Romantics Anonymous
(Les Émoticos Anonymes)
A film by JÉAN-PIERRE AMÉRIS

BENOÎT POELVOORDE
ISABELLE CARRÉ

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FORMAT: 2.35 / SOUND: DOLBY SRD / RUN TIME: 80 MINS / VISA N° 121.064

FRENCH RELEASE DATE DEC. 22, 2010
Jean-René is the boss of a chocolate factory and Angélique is a talented chocolate maker. They are both emotionally-challenged people.

Drawn together through a shared passion for chocolate, Jean-René and Angélique fall in love, but neither is able to express how they feel.

Sadly, their crippling shyness is driving them apart. But eventually, they manage to overcome their lack of self-confidence, and risk baring their true feelings.
How did this project come about?

I feel like I've always had this film inside me. It's definitely the most intimate and most autobiographical film I've made. I always knew that one day, I’d tell a story involving emotionally-challenged characters – being one myself since early childhood.

I remember when I was young and I had to go out of the house, I'd open the door a crack and peer through to check there was nobody in the street. If I was ever late for school, I was unable to walk into the classroom. It got even worse in my adolescence and that’s when I developed my passion for cinema. Safe in darkened movie theaters, I could really experience fear, suspense, joy and hope; I could experience great emotions without worrying if anyone was looking at me.

And yet you've made many films and being a director means you're very exposed…

My desire to make films was born from this great affection for cinema, and it was cinema that helped me overcome my fears. As I went on, I tried to make my fear an ally and it became something that drove me. That’s how I dared make my first shorts and really got into being a director with everything that comes with that. With hindsight, I see that fear has always been the subject of my films: The fear of commitment in LE BATEAU DE MARIAGE, the fear of taking the plunge and becoming an actor in LES AVEUX DE L'INNOCENT, the fear of death in C'EST LA VIE and the fear of sexuality in BAD COMPANY. My characters’ fears are a prism through which I observe them, but because I am positive by nature, I also like describing how they get over them and how they pull through.

Did you ever join Emotions Anonymous, the 12-step program for emotionally-challenged people?

I discovered that organization a decade or so ago and I went along and joined a group at the Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital where I found other people and other stories, and realized the huge number of people who suffer this unhappiness. The thing emotionally-challenged people fear the most is being with others, in intimate situations. The idea of baring all, both physically and emotionally, makes them panic.

How would you define a typical emotionally-challenged person?

These people aren’t shy – this is something else. They are people who live in an almost permanent state of tension, torn between a powerful desire to love, to work and to exist, and something that holds them back and stops them every time. They are often full of energy and are neither depressed nor depressive. It’s this state of tension that defines them which drew me to comedy because it often places them in some odd situations.

Your films often deal with characters struggling to find their place…

I've always told stories about solitary individuals who try to integrate with groups of people. They are afraid but they look for the link. That's what I like to recount in my films and in a way, that’s the function of cinema – to create a link and bring people together. Being emotionally-challenged is something that isolates people a great deal. As a child, I spent a lot of time alone. I've known people who couldn't even leave their houses, although I never ended up like that. Everything becomes a challenge – going out to buy bread, or passing people on the staircase. You fear other people and fear them looking at you.
Why did you decide to make emotionally-challenged people the basis for your new film?

It was a slow process; a desire that grew within me over time. There was one question gnawing at me: What are we afraid of in life? Criticism, teasing, failure, what other people think? When I made C’EST LA VIE, I spent a lot of time with people who were going to die and they all told me the same thing: “What an idiot I was, being afraid. I should have spoken up, told them I loved them. I should have dared to do it but now it’s too late. What was I frightened of?” That feeling is pretty universal. We all regret not having tried, and it’s often silly. You just need to go for it, not be afraid of failure, not be afraid of reaching your limits. It’s not success or failure that’s important; it’s trying. We’re too afraid of failure. We’re living in an era where everyone is chasing performance and that adds an extra layer of pressure that brings nothing. You feel you have to succeed, you have to be beautiful and young, but this is crushing people. Nobody manages to be as successful as the role models we are presented with. And that’s also what I was trying to say with the film: I wanted to tell a story involving this fear but with a light-hearted approach that could inspire confidence in people who share the characters’ suffering to different degrees.

How did you structure the story?

I have been thinking about making this film for years so it is imbued with the people I’ve met and my own experiences. Things really came together when I realized we could tackle this subject as a romantic comedy. The potential for funny situations between two emotionally-challenged people was huge. I started by making notes and writing things down. I also read a lot, notably the book by Christophe André and Patrick Legeron, “La Peur des Autres” (The Fear of Others). In the end, I put together over 100 pages of notes and thoughts but it was my encounter with Belgian scriptwriter Philippe Blasband that really helped me construct the plot. I encouraged him to write a romantic comedy involving two emotionally-challenged characters neither of which realizes the other shares their problem, drawing on all that autobiographical material. Together, we worked on the story.Lots of the tales I’d heard in discussion groups involved people at work so I wanted their meeting to take place in a work environment. Perhaps Philippe and I came up with the idea of chocolate because we were in Belgium, in a Brussels tearoom, but it’s more likely because chocolate is wrapped up in a lot of emotional associations. They say it helps you feel better, it has an aroma and a taste linked to childhood and emotional types tend to abuse it. Hence the idea of the chocolate factory in which he is the boss and she is a chocolate maker.
Isabelle really drove us.

I was poised between his emotion and his comic talent. Writing for him and for whilst being funny. The idea was also to show him in a new light, finely level, flaws and emotions are never far away. He can be incredibly moving without a second thought. He’s a comic genius and like all artists at that a highly-emotive person throws himself or herself into life. He does it with Benoît. When he acts, he throws himself into a scene like with bricks, small windows and warm lighting. I also thought of Benoît Poëls very early on. You can feel that tension with Benoît. When he acts, he throws himself into a scene like a highly-emotive person throws himself or herself into life. He does it without a second thought. He’s a comic genius and like all artists at that level, flaws and emotions are never far away. He can be incredibly moving whilst being funny. The idea was also to show him in a new light, finely poised between his emotion and his comic talent. Writing for him and for Isabelle really drove us.

Your film revisits a lot of mandatory scenes from the romantic comedy genre, but from an unusual, off-beat angle, which takes them a step further.

I like the idea of films with a clearly identified genre and for this one, I was inspired by some of my favorite films, mainly English-language ones. I like the idea of actresses in its own right, a coherent, separate little world. The metaphor of the theater is absolutely perfect here: People going on stage, others waiting in the wings, the majority preferring to remain in the shadows, there are more of them, they are the most modest and I find them touching. These are the ones I’m interested in. Jean-René and Angélique are modest people but they can still find their place in the world and in a romantic comedy. They are heroes who was a lot of small battles, but they are mostly fighting against themselves.

Do you remember the first scene you shot with Isabelle and Benoît?

The first real scene was the one in the restaurant, their first dinner date. We were right at the heart of the subject, their relationship composed of impulses, desires, impediments, doubts, with each one thinking they’re the most terrified, and with all the compromises that involves. It was also very emotional, shooting this scene. The choice of the restaurant we used was no coincidence – it was the Cintra in Lyon, the city where I was born and where we shot most of the film. It’s one of the most popular restaurants, a place my father dreamed of going to, with quite an English look to it with wooden paneling and a warm feel. Isabelle and Benoît immediately found the right tone, a combination of humor and emotion. They were funny and immensely moving.

Your film has quite a stylized, almost timeless universe. At times it is like a fable. How did you define its visual style?

That aspect corresponds perfectly to the perception emotionally-challenged people have of the world. I wanted the audience to be immersed in their subjectivity. In my first film, I shot LES NIVEUX DE L’INNOCENT in prison and C’EST LA VIE in a real palliative care unit. My idea was to bring fiction into reality. Since CALL ME ELISABETH, I’ve been more daring in attempting to create different worlds. With ROMANTICS ANONYMOUS, I was surrounded by a crew that I really love working with: Gérard Simon for the lighting, Sylvie Olivier on set design and Nathalie du Roscoat for the costumes. For Isabelle’s character, my reference was Ginger Rogers who was an actress I adore. Benoît has a touch of James Stewart in Ernst Lubitsch’s THE SHOP AROUND THE CORNER. This involves a palette of colors, reds and greens, a style of clothing that makes you think of 1950s but with the energy of today, an architecture that’s more London than Paris, with bricks, small windows and warm lighting. I also wanted to find and transmit that pleasure which made me fall in love with the movies and enter into another universe, leaving the real world behind.

Was it that spirit that made you have the actors sing in the film?

I’ve always loved songs in films. The little song that Isabelle sings, “I Have Confidence”, is taken from Robert Wise’s THE SOUND OF MUSIC. Julie Andrews’s character sings it when she wonders why she’s so afraid when she’s about to embark on a huge adventure. For Angélique, Isabelle’s character, humming that tune is a little like cuddling a teddy bear. It reassures her. Benoît’s character sings too, but for another reason, just as believable in terms of the psychological point of view of highly emotional people. Benoît sings “Les Yeux Noirs” which I think is enormously moving. It wasn’t easy for him. What his character does is pretty sympathetic of highly emotional people. He’s scared of everything. He trembles when he finds himself alone with the woman he loves, but suddenly, he throws himself on the microphone and sings a song in the middle of a restaurant. The way Benoît sang it, what he reveals at that moment is one of my greatest memories of this film. I was really moved.

What are you most pleased of in terms of this film?

What amazed me was the comedic power and emotion given off  by Benoît and Isabelle. They brought their characters to life with a humanity that is unique to them. You really become attached to them in this movie.
Cinema

2010 ROMANTICS ANONYMOUS
   with Benoît Poelvoorde, Isabelle Carré
2006 CALL ME ELISABETH
   with Alba Gaia Bellugi, Stéphane Freiss, Maria de Medeiros
2004 LIGHTWEIGHT
   with Nicolas Duvauchelle, Bernard Campan
   Official Selection “Un Certain Regard” Cannes Film Festival 2004
2000 C’EST LA VIE
   with Jacques Dutronc, Sandrine Bonnaire
   Best Director at the San Sebastian Film Festival 2000
1998 BAD COMPANY
   with Maud Forget, Lou Doillon
   Official Selection at the Sundance Film Festival 2000
1995 LES AVEUX DE L’INNOCENT
   with Bruno Podalydès, Michaël Laroque
   Critics Week Prize at the Cannes Film Festival 1996
   Youth Award at the Cannes Film Festival 1996
1992 LE BATEAU DE MARIAGE
   with Florence Pernel, Marie Bunel, François Berléand
   Official Selection at the Berlin Film Festival 1993

Television

2010 LA JOIE DE VIVRE
   with Anaïs Demoustier, Swann Arlaud
2007 MAMAN EST FOLLE
   with Isabelle Carré, Marc Citti
   Critics Prize for Best TV Fiction 2008
1997 L’AMOUR À VIF
   with Sophie Aubry, Samuel Le Bihan
   SACD Prize 1997
1996 MADAME DUBOIS, HÔTEL BELLEVUE
   with Micheline Presle
How did you get involved with the project?

Isabelle Carré, with whom I’d previously made ENTRE SES MAINS by Anne Fontaine and really enjoyed working with, called me to tell me about Jean-Pierre’s project. He didn’t dare contact me himself. I read the screenplay and I really liked it. I told Isabelle who in turn told him but a few weeks went by and surprisingly, I still hadn’t heard anything from Jean-Pierre. I talked it over with my agent whom we share, and my agent said that his behavior wasn’t surprising given the autobiographical nature of the film. When you know to what extent the film is autobiographical, you can better understand the situation. He finally called me two weeks later and everything was fine!

What drew you to the project?

I never imagined ROMANTICS ANONYMOUS could exist as a film. When I first read the screenplay, I thought it was an excellent idea. I think that everyone is more or less emotional but when it’s to that extent, it’s a real handicap. Then I met Jean-Pierre who told me about his experiences and about the discussion groups that are so useful to those who suffer from this condition, and the whole project took on a new dimension. It is an extremely well-written story, which also offers something deeper that could really help a lot of people. The film is a comedy that draws upon a little-known reality, which only served to make the film more interesting. The idea of working with Isabelle Carré again was also very appealing to me. She’s an exceptional woman and an excellent acting partner with whom it is very motivating to work.

How did you approach your character, Jean-René?

I really liked the idea of playing this kind of character. Jean-René isn’t shy, he’s panicking. It’s not stuttering, it’s not hesitation – it’s something else: He’s paralyzed by fear. He had to be portrayed as being always on the edge. It wasn’t easy but it was fascinating. Having seen his other films, I also knew that Jean-Pierre was going to tackle this one in a very delicate way. To get into the character, I often used what I saw in Jean-Pierre. I didn’t try to imitate him but he sometimes inspired me. Fortunately, Jean-Pierre laughs more than my character but during moments of doubt, when he has to take decisions, they do have some points in common. Like my character, he has this impulse towards other people, all the while maintaining a distance. This again gives rise to tiny fractures, to discrepancies. With him, you have to watch out more for what you feel than what you see.

How did you approach the acting?

I play all my characters literally. I throw myself into the scene and into the moment. The director locates the scene in its context for me so as not to lose the coherence of the story and then—if the casting is spot-on, if the costumes are right and the sets are appropriate—all you have to do is slip into character.
Were there any scenes you were particularly looking forward to playing?
I relished all the comedy scenes that take you further, those ones that make you laugh but which reveal something touching. For example, when Jean-René doesn’t answer the telephone during his first meeting with Angélique. I really liked that scene. All the scenes of embarrassment – the dinner or in the alleyway when he takes her hand – all those situations were really appealing to me. And performing them with Isabelle was a further pleasure. We started by filming the scenes at the psychiatrist’s and I was immediately right into the character.

What do you have in common with Jean-René?
I’m not like him but we all have things in common with both the characters in the film. They trigger empathy but there’s some way to go between that and actually being like them. Women don’t scare me. I like this kind of role because it allows me to express my most vulnerable side but also make people laugh. I don’t think I’m emotionally challenged. We often mistake modesty for shyness. I’m modest but I’m not shy.

What memories will you retain of ROMANTICS ANONYMOUS?
There were a lot of high points but I think the scene when Jean-René arrives at Emotions Anonymous and speaks to Angélique left the biggest impression on me. He dares to make a confession. He dares to reveal an attachment and a vulnerability.
Do you remember the first time Jean-Pierre Améris mentioned the project?
It was a long time before he wrote it. We'd just shot MAMAN EST FOLLE and he just mentioned the idea. He confided in me that he'd been to Emotions Anonymous meetings and we talked a lot about how we felt about our emotions. That drew us closer. Jean-Pierre is someone I really like both as a man and as a director. I like the way he directs. The idea of working with him again and on that subject in particular was very appealing.

How would you define your emotional state?
Today I find it easier to talk about it. It has been a problem but it's much less so now. It's something that affects your daily life. For example, when I used to get angry, I'd cry. Part of myself would turn against me. It's quite complicated to handle because suddenly, there's something swallowing you up. Not so long ago, when I went to a dinner party, I had to walk around the block ten times, sometimes in tears, before finally daring to go in.

To me, shyness and being emotionally challenged are linked. I think it's no accident I do this job – acting allows me to channel and these emotions and put them to good use. Doing a job where you have to reveal yourself and demonstrate feelings in public may seem paradoxical but it's not. On a set or on stage you hide behind a character, behind the directing. Being an actor permits me to experience emotions with a freedom and an intensity that aren't always permitted in real life.

Have you compared experiences with Jean-Pierre?
We talked a lot. I told him about when I went to Cannes for the screening of Philippe Baril's LA FEMME DEPONEE and I was terrified. I was alone and the only way I could calm myself down was by singing a song from THE SOUND OF MUSIC. As soon as I'd get stressed, like Julie Andrews' character, I'd repeat: "I have confidence in me..." It helped me. I also had lots of good-luck charms on me; trinkets. But today, I'm much better! Jean-Pierre really liked that anecdote and he used it in the film. We had a lot of conversations like that and they really helped feed into my character.

How did you get close to Angélique's character?
There is a certain tension in Angélique. That's one thing I share with the character. Like her, after the sweetness we first feel, I have a huge amount of energy and I'm pretty willing. It was important not to let her come across as a shrinking violet. She's not the kind to hesitate. She wants it all but she's stuck. Knowing that, if you had to describe Angélique in one word, it would be "courageous." You need a whole lot of courage to overcome what holds her back. Courage is the key to her character. I found the fact that she has a gift very moving, too. And that paradoxically for her, it's not easy to live with this gift. In the beginning, she almost wants to apologize for it, to hide it. She needs time to take it on board. That's another nice thing the film does: Those who are most modest, in all senses of the word, can have a gift, and this story tells how they can express and share it.
What did you feel when you saw the finished film?

There is one shot I loved of Benoît when he’s just changed his shirt and he comes back into the restaurant with the song “You Are My Destiny” playing. I think he looks beautiful. He’s giving off something amazing. In terms of the film as a whole, despite its brilliance and sparkle, it’s not just a simple comedy. I think Jean-Pierre has completed a journey of which ROMANTICS ANONYMOUS is a significant stage.

Visually, I often thought of her character as a kind of Mary Poppins – also played by Julie Andrews. I also sometimes thought of my mother who is an inexhaustible source of inspiration. I remember when I was a child, how she would be thrown into confusion by saleswomen who were too authoritative. That fragility which suddenly emerges really struck me. That’s what Angélique has.

How was it working with him?

We were working together again five years after ENTRE SES MAINS. Back then, with Anne Fontaine’s film, Benoît was tackling a register that was pretty new for him. He wasn’t sure about it. But here, I found a more powerful Benoît, one who was more at ease in the range of facets he masters perfectly. But his acting was even richer – he has gained in versatility. He is capable of acting in different registers and sometimes simultaneously. It’s impressive. Benoît is modest and I like that. He throws himself right into it and his confidence is very moving. We started with the scene in the restaurant, which was very smart because all the complexity of the relationship between the two characters is right there. You can feel the tension, the energy in the scene, and I think as meeting up again had something to do with it. There was something of the characters in us, acting together again and perhaps being afraid of not measuring up to each other.

What was it like working with Jean-Pierre?

He is very precise. He’s not frightened of doing a lot of takes. He helped us progress, ensuring the film’s coherence. Jean-Pierre is like us. He’s a fighter and he didn’t allow us to slack. Jean-Pierre told us how far we should go in terms of our acting. We had to stick our necks out but without slipping into caricature. He defined our limits. I’m touched that he put things in the film that are personal to me. It confirms the closeness we feel, if that were necessary. There are many aspects to him that I see in myself.

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CINEMA
2011 DES VENTS CONTRAIRES by Jalil Lespert
MEETING WITH AN ANGEL by Yvan Thomas and Sophie de Daruvar
2010 ROMANTIC'S ANONYMOUS by Jean-Pierre Améris
HIDEAWAY by François Ozon
2009 TELLEMENT PROCHES by Olivier Nakache and Eric Toledano
MUSÉE HAUT, MUSÉE BAS by Jean-Michel Ribes
GOD’S OFFICES by Claire Simon
2008 THE FOX AND THE CHILD by Luc Jacquet
ANNA M. by Michel Spinosa
2006 PRIVATE FEARS IN PUBLIC PLACES by Alain Resnais
QUATRE ÉTOILES by Christian Vincent
2005 ENTRE SES MAINS by Anne Fontaine
L’AVION by Cédric Kahn
2004 HOLY LOLA by Bertrand Tavernier
FEELINGS by Noémie Lvovsky
2003 BEAUTIFUL MEMORIES by Zabou Breitman
TOMORROW’S ANOTHER DAY by Jeanne Labrune
DAY OFF by Pascal Thomas
2002 LA FEMME DÉFENDUE by Philippe Harrel
2001 LEONCE ET LENA directed by André Engel
2000 RÉSONANCES directed by Irians Brook
1999 MADEMOISELLE ELSE directed by Didier Long
1998 L’HIVER SOUS LA TABLE directed by Zabou Breitman
Molière for Best Actress
1997 ANNA M. by Michel Spinosa
1996 SLAVES directed by Jorge Lavelli
1995 ON NE BADINE PAS AVEC L’AMOUR directed by Jean-Pierre Vincent
1993 IL NE FAUT JURER DE RIEN directed by Jean-Pierre Vincent
1992 L’ECOLE DES FEMMES directed by Jean-Lou Boutté

THEATER
2010 UNE FEMME À BERLIN directed by Tatiana Vialle
2008 UN GARÇON IMPOSSIBLE directed by Jean-Michel Ribes
2007 BLANC directed by Zabou Breitman
COMMENT DIRE directed by Nicole Aubry
2004 L’HIVER SOUS LA TABLE directed by Zabou Breitman
Molière for Best Actress
2003 LA NUIT CHANTE directed by Frédéric Belin-Garcia
2002 HUGO À DEUX VOIX directed by Nicole Aubry
2001 OTHELLO directed by Dominique Pitoiset
1999 RÉSONANCES directed by Irians Brook
1998 L’HIVER SOUS LA TABLE directed by Zabou Breitman
Molière for Best Actress
1996 SLAVES directed by Jorge Lavelli
1995 ON NE BADINE PAS AVEC L’AMOUR directed by Jean-Pierre Vincent
IL NE FAUT JURER DE RIEN directed by Jean-Pierre Vincent
1992 L’ECOLE DES FEMMES directed by Jean-Lou Boutté
CAST

Benoît Poelvoorde  Jean-René
Isabelle Carré  Angélique
Lorella Cravotta  Magda
Lise Lamétrie  Suzanne
Swann Arlaud  Antoine
Pierre Niney  Ludo
Stephan Wojtowicz  Psychologist
Jacques Boudet  Rémi
Céline Duhamel  Mimi
Grégoire Ludig  Julien
Philippe Fretun  Maxime
Alice Pol  Adèle
Philippe Gaulé  Philippe
Joëlle Sechaud  Joëlle
Isabelle Gerault  Isabelle
Claude Aufaure  Mr. Mercier
Philippe Laudenbach  Head of the Jury
Music Supervisor Valérie Lindon for Ré Flexe Music
Original music composed, arranged and directed by Pierre Adenot
Arrangements: Cyrille Auffort & Pierre Adenot
Orchestra conducted by Cyrille Auffort
First violin: Tom Bowes
Piano: Simon Chamberlain
Orchestra Manager: Isobel Griffiths
Assisted by Jo Buckley
Recorded at Air Studios (London) by Nick Wallage assisted by Olga Fitzroy

Programming: Éric Chevalier
Pro Tools Operator: Aymeric Letoquart
Copyist: Guy-Paul Romby
Original Music Advisor: Patrick Millet
Recorded at Meudon Studios by Julien Bassères

Sound Mixing: Stéphane Reichart assisted by Hugo Legrand
Guillaume Tell Studios (Suresnes)
Agents for Pierre Adenot & Cyrille Auffort
Marie Sabbah & Jean-Pierre Arquèi (Film Musique Services)

MUSICAL EXTRACTS

« I Have Confidence »
(Rodgers/Richard/Adapt.Lemarchand)
Performed by Isabelle Carré
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« You are my Destiny »
(Paul Anka)
Performed by Paul Anka
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« Les Yeux Noirs »
(Yevgen Grebenka - Public Domain)
Arrangements: Pierre Adenot
Adaptation: Elisabeth Anais
Performed by Benoît Poelvoorde
© 2009 Pan-Européenne

« Ay Jalisco no te rajas »
(Ernesto Cortazar Hernandez /Manuel Esperon Gonzalez)
© 2009 P.H.A.M., Mexique
With the authorization of Peermusic France – Paris

CLOSING CREDITS SONG

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(Stone/Stone)
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