

LE BUREAU présente

PRISON : A PLACE TO ESCAPE FROM.

Michel Vaujour

 59 Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Forum



**MY GREATEST
ESCAPE**

A FILM BY FABIENNE GODET

**1 MAN'S INCREDIBLE
TRUE STORY**

27 YEARS IN PRISON

**17 YEARS IN SOLITARY
CONFINEMENT**

5 ESCAPES



MY GREATEST ESCAPE

a film by **Fabienne Godet**

France - 2009 - 107min - 1:85 - Dolby SRD - Color - French

**...But something else
would set him free...**

the directors label



World Sales

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2 rue Turgot, 75009 Paris, France

T : + 33 (0) 1 4970 0370 F : + 33 (0) 1 4970 0371

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A close-up, high-contrast photograph of a person's face, focusing on the forehead and eye area. A hand is resting on the person's forehead, with fingers slightly spread. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the texture of the skin and the contours of the face. The background is dark and out of focus.

SYNOPSIS

Former thief and mobster, Michel Vaujour always chose to break for freedom over a life behind bars, adventure over a life of submission. He has spent 27 years in prison – 17 of those in solitary confinement. He succeeded in carrying out amazing escapes with toy guns worthy of a Hollywood script. The most notorious involved a firearm made out of soap and a daring helicopter break out organized by his wife from the roof of a jail. He was finally released on parole in 2003.

If his life story is at times an exhilarating ride, he also experienced some of the most challenging conditions the penal system can bestow. This isolation forced him to continuously confront himself. The reward has been self-enlightenment.

Fabienne Godet's film is an uplifting and universal story of a remarkable transformation. Michel Vaujour's greatest escape was not from jail but from himself: the liberation of the mind and ultimately, the soul.

Interview with Fabienne Godet

By Philippe Mangeot

How did you meet Michel Vaujour?

I was working in late 2003 on a 52-minute documentary about Dominique Loiseau, called *Le Sixième Homme* (The Sixth Man). Dominique had been wrongly accused of being a crooked cop. When I asked him what had helped him withstand jail, he mentioned his father and Michel Vaujour whom he'd met at the Bois d'Arcy Penitentiary. At the time, Dominique felt terribly down. As for Michel, he had been shot in the head during a hold-up and he was giving himself his own speech therapy. Michel gave Dominique the will to keep fighting no matter what. Dominique often told me that without his support he wouldn't be around today.

So, I set up a meeting between them. During the shoot Michel said: "What endeared me to Dominique was the innocence I found in his pain. I'd lost that innocence over time. I had to relinquish it to survive." His words were heart-wrenching to me. Although we come from very different backgrounds, his words found their way into me because they resonated in my mind – they were reminiscent of the dreams and ideals I had to leave behind when reality hit me; they reminded me of the sorrows and disillusion life is made up of. But whereas I saw only pain in this experience, Michel showed me that he found strength in it. When I heard those words of his, I felt the urge to make a film with him. And those words are the underlying theme of the film.

What did you know about his past then?

Hardly anything. Just like everyone else, I had heard about his escape from La Santé Penitentiary –nothing more. When I met him for the first time in February 2004, he'd only been released for six months and yet he never brought it up, as if the past didn't exist. We met at the Gare de Lyon train station. Michel is not the outspoken type and he wanted to know more about me. I told him I'd worked as a social psychologist and I'd worked with hospice medical staff. Michel was well acquainted with death – he'd been flirting with it his whole life! As he had been shot in the head he'd had a near death experience. When we parted I didn't know much more, but I realized I'd definitely met someone who'd made a lasting impression on me.

My Greatest Escape is the first documentary about Michel Vaujour that he was willing to take part in. But he'd already written a book about his life ...

When I began dreaming up the film, I didn't know Michel was writing a book about his life. When the book came out in autumn 2005, I read it over and over again to figure out how best to approach the subject. I was aware that he'd turned down offers from producers and directors: they wanted him to dwell on organized crime because he's one of the last who survived those years. But the fact of the matter is, he'd already written about this in his book and he refused to be reduced to his past,

especially since he had managed to free himself from it. Besides I felt this wasn't the approach I was interested in. The fact that he turned down so many offers was not very encouraging, but it helped me clarify what I really wanted to do and understand why this film was so important to me. His book was obviously helpful. But what was most valuable was the fact that my producer Bertrand Faivre and my co-screenwriter Franck Vassal kept questioning me and reassessing my goals, which helped me clarify my take on the material. If you stick to the facts, my life and Michel's life are obviously poles apart. And yet this film has echoed a host of questions which basically boil down to: what did I do with my life and my freedom when Michel was in jail for 27 years? Do I deserve the life that was given to me?

The film's original title comes from the notion of "liberation." But we soon find out that that notion cannot be reduced to the five escapes which have made Michel Vaujour famous.

Vaujour's whole life has revolved around the notion of liberation – and his escapes are only the tip of the iceberg. It all began at a very early age: how free can you be when you come from a working-class background and when you refuse to follow in your father's footsteps and to live like a slave? And then long years of solitary confinement followed: how can you free your mind in order to cope with physical restraint? More questions followed, especially when he realized that the decisions he'd made had driven him to lock himself up: how can you be free from yourself and the values of your environment? In other words, how can you "decondition" yourself to "live like a normal human being" again – as he puts it?

More generally Michel Vaujour's main concern – which is mine too and, most likely, everyone's is: how can you free yourself? So my film is a coming-of-age story. The notion of liberation is the guiding theme which has determined the look of the film. I've thought of this film as a philosophical debate. I could have called it *Interview with Michel Vaujour About the Meaning of Life*. Not about the meaning of what it is to be a mobster or about the escapes themselves which don't seem so significant to me.

Instead of an adventure movie, My Greatest Escape is, against all odds, a more subdued, romantic film – and it is definitely less action-packed than expected.

Vaujour's life has been more romantic than the best fiction I could possibly have written. Of all his escapes, the most famous one – the helicopter break-out at the Santé Penitentiary in 1986 – is the one I'm the least interested in though. It has helped build up his legend and has overshadowed everything else. In the film, the legend is told through clips of TV news bulletins which all comment on the "cinematic quality" of his escapes. But the thing is my film is no actioner – far from it. With that escape, however spectacular it may be, Michel experienced bereavement: during preparations, his brother-in-arms Gilles died and the so-called friends he thought he could count on backed out on him. So the 1986 escape is only a part of his psychological and existential evolution.



The film nonetheless dwells on the 1979 escape from the Châlons-sur-Marne courtroom involving a firearm made out of soap.

I really like this one! Michel had nothing then. He only managed to escape because he worked hard on controlling his mind and reactions. He was in solitary confinement and for four years he struggled to control his emotions and to focus entirely on one particular goal and to get rid of what was left of his child-like nature to make a weapon of himself.

At that point he lost his innocence and confined himself to being a mobster. At the same time he gained focus, energy and mental strength to cope with confinement. His escape – amazing to say the least – came as a result of all that hard work. When years later he was left a paraplegic and a prisoner in his own body, he used that same mental strength to give himself speech therapy in jail and, even later, to free himself from the mental shackles he had imposed on himself.

Did you wish to portray Michel Vaujour as a monk?

He has used the monk metaphor himself – which makes sense if you consider the years of loneliness and silence in a cell – but I'd rather speak of asceticism. He'd embark on a spiritual journey and be really harsh on himself. He could have been a mountaineer or a solo yachtsman: he experienced the exhilaration of pushing himself to the limits and living on the edge through organized crime.

In an archive clip, a defence attorney says that Michel's escapes have always won him sympathy and even love sometimes.

Indeed, outlaws have always been kind of popular, especially because they've been able to rebel against social order. But behind the myth, what do we know really about the lives of these men? Nothing much. This is precisely what I was interested in. This film goes behind the scenes and stays away from hackneyed and glamorous imagery. Reality hit Michel hard in the face. He had to pay the price. This is what he tries to pass on to his great-nephews. This moment is very important to me because it is meant for all those who dream of "fellowship" in this environment – since this sense of "fellowship" hardly exists at all...

In the film, Michel Vaujour seems to have won your admiration, though.

I don't embrace what Michel did, but I've tried to understand how the child he once was grew into a dangerous man, without being judgmental. On the other hand I embrace the man he became today. How did he manage to hang on to life while he was in such a destructive environment? The film opens and concludes with a life-affirming message and celebrates "the beauty given to us." Now this man spent half his life in jail: 27 years, including 17 in solitary confinement. What does it mean, really, not to be able to touch someone for so many years? How come he didn't lose his mind – how come he wasn't crushed to pieces? I've tried to unveil that mystery of resilience.

To get to the core of the mystery, you look at his life from a psychological standpoint: you examine his childhood, his griefs and his missed opportunities to find out both how he turned into a mobster and became so resilient, as you said.

I've used a psychological approach, assuming for instance that Gilles might have been a surrogate brother to Michel. Michel didn't know what to make of it but he didn't object to it either. I know it doesn't explain everything: I have tried to unlock the mystery of a life with this film, but I won't claim I solved it. This was a kid who was messing around, like any other kid. How come his life changed a full 180 degrees? What chain of events has led him to grow into Michel Vaujour?

But you could argue that, for me, it all began with the end in mind: from day one, I've been amazed by the kind of man he became after what he went through. This is why I've used a reversed montage towards the end of the film: you go from the day of his release back to the days when he was just a kid in short pants.

So basically the film operates on two interconnected time levels: the present period of his release on parole and the past years that led him to where he is now. When Michel says he had to give up omnipotence, you have to realize at the same time how he became all-powerful. In terms of editing this involved alternating between scenes of Michel talking about himself in his mother's dining-room and exterior scenes of his roaming the countryside. I wanted to show his profound relationship with nature that combines wonder and sensual delight. When he was a little kid, just being in the wild made him happy. But then he left and went to the "cold cities" he mentioned in one of his prison letters. Ever since he was released, he has been able to rediscover nature...

You shot the film, for the most part, in his parents' house...

He was living there when we shot the film. So this is where I filmed him on several occasions with Crystel Fournier who served as both camera operator and sound recordist. We would share in his freedom and accompany him as he went out for walks. I thought it was necessary to be immersed in his family setting to get to the truth of his words. Now it also involved working with as small a crew as possible to create the intimacy we needed. Michel would often tell me that not so long ago he wouldn't even have considered talking to someone who wasn't a mobster.

In the film Michel Vaujour's anger seems to have subsided. He doesn't sound "political" and hardly makes any comment on the violence of the prison system...

As Michel puts it, he's never been politically involved. He took to the streets in 1968 but even then, he was more of an individual rebel type. As far as the prison system goes, Michel has never portrayed himself as a victim during our interviews. This is also what saved him in a way. One of his attorneys, Henri Leclerc, explained convincingly how resilient he had to become to maintain what little freedom he had. When Michel was released he said, "If I have hatred in my heart now, it means they have won." I think he's right.

Speaking of his attorneys, why didn't you interview them in the film?

I've met three of his attorneys, Henri Leclerc, Antoine Deguines and Marie-Laure Barré. The DVD bonus features will include their interviews. They speak about Michel in an intense fashion and provide insight into very different periods of his life. But my editor Florent Mangeot and I came to realize that the film would be better off if we focused on Michel's words. It was also closer to my original approach. But I needed to embrace it and trust myself – but especially trust the audience. In *Autobiography of A Scarecrow*, Boris Cyrulnik explains that storytelling is always a liberating experience: "Storytelling isn't about looking back on your past, but about coming to terms with your history. You piece together an image; you give sense to events, as though you were healing an unfair wound." I chose to focus primarily on that process. The film medium has given me that kind of freedom: I was able to make a not-so traditional film – even in terms of length – and I didn't feel like I had to necessarily include clashing viewpoints to conform to a supposedly objective standard, which is often a complete joke! I don't believe in trying to cover the whole story either: if you try to say everything, then you won't say anything. So I decided to whittle down 60 hours of dailies to the footage dealing only with existential issues. And of all the interviews I conducted I only edited clips including Michel and so dealing as much with his past as with the man he has become.

Surprisingly, there are no women in the film, although Michel Vaujour has always been fond of women and women have played a key role in his life.

Actually, contrary to what you say, the film deals with women! I have emphasized the clash between their courage and men's cowardice. For instance, his mother, Lisa, showed him her love whereas his father ignored him. His sister Chantal was the only one who visited him in jail on a regular basis. Out of love, Nadine organized the helicopter break-out, whereas Michel's so-called brothers-in-arms backed out on him. Jamila was incredibly bold and took the chance of being imprisoned by strongly voicing her decisions – just to get to him. She also helped him gain back the humanity he'd lost. At the trial the judges tried to have her and Nadine confess that they had been manipulated, which they forcefully denied. They all assumed in their misogynistic thinking that they were both stupid and impressionable and so no one took any interest in the real political and social issues raised by their commitment. This film is a tribute to them. Now the fact that Nadine and Jamila remain off-screen is another story. For instance Michel and Nadine split up before the new law on parole came into effect. Michel had no future but to accept the idea he'd die in jail. Besides any break-up – especially of such a legendary couple – is painful for both parties. I'm not sure I could have brought them together again. Anyway this isn't relevant to the film's subject matter. As for Jamila, she's decided to keep a low profile and I respect her decision. This doesn't mean that we don't feel her presence: quite the contrary, she's with us all the time through the beautiful letters that she gave me and that she read at my request. Her voice says it all.

You place great emphasis on voices: the film opens on a dark screen with Michel's voice in the background.

The film opens in the dark to immediately engage the audience to pay attention: someone is there talking to you, as he's been talking to me. This sums up the true heart of the film. Michel's voice fills the screen. It matches his focusing ability. At the beginning of the film, Michel proposes we listen to silence, to convey the feel of silence in a prison cell. His silences are as telling as his words: he may go silent at some point because he's concentrating. But I also understand his silences as a way of putting things in perspective and allowing his words to find their way to the people he's talking to.

He actually has the presence of a great actor.

He has an immediate presence that commands attention. Some people told me that he's a seducer and that he's playing. I told them: he's not playing, he's just himself. For instance he often looks up, always to the same side. I'm not sure where he got that from but it somehow tells me what it is like to live in 100-square-foot cell for years. But I know for a fact that he's not afraid of the camera. He has decided to tell his life story and he goes the whole nine yards. He once told me, "I've rehearsed those words for 27 years and I know them by heart." I don't think it makes him an actor, though.

You often shoot him in close-ups, as if you were trying to capture something in his gaze.

The camera's lens is only the extension of my own way of seeing. I unwittingly memorize faces, the slightest gestures, the slightest details... When I film him this way, I engage the audience to place themselves in my shoes. Sometimes his eyes cloud over and go from looking kind to cold, from a child's gaze to a killer's gaze. Whenever we met, I'd tell him about the sadness I saw in his eyes. Michel would deny being sad and preferred to say he was melancholic: he'd speak about the tragic feeling of existence haunting him which, paradoxically, fills him with a feeling of great lightness and joy. It actually makes perfect sense: when you've pushed yourself to the limit and come to the end of your tether, you're not afraid of anything anymore. Death is the mother of all fear and Michel has come to the end of his death. So he can't but feel light-hearted by being profound. This is probably what gives him the smile you can see on his face.

The film is dedicated to Jamila. Who is it from – Michel or you?

I took the initiative to dedicate the film to her: through her commitment – which took a heavy toll on her – Jamila allowed Michel to be with us today. She showed him the way and allowed him to change and to readjust to a "normal" life. Without her I'd never have met Michel and he'd never have confided in me. In a way, she made this film possible.



Fabienne Godet

Director, Writer

Feature Films (screenwriter / director)

SAUF LE RESPECT QUE JE VOUS DOIS. (Burnt Out) (2005)

Director Fabienne GODET [1st film], producer Bertrand Faivre

Cast: Olivier Gourmet (best actor Cannes 2002), Julie Depardieu, Marion Cotillard, Dominique Blanc

San Sebastian Film Festival 2005 – London Film Festival – Seville Film Festival 2005 Angers

1ers plans - Miami (Grand Prix) –Seattle – Jerusalem - Tubingen – Lubjana -Shanghai (Best

Director, Best Actor) – Hong Kong 2006

Documentaries (screenwriter/director)

CARNET D'ACTEURS : NATACHA REGNIER (2006)

Documentary 43'

Production: Strawberry Films / Broadcaster: Cinécinéma

L'AFFAIRE LOISEAU – LE SIXIEME HOMME (2005)

Documentary 52' Selected at FIPA 2006

Production: Le Bureau / Broadcasters: NBC-UNIVERSAL 13èmeRue, TPS, France5

Short Films (screenwriter / director)

TEMPTATION OF INNOCENCE (LA TENTATION DE L'INNOCENCE) [43'-1999]

Director Fabienne GODET, producer Bertrand Faivre

Cast: Emmanuelle Devos (Read my lips), Antoine CHAPPEY

Director's fortnight – CANNES 1999

LE SOLEIL A PROMIS DE SE LEVER DEMAIN. (The Sun Will Rise Tomorrow) (1995/1996).

Cast : Nathalie RICHARD, Valery DU PELOUX.

Production: Lazennec Tout Court / Diffusion TV : France 2, TV Breizh.

Selected at Pantin, Combs-la- ville, Vendôme, Angers, Locarno, Istanbul, Namur, Torino

1993/1994 : UN CERTAIN GOUT D'HERBE FRAICHE. (1993/1994)

Cast : Antoine CHAPPEY, Eva MAZAURIC, Patrice PERTANT .

Selected at Clermont -Ferrand, Brest, Angers, Rennes (Grand Prix), Lille, Deçines (Grand

Prix) Pantin, Villeurbanne, Toulouse, Sarlat, Vendôme, Epinal, Saint Benoît de la réunion,

Montréal, Saint-Petersbourg, Mons, Belo Horizonté, Montecatini, Valencia, Tampere,

Melbourne, Prix à la qualité 1994.

LA VIE COMME CA. (1991/1992)

Prix à la qualité 1992.

Bertrand Faivre

Producer

In Post-Production

FAREWELL

Director Christian CARION [Academy Award nominated MERRY CHRISTMAS],

Cast: Guillaume Canet, Emir Kusturica, Alexandra Maria Lara, Willem Dafoe, David Soul

Completed

NE ME LIBEREZ PAS, JE M'EN CHARGE (MY GREATEST ESCAPE)

Director Fabienne GODET [BURNT OUT]

Feature-length documentary

OFFICIAL SELECTION – BERLIN FORUM 2009

French release April, 8, 2009 (HAUT & COURT)

LONDON RIVER [COPRODUCTION- 2009]

Director Rachid BOUCHAREB [Academy Award nominated DAYS OF GLORY]

Cast: Brenda Blethyn, Sotigui Kouyate

OFFICIAL COMPETITION – BERLIN 2009

THE MIDDLE OF EVERYWHERE (LET'S NOT TALK ABOUT SEX)

Director Rebecca LEE JACKSON & Jesper MALMBERG [1st film],

52' TV documentary

SPY(IES) (ESPION(S)) [COPRODUCTION-2009]

Director Nicolas SAADA [1st film]

Cast: Guillaume Canet, Géraldine Pailhas, Stephen Rea, Vincent Regan, Alexander Siddig

OFFICIAL COMPETITION – ANGERS 2008

JULIA

Director Erick ZONCA [DREAMLIFE OF ANGELS],

Cast: Tilda Swinton

OFFICIAL COMPETITION – BERLIN 2008

FAR NORTH

Director Asif KAPADIA [THE WARRIOR]

Cast: Michelle Yeoh, Sean Bean, Michelle Krusiec

International Sales : Celluloid Dreams.

OFFICIAL SELECTION – VENICE 2007

MERRY CHRISTMAS (JOYEUX NOEL) [COPRODUCTION-2005]

Director Christian CARION [THE GIRL FROM PARIS],

Cast: Guillaume Canet, Gary Lewis, Diane Kruger, Daniel Bruhl

Official Selection Cannes 2005 – US distribution : Sony Classics – UK : Columbia Nominated for

Best Foreign Film at Academy Awards, BAFTA, Golden Globes 2005

Bertrand Faivre (continued)

Producer

ISOLATION [2005]

Director Billy O'BRIEN [1st film]

Cast: John Lynch, Essie Davis, Ruth Negga, Marcel Iures, Sean Harris
Toronto Film Festival, Dinard, Cork, Gerardmer (Grand Prize&Critic's Prize), Brussels, ScreamFest LA
(Best film, best director), FrightFest UK, River Run 2006

BURNT OUT (SAUF LE RESPECT QUE JE VOUS DOIS) [2005]

Director Fabienne GODET [1st film]

Cast: Olivier Gourmet (best actor Cannes 2002), Julie Depardieu, Marion Cotillard, Dominique Blanc
San Sebastian Film Festival 2005 – London Film Festival – Seville Film Festival 2005 Angers 1ers
plans - Miami (Grand Prix) –Seattle – Jerusalem - Tubingen – Lubjana -Shanghai (Best Director, Best
Actor) – Hong Kong 2006

THE DEVILS (LES DIABLES) [2002]

Director Christophe RUGGIA

Grand Prize Cannes Junior 2002 – Best Interpretation Chicago 2002

THE WARRIOR [2001]

Director Asif KAPADIA

Selection at Edimburgh, San Sebastian, Dinard, Warsaw, London, Mumbai2001.
Grand Prix DINARD 2001 - Best Photography SAN SEBASTIAN 2001 - BIFA 2001
Douglas HICKHOX award. SUTHERLAND trophy. 2001
Double BAFTA Winner: Best British Film and best newcomer 2002

RATCATCHER [CO-PRODUCTION - 1999]

Director Lynne RAMSAY

Un Certain Regard – CANNES 1999

Best Young Director – BAFTA 1999

Douglas HICKHOX award 1999 & SUTHERLAND trophy. 1999

BAFTA Winner: best newcomer 2002 & nominated for BAFTA Best British Film

TEMPTATION OF INNOCENCE (LA TENTATION DE L'INNOCENCE) [43'-1999]

Director Fabienne GODET

Cast: Emmanuelle Devos (Read my lips)

Director's fortnight – CANNES 1999

STILL WATERS RUN DEEP (MEFIE-TOI DE L'EAU QUI DORT) [1996]

Directed by Jacques DESCHAMPS [1st film]

Cast: Marushka Detmers

Youth prize and Best first film - VENICE 1996

CREW

Director

Written by

Editing

Sound Editing

Original Music

Research

Assistant Editor

Foley Artist

Calibration

Production

Producer

Associate Producer

Assistant Producer

Financial Director

Production Interns

Additional Music

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Sound mixing

Fabienne Godet

Fabienne Godet and Franck Vassal

Florent Mangeot

Nathalie Vidal

Xavier Godet

Sandrine Ventezout

Gwenaël Mulsan

Xavier Drouault

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