natural closeness to him. How do you feel about the motherhood aspect?**

I don't have my own children yet, but I definitely hope to in the future. Motherhood is definitely one of the most wonderful things you can achieve. Although the conflict between having a career and being a mother is something that also resonates in my life too. Besides there is the love element, present in the film, which is also in my life too. The relationships to partners, close friends, coaches, family.... all of these emotional questions, which PEARL has to deal with, I can totally feel her.

## **WORKING WITH ELSA**

**Did working with a female director helped you get in touch with your character?**

In the first instance, it was really about "working with Elsa Amiel" as opposed to "working with a female director". And it was her research, her interest and her honest and emotional way to deal with "female Bodybuilders" that made a difference. There was no boldy or primitive bodybuilding stereotype in her story. I just felt the subtle and very emotional side of her story. I do think that Elsa's take on Pearl's story - the pain and struggle, the emotions - all of these things work especially well because of who Elsa is. The fact that she's a mother herself, and a woman, means she can emphasise even more with the stories of these female bodybuilders, who live such unusual lives.

**Bodybuilding seems to be a male dominated field. How was it to work with a female director?**

Bodybuilding is a very male dominated field, especially when we're talking about acceptance. But the gender question has never really been an issue in my life, nor when it comes to acting. The real thing which is important for me is trust. And again I need to underline Elsa's wonderful strength, confidence and sovereign personality. The fact that as a woman, Elsa is also moving in a very male dominated field, were parallels that made us a very strong team based on honesty, deep trust and respect from the very beginning.

## CAST

Julia FÖRY Léa Pearl

Peter MULLAN Al

Arieh WORTHALTER Ben

Vidal ARZONI Joseph

Agata BUZEK Serena

## CREW

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| Director             | Elsa AMIEL                                     |
| Screenplay           | Elsa AMIEL,<br>Laurent LARIVIERE               |
| 1er Assist. Director | Emmanuel GOMES DE ARAUJO                       |
| Script               | Louis SEBASTIEN                                |
| Casting              | Juliette DENIS                                 |
| DOP                  | Colin LÉVÊQUE                                  |
| Head decorator       | Valérie ROZANES                                |
| Line Producer        | Damien SAUSSOL                                 |
| Costumes designer    | Yvett ROTSCHEID                                |
| Chief make-up artist | Ferouz ZAAFOUR                                 |
| Production Designer  | Valérie ROZANES                                |
| Sound Engineer       | Marc VON STÜRLER                               |
| Post-Prod Supervisor | Astrid LECARDONNEL                             |
| Editing              | Sylvie LAGER                                   |
| Producers            | Bruno NAHON,<br>Caroline NATAF<br>Lionel BAIER |
| Production           | Unité de Production<br>Bande à part Films      |
| International Sales  | mk2 films                                      |

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