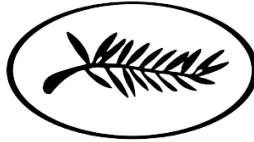


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PRESENTS



FESTIVAL DE CANNES  
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*2022 OFFICIAL SELECTION*

# DON JUAN

A FILM BY SERGE BOZON

2022 – FRANCE – DRAMA – FRENCH – 100'

**mk2**  
FILMS

## SYNOPSIS

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Jilted on his wedding day, Laurent, a stage actor playing the role of the famous seducer Don Juan, cannot help but see his ex-fiancée in every woman he meets. In an attempt to mend his broken heart and ego, he tries to seduce them all but none are receptive to his elaborate (and musical) advances. Meanwhile, at the theater, the leading lady quits and the production brings in Laurent's ex-fiancée as the replacement.

## INTERVIEW WITH SERGE BOZON - Director

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### Why Don Juan? Why now?

Originally, I simply felt the desire to leave behind the register of genre movies, "genre" in the sense of their action: *La France* resembled a war movie, *Mrs. Hyde* a fantasy movie, and *Tip Top* a detective movie... Yet, in all three, this relationship to the action was never a key element of the final result. So I felt that I may as well abandon it! This time, I wanted to try something more emotional by telling a love story, something that I had never done before. For this love story, I found it easier to use a starting point that everyone knows, and so I suggested to Axelle Ropert, my co-writer, that we work on Don Juan. At the time, Axelle was involved in what was happening around #MeToo and we agreed on the idea of a reverse Don Juan. Instead of conquering every woman, he is abandoned at the beginning and will be abandoned again at the end, for good. Rather than a Don Juan who seduces all women, he is obsessed with one woman, whom he sees everywhere, in multiple versions. And he keeps getting dumped by the women whom he approaches and in whom he thinks he recognizes her. Normally, a Don Juan is victorious, cynical and manipulative; here he is a loser, sincere and helpless. Having a man obsessed with a single woman instead of a man going from woman to woman also allows the story to be a duet rather than a solo. And thus it becomes a film for two actors, one man and one woman, Tahar Rahim and Virginie Efira.

That said, I didn't suddenly feel compelled by the times to make a film about the hot question of gender. The principle of inversion is present in all my films: *Tip Top* is a crime thriller whose heroines are female police inspectors (obsessed with fairness), *Mrs. Hyde* is a female take on a famous male character, *La France* is the story of a woman who passes herself off as a man (in order to take part in the First World War)... But, even so, there was a special kind of tension, more virulent than usual, with Axelle Ropert, with whom I have written all my films.

With this Don Juan, we wanted to present a non-conquering figure of seduction. The film questions the idea of abandonment. To put it simply, a classic Don Juan sleeps with every woman and that's his triumph. Ours does not cheat and does not triumph. His Don Juanism lies solely in the way he looks at women, without betrayal, conclusion or deception. Everything plays out in the gaze.

The screenplay is extremely simple. A woman abandons a man who subsequently thinks that he sees her everywhere, she comes back, they get back together and she finally abandons him for good. That's it. The whole story can be summed up in one short sentence. Its interest is therefore not in the richness of its twists and turns or in its dramatic virtuosity, but in the way in which the film tracks down something tenuous but important, I think, in this narrative simplicity: where does doubt arise from in a relationship? What causes loving trust to waver? And that's where the music comes in, because it's thanks to songs that the film can reveal intimate details about this doubt - how feelings can be jeopardised by almost nothing: a glance, a tiny gesture... I liked this idea of the "almost nothing" of the narrative becoming an "almost everything" through the music. The narrative minimum that becomes a possible emotional maximum through music.

### **The depressive melancholy of Don Juan is often contrasted with the libertine hedonism of Casanova.**

Don Juan is much darker than Casanova. The play by Tirso de Molina, the author of the original *Don Juan*, contains the following line: "Let them sing, for soon they will have to weep!" And it's true that musicals usually promise communicative euphoria; here, the music accentuates

the dark, if not painful, side of the characters. I feel that words would be duller than song to communicate such intimate suffering. The music therefore expresses what the characters cannot say in words. It is like a voice-over in song - a descent into the intimate doubts of a character and not a collective sharing of external euphoria. That's why the film is not really a musical, just a love story with some rare sung passages.

**The film does not give in to the familiar myth of Don Juan and offers a feminist version. It takes the side of women.**

It is not for me to say whether the film is feminist or not. In any case, there is a threefold bias: 1) at every turn, the film shows the revolt of the women who reject Laurent when he "harasses" them (a rejection that culminates in the nocturnal dance during the final party); 2) Laurent is never presented as a victim of women but as a victim of himself; 3) at the end, he has nothing left (no job, no wife) while Julie shines on stage.

**Since Antonioni and Bergman, there has been an auteurist tradition of films about "incommunicability" in a relationship. The film avoids this but nonetheless seems aware of it...**

I feel that's a rather ponderous tradition. I have no affinity with the neo-existentialism of the authors of modernity (Bergman, Antonioni, Resnais...), I prefer to go directly from Minnelli or Sirk to Fassbinder, thus bypassing the great European modernity of the early 1960s. Deep down, Fassbinder is more an extension of Hollywood than Antonioni is of Cinecittà. There is a genuine continuity, if only in the belief in melodrama, while Antonioni freezes the narrative and thus lays the groundwork for the disillusioned aesthetics of glossy fashion magazines.

Furthermore, I did not want to crush the male character, nor excuse him, just work on a doubt about his violence. It was necessary to maintain this crucial doubt about the violence of what our Don Juan imposes on his Elvire, since it is based on the tiniest things, on the collapse that a single glance can cause. Where does his way of looking at women come from? He is embroiled in a constant dreaming process, but it is a slippery slope that deprives him of perspective, and locks him in more than anything else. He is a blocked, haunted character and there is nothing particularly perverse or manipulative about him, but that doesn't prevent him from perhaps being dangerous.

That said, when I make a film, I don't ask myself so many questions about the content. I'm more interested in the light, the sound, the direction, knowing where to put the camera, how to direct the actors, etc. I don't claim to make films naively, but I let myself be carried along by the movement of the shoot without asking myself too many questions about the content, which I in fact discover during editing (and, at that point, I finally ask myself and the editor what the film is about!) However, I felt that from beginning to end, the film's material was constantly shifting in an underground manner, like in muffled waves, without us knowing very well where it was going, but without seeming digressive or far-fetched either. It shifts constantly but, at the same time, the film holds a single note, full of anxiety, which resounds from the beginning.

**The female character played by Virginie Efira, Julie in the real world and Elvire on stage, is multiple, whereas Tahar Rahim's character, whether he is Laurent or Don Juan, is unchanging.**

Yes, at the beginning, he has an obsession: he sees her everywhere. Only at the end of the film, with the sort of theatrical "coronation" that consecrates Elvire/Julie, is his obsession

relayed by a theatrical superiority in the strictest sense, in the objective sense: her power is to be all women when he is only one man, or even only a male gaze. This is why he is obliged to say to her: "You act better than I do". And he is right. It has nothing to do with personal talent. She can be any woman, he can only be a Don Juan, stuck with his obsessive gaze. Strangely enough, this extreme limitation does not prevent him from having a permanent ardour, which nothing can extinguish. He is stuck in the most culturally predictable position for a man, but this never rules out ardour.

### **Music and songs have always played a key role in your films.**

If you don't like naturalism, the musical is always a possibility, because it's the most anti-naturalistic genre there is. I have already made musical films. In *La France*, there were only songs, no dancing. In *Mods*, there was only dancing, no singing. Here, I wanted both.

In my previous films, the musical choices seemed surprising, if not "out of place". In this case, it's the opposite: I wasn't looking for something out of place, but for something obvious. So I looked for the type of music that would be most in keeping with what was going on in the film. A film about love, so love songs. A wounded and painful love, so wounded and painful songs.

And the very term "song" is misleading. A song is a structure with verses and a chorus. Something that you can sing in the shower, on a walk... because you already know the tune and the words. Not here. The characters in my film don't start singing something they already know. They are swept away by what is happening in a particular situation and the fact that they sing is not a break in the story but a step in it. Through this narrative dimension, we are closer to an aria than to a song: the music does not turn into verses and a chorus, but instead develops to attain a new lyrical dimension.

Until now, I had remained within the spectrum of pop music. Pop is by definition a light-hearted genre that relies on a non-emotional investment by its singers. "Melodramatic pop" is an oxymoron. Popular music can be melodramatic, pop music cannot. Compare the Beatles to Piaf (or Voulzy to Fréhel, or Daho to Christophe) and you'll see! Here, we did not need that lightness, the loose and blank singing of pop music. We needed shady lyricism. So we had to get away from pop.

What does leaving pop music behind entail? Firstly, the elimination of all pop instruments: no bass, guitar, drums, synthesizer, etc. Which means keeping only classical music instruments. But for what musical style? That of the film is not really identifiable: it's obviously neither rap, nor reggae, nor rock, nor zouk... nor opera. Is it a new genre or just an intermediary between old genres (say classical and pop music)? I don't know. The orchestration is classical (and even symphonic), but not the singing. Benjamin Esdraffo composed the whole soundtrack, but the songs are the fruit of a group effort in which Mehdi Zannad played a crucial role. And Jacques Duvall wrote all the lyrics.

In any case, the transition from the spoken to the sung word does not occur at the rhythm of a casual pop song but, on the contrary, with a kind of gravity: it is a step for the characters as well as for the actors, who all sing live: it is the moment when they have to "take the plunge". I was very keen on this commitment to singing and performance.

Tahar took about fifty singing lessons, Virginie learned to play the piano. They more than committed themselves to the film.

**This film resembles you but it also proposes something new. We can see it as a deconstruction of the nature of the actor's profession, as well as a reflection on that of the director's profession.**

I hadn't thought about it that way. I just wanted to make a film whose trajectory would go from Molière to Mozart. At the beginning, the film is associated with the theatre, and it gradually rises towards music in an almost "celestial" movement: we end with shots of the sky, with Mozart on the soundtrack. It may be naïve, but the whole film leads up to the overture of Mozart's opera, which is why, in its final third, it adopts the Commander's point of view, which causes Laurent and Julie's revived romance to collapse. I liked the idea of starting from a rather cruel and dry subject, as in Molière's work, to arrive at romantic ardour, in the sense of German romanticism. What is romanticism? Schlegel's definition is to treat a sentimental subject in an unsentimental manner that approaches the fantastic. I tried to do that. And this also affects the characters, with Virginie's transformations and the hero's permanent feverishness. It's a "German romantic" type of story about actors who split in two in turn and occasionally sing to each other in this or that disguise, prowling around together in a mutual enigma (which has nothing to do with Antonioni's incommunicability). It's very close, I feel, to the stories of Mörike, Eichendorff, Hoffmann... about impassioned and lost actors who are victims of regular illusions, each one looking for the other without ever finding him or her.

**But isn't this film also an opportunity to talk, via the theatre and actors, about your own work?**

I don't know. Before shooting, I was rather apprehensive about the theatrical part of the film, as if I had a phobia of the closed space, of the black box. Then, during the location scouting, I had the idea of a theatre opening onto the outside, with the possibility of bringing nature, the wind, the sea, seagulls and especially natural light into the frame. What liberated me was this inside-outside relationship, between nature outside and the stage set inside, which is not a set (because there is never anything on stage) but just an opening. The set is the opening. Period. Similarly, the least stylised scenes in terms of lighting are paradoxically the theatre scenes, where natural light does everything, whether it's day or night.

In the play's rehearsal scenes, there is also work on gestures, particularly those of the director (played by Jehnny Beth), who develops a whole range of precise and light moves in order to express herself, maintaining a kind of distant relationship to dance. I didn't want to adopt the register of a retro musical with scenes of group choreography, but this remains a way of evoking dance, like the first scene of the film with Tahar's gestures in front of the mirror. We worked with Christian Rizzo, the choreographer, with this idea in mind: dance is not only present in the romantic duet in the hotel room or in the dance of the "witches" at the end, it is also in all these stylised gestures that dot the film, from beginning to end.

Generally speaking, the fantasy that occasionally emerges in the film is mostly conveyed by the supporting characters (Damien Chapelle, Jehnny Beth, Louise Ribièrè, Colline Libon). Fantasy does not characterise the two main characters at all. As Laurent often says, the main couple is basically an ordinary couple, people like you and me, who are actors in the same way that they could be teachers, accountants or nurses (hence the banality of their names: Laurent and Julie). They are not zany people or whimsical stars but serious, everyday people with serious, everyday concerns. Strangely enough, this is the first film I've made that takes an interest in banality.

**In its form as in its content, this Don Juan brings a more solemn scope to your cinema.**

I was indeed seeking something less grating than my last two films, something more harmonious, with fewer breaks in tone and no longer playing on a permanent rift, a fuller and more vibrant form you could say. I was looking for an emotion that rises little by little, quite simply. Not immediately, but gradually: after a somewhat abstract opening, a more concrete story opens up with the departure to Granville, then emotion gradually finds its place, I hope, with Julie's return, then...

**The cast itself is a turning point: Virginie Efira, Tahar Rahim, Alain Chamfort...**

I thought of Virginie at a very early stage, with the intuition of making her perform in a slightly "gentler" and more "questioning" manner than she has done so far. She is not a character in the grip of great events, her whole role is one of inner reflection, a kind of restrained thought: she is trying to find where her confidence lies. It's a bit like her scene at the piano: yes, she finally breaks down, but after a long period of restraint, like a point of rupture that arises gently in her singing. And I find that she has a non-literary beauty that makes her unpredictable in the film and that makes her restrained thinking equally unpredictable.

And I also wanted to see her change, to transform her image several times, to make her appear as a redhead, a brunette, with short hair, long hair, blue eyes... when she usually presents a single image. What was amusing was to ask for her "alter egos" the opposite of what I asked for Julie: rather than an inner reflection, an outer immediacy - the "happy woman" is immediately happy, the "gothic woman" immediately surly, the "shy woman" immediately timid, etc.

**We have never seen Tahar Rahim like this, he gives us a unique gift.**

Tahar brings something distraught, innocent and non-manipulative to an almost extreme extent. You never get the impression that he is lying. And indeed, is he lying? We don't know anymore, even in the restaurant scene where Laurent is in total denial. Thanks to his acting, his character becomes both fragile and fiery, with something very carnal and fleshy, like bread that is too hot. Yes, we see him as we have never seen him before. It's perhaps hackneyed to say that, but, like Virginie, he brought things to the film that I hadn't anticipated. It was a great encounter for me. It's as if he were the inner core of the film and she were its exterior, constantly coming up against the core, taming it, caressing it, doubting it again, turning back to the exterior, etc. Yes, he completely surrendered to the film.

**We also witness Alain Chamfort's first steps on the big screen.**

He had never acted before, in fact, except for two tiny roles. It was a risky gamble but he slipped effortlessly into the skin of this spectral and ironic Commander, with an emaciated side between Henry Fonda and Bryan Ferry. And with his looks, his age, his half-worldly, half-sovereign manner, slightly shaky and never pompous, he was able to convey the subterranean anxieties that inhabit the film. Perhaps it is worse to lose your daughter than to lose your trust in the man you love (for a look)! So perhaps he is the one who carries the deepest grief in the film... Despite his initial stress, things were very easy with him and, when he acts, he keeps that very particular physical elegance, that exquisite and awkward politeness that gives the feeling that he is improvising, never knowing what he is going to say, as if he were inventing his lines instead of performing them.

*Interview by Olivier Séguret*

## ABOUT SERGE BOZON - Filmography

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**2022**      **DON JUAN** | Feature, 100'  
**2018**      **MRS. HYDE (Madame Hyde)** | Feature, 95'  
**2013**      **TIP TOP** | Feature, 106'  
**2007**      **LA FRANCE** | Feature, 102'  
**2003**      **MODS** | Short, 59'  
**1998**      **L'AMITIÉ** | Feature, 84'



## CAST

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Laurent

Julie

The Commander

Naël

The Director

Marina

The Dresser

Tahar Rahim

Virginie Efira

Alain Chamfort

Damien Chapelle

Jehnnny Beth

Louise Ribi re

Colline Libon

## CREW

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Director	Serge Bozon
Screenplay	Axelle Ropert, Serge Bozon
Producers	David Thion, Philippe Martin
Co-Producers	Jean-Yves Roubin, Cassandre Warnauts
Associated Producers	Arlette Zylberberg, Tanguy Dekeyser, Philippe Logie
Artistic advisor	Pascale Bodet
Editing	François Quiqueré
Director of Photography	Sébastien Buchmann (AFC)
Sound	Laurent Gabiot, Renaud Guillaumin
Original Music	Benjamin Esdraffo
Songs	Jacques Duvall, Mehdi Zannad, Benjamin Esdraffo, Laurent Talon
Choreography	Christian Rizzo
Assistant director	Julie Gouet
Production manager	Damien Saussol
Casting	Stéphane Batut
Production Design	Pascale Consigny
Costumes	Delphine Capossela
Production	Les Films Pélleas
French Distribution	ARP
International sales	mk2 Films

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