



Patrick Quinet presents

Stanislas
MERHAR

Aurora
MARION

Marc
BARBÉ

LA FOLIE ALMAYER

ALMAYER'S FOLLY

a film by Chantal Akerman

*A river roars.
The sun burns your eyes.
A woman loses her mind.
A girl sings in a honky tonk.
A Chinese man on opium dreams.
Running after a child through the jungle.
Lightning.
A marriage without love.
A veil of sadness. Boundless joy.
You will not have Nina.
A young girl walks to the end of the night.
Black sun.
A father cries out his love.
An outcast.
An empty rowboat wobbles in the storm.
Humid palm trees glisten.
A dead man.
Mosquitoes.
A telluric film.*

*A tragic story, like all Greek tragedies that never age.
A tale as old as the world.
A story as young as the world.
Of love and folly. Of impossible dreams.*



Where did you get the idea for this film?

It stemmed from a kind of shock. Just as I was finishing reading Joseph Conrad's *Almayer's Folly*, I saw F.W. Murnau's *Tabu* at the movies. The penultimate chapter of the novel portrays the last encounter between the father and daughter in the jungle. That chapter upset me deeply. Yet it has nothing to do with *Tabu*. But I guess, the simplicity and sheer beauty of Murnau's film, its would-be paradise troubled by a predator somehow resonated with Conrad's story. This connection occurred a little over three years ago. In the end, though, I didn't at all deal with the father's scene in the same way as Conrad. In the book, it's a moment of redemption through heroism, when Almayer finally takes the young lovers to 'freedom'. I trivialized this journey to the beach. Almayer is no hero.

How did you go about writing the script?

I kept writing right up until the start of the shoot. In the beginning, I really wasn't sure how to go about it. Nicole Brenez suggested I pick the parts I really like. That doesn't always work, but it enabled me to start. *Almayer's Folly* is Conrad's first novel, yet all his themes are already present – guilt, loss, redemption, the other. All Christian themes, which are quite remote to me, except for the other, but only in [Emmanuel] Levinas's meaning. I first started by writing a scene that doesn't exist in the novel, where Almayer and Lingard are tracking Nina as a child. It might be reminiscent of *The Night of the Hunter*, but I think it came from something else. My grandfather, a strict Orthodox Jew, lived with us. My father, trying to be a good son, lived all those years respecting his father and all the Jewish rituals. When my grandad died, the first thing my father did was to grab his

daughter and throw her into a public school. He did it for his own self-emancipation, not for the sake of his daughter. I didn't count. Maybe it came from that. Who knows, it doesn't matter at all. Suddenly I saw this chase. It's the first scene I envisioned and I knew I had a movie.

It's less a chase than a kind of mad, screaming trek for Almayer.

Yes, he screams, out of helplessness, pain, grief. Everyone is a kind of victim in the film. The mother, the father, the daughter, even Dain – they are all victims of their prejudices and helplessness. I believe that Nina will make it in the end – probably by paying dearly for her escape, but she will pull through because she has no illusions.

In the film Nina has a more important role than in the novel.

Yes, she is more like the hero. But not in Conrad's meaning. Women didn't really matter to him, except in rare instances. Then it all started with the chase after the little girl... And the mother and father who gradually go mad. The Chinese character didn't exist in Conrad's book. Not this way anyway. There was no city either, all the stuff we shot in Phnom Penh. We don't really know it's Phnom Penh, it could be any Asian city. I got the urge to film the city when I went scouting there. That's also when the Chinese character came to me and the boarding school took greater importance, and all the wandering that leads Nina to realize that there's no place for her anywhere. You see it as she walks on. So she arrives at the harbor without knowing what to do there, and the young Chinese captain makes the decision for her, in a manner of speaking. If not for him, she might have

stayed there, like Adjani in Barbados at the end of Truffaut's film *The Story of Adele H.*

In your version of the penultimate chapter of the book, before they set off to the beach, Nina comes near her father and strikes an odd pose, like a protective statue. This intimacy, which distances her from Dain, doesn't exist in Conrad's original story.

She doesn't want Dain to kill him, I guess. She sets limits for him. In the novel Nina loves Dain. In the film she doesn't. She says her heart is dead, for the time being. At the end of the day, it doesn't really matter. Her mother told her to leave, and that's what saved her. In the film's opening scene we understand that Nina is being used by Dain. We don't know anything other than that she's one of many dancers. Maybe she takes drugs, hallucinates, works in some kind of brothel. She finally gets to breathe when Dain dies. She didn't kill him, but she could have. Nina will make something of her life.

The scene of Dain's murder is also a new element, as compared with the novel. Why did you set it at the beginning of the film?

Precisely because it is a beginning for Nina, whereas the end of the film spells the end of Almayer. Otherwise, it would have seemed like two endings, with one choking the other. Can you imagine having Almayer's ultimate descent into madness and then Dain's death and Nina's song?

Did you have Stanislas Merhar in mind for the role of Almayer from the start?

I didn't have anyone in mind when I wrote the script, but very quickly thereafter it was him, and only him. On the set I didn't block the actors. Stanislas let himself be guided by his inner rhythms, and I didn't want to interfere. That's how he was able to go so far. French actors are not accustomed to working this way. We worked together, we followed him, we adapted. This happened, among other times, on the last shot, on his face. We pushed his chair toward the camera, and toward the sun, and he listened to everything that went on around him. The sounds of the river. Sometimes he'd throw me a glance, and I signaled for him to keep going. We shot a full mag that way, and then I edited it. He was incredible.

What about your choice of Aurora Marion?

When I started on my rewrite, I already had Aurora Marion. She probably brought something to the writing. After submitting an earlier draft I had to find a Belgian actress in order to access funding in Belgium, so I started casting. Aurora's father is Greek; her mother is half-Belgian, half-Rwandan. Sometimes she looks like a statue from Ancient Greece. Quite unwittingly. Aurora is not comfortable with the color of her skin. I asked her to stand upright when she says, 'I'm not white.' Just like Nina, she is not black either. You can't quite tell what she is. She lived in London, where people often mistook her for an Indian. It's just like the boy who plays Dain. He is from Madagascar, and such a fan of Kung Fu and all that martial stuff that he speaks a little Chinese. We found the Chinese man there, as well as Ali – we scouted rivers with him and I always saw him from behind, because he was driving the boat. One day he turned around, and I said, that's Ali!

Did you do a breakdown?

I didn't. I shot this film a bit in the same way I do my documentaries: I didn't look at the shooting schedule in the morning, nothing

was an obligation, and I worked in my pajamas. The blocking was improvised on the day. I have a great crew for that way of working – Remon Fromont, the Director of Photography, and Pierre Mertens on sound, and all the others. All of them, really. At the end of the third day, Pierre told Remon, 'Look, she's making this feature like her documentaries.' Meaning, receiving what happens, accepting it – being a sponge. Imposing nothing. I chiseled every detail of *The Captive*, here I didn't at all. I didn't know I was going to shoot this way when I started on the project, but it struck me intuitively... I took a chance, but it was exhilarating.

Did you operate the camera?

I often do, but less so in this case. Remon knows me so well... When he suggested something that he knew I wasn't going to like, he'd look at me and say, 'You're not gonna like it,' and I'd laugh and say, 'You're right.' We met in 1978, he was the assistant cameraman on *Anna's Rendez-Vous*. Then we shot *Portrait of a Young Girl*, *A Couch In New York*, and the documentaries - except for *Là-Bas*, which I shot myself with my little PD-100. That's a sweet camera, I love it. I find HD too crude, it requires too much work.

There is one shot on the water troubled by the storm that comes back three times. It could epitomize the impact of the film: a sort of confusion in time, like those sudden switches from day to night. A sense of standing still that illustrates Almayer's own confusion.

In terms of plot, I knew that those scenes were what the Chinese dreamed of when he was on opium. Two dreams. And then, the third time, in the realm of 'reality', I replay with his dreams and turn them into nightmares. That difference between dream and reality is not immediately understandable. This is like my documentaries: shots follow one another without any explicit reason being given for their juxtaposition. The only reason is filmmaking, without actual logic. *Almayer's Folly* works on you after you're done watching it. At first, it leaves you a little speechless, then the images come back to haunt you, I think. This is because I'm not trying to say something I already know. I work from my unconscious, and that speaks to other people's unconscious - the audience's.

***The Captive* prepared the way for the wholly 'mental film', whose images consistently border on the fantastical. And it, too, was shot in a style akin to your documentaries. That's an unprecedented mix for you.**

It is. It really is a stage in the process. A broader kind of film, more deconstructed, I think. When I look at it, I think I dared to go for power, whereas I always used to aim for the minimal. It's kind of like a flow of lava that I might have held back or repressed. *Jeanne Dielman* is a uniquely radical film still today, but it is all about implosion. Here, it is the opposite. My psychotherapist, whom I call my little boy, always tells me that if I stopped withholding, or rather the reason I'm afraid of not withholding is that I'm afraid of my own bottled up anger, I'm afraid of killing, figuratively speaking. Meanwhile, I'm killing myself little by little. The film was shot in a sort of hedonism, total pleasure. I didn't realize that a nearly telluric force would emanate from it. Up until that point, withholding gave power through implosion. Here, it's the reverse. That is how I progressed, it's my own liberation.

LA FOLIE ALMAYER

ALMAYER'S FOLLY

a film by Chantal Akerman

Somewhere in South-East Asia, in a little lost village on a wide and turbulent river, a European man clings to his pipe dreams out of love for his daughter. A story of passion, loss and madness.

Adapted from the novel by Joseph Conrad

CAST

ALMAYER STANISLAS MERHAR
NINA AURORA MARION
CAPTAIN LINGARD MARC BARBÉ
DAÏN ZAC ANDRIANASOLO
ZAHIRA SAKHNA OUM
CHEN SOLIDA CHAN

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY CHANTAL AKERMAN

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COSTUMES CATHERINE MARCHAND

SET DESIGN PATRICK DECHESNE, ALAIN-PASCAL HOUSIAUX

LINE PRODUCER MARIANNE LAMBERT

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COPRODUCED BY ARLETTE ZYLBERBERG

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FRANCE - BELGIUM / 2011 / 35 MM / 1,85 / 127' / COLOR / FRENCH - ENGLISH - KHMER / DOLBY SRD

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