

HÉLICOTRONC AND TRIPODE PRODUCTIONS

PRESENT



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DE LA CRITIQUE  
CANNES 2022

# LOVE ACCORDING TO DALVA

A FILM BY EMMANUELLE NICOT

2022 – BELGIUM, FRANCE – DRAMA – FRENCH – 87'

**mk2**  
FILMS

## SYNOPSIS

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Dalva, 12, lives alone with her father. One evening, the police storms into their home and takes her into foster care.

As Dalva befriends her new roommate Samia and social worker Jayden, she gradually comes to understand the love she shared with her father was not what she thought. With their help, Dalva will learn to become a child again.

## INTERVIEW WITH EMMANUELLE NICOT - Director

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### **Where did you get the idea for *Love according to Dalva*?**

It came from an imbroglio of many things. First, there is the theme of influence and control, which is personal to me. Then, during the making of my last short film *À l'arraché (Snatched)*, I spent some time immersed in an emergency reception centre for teenagers; what struck me was that all the children for proven abuse continued to stand with their families, claiming that the justice system was unjust to have placed them there. I followed two of these kids for years, leading me to discover their journey from family separation to "liberation". In addition, a friend of mine had a father who was a youth worker, whose job was to take children suspected of abuse out of their homes and into care. One day, this youth worker had to deal with a 6-year-old girl living alone with her father on suspicion of incest; he found himself faced with this hyper-sensualised and sexualised little girl who was in a game of seduction with him. This is how the idea of *Dalva* was born. I asked myself: what would have become of this little girl at the age of 12, at the age of puberty and the first romances?

**For part of the film, there is uncertainty as to whether Dalva is being manipulated by her father or has a radical Oedipus complex as she claims to love and desire her father and rejects her mother.**

Personally, I am sure that Dalva is totally under the influence of her father. Before her being placed in care, we understand that she has been living alone with him for years, without a mother's presence, that she has dropped out of school, that she has no outside reference and that her father has made her his wife. To cope with the insufferable, Dalva has taken refuge in extremely powerful denial. She tells herself that she and her father are in a love affair that no one can understand. It is this denial that makes her accept this incestuous situation and this is what is discovered as the film progresses.

When Dalva says she loves her father and she clearly loves him with filial love, it is the power of this denial that makes her confuse filial love with the love between coupled lovers. By contrast, she never talks about desire. As for her mother, she rejects her while still being completely under the control of her father. The adolescent girl who sees herself as her father's beloved wife perceives her mother as the ultimate rival.

**Is Dalva not only a victim of incest, but also of control and domination that deprive her of her lucidity, her free will and her natural evolution from childhood to adolescence?**

Yes, as I said before, Dalva is in a very powerful denial that protects her from any lucidity regarding the situation she is living. Moreover, her father has put her in the place of his wife who left him, and has shaped her in her image. Dalva has internalised the idea that it is in this place and with this appearance, wearing her clothes, make-up and hair that her father loves

her. In order to maintain this love, which she vitally needs – since she receives no love from anyone else – she has never questioned this place or appearance.

**The character of the youth worker is also very beautiful. You show that his task is extremely complex, between authority, benevolence, psychological finesse and necessary distance.**

This youth worker is inspired by my own brother. He is a man of great empathy, not very cerebral, very professional and at the same time temperamental, who must always contain himself so as not to explode. I admire very much the work done by the youth workers in care homes, who are faced with extremely complex problems. Children in care are removed from their families not because they are “not” loved, but because they are “poorly” loved. As they begin to detach themselves from their parents, a vital need for love and tenderness begins to overwhelm them. And this need cannot be met by youth workers who are always forced to keep a distance from them.

Dalva is in this situation. Her father will gradually fall off his pedestal and leave a great void. But in her entourage, the male reference who replaces the father figure is Jayden, the youth worker who watches over her, sets limits for her, accompanies her in crucial moments... And it is from him that Dalva will seek tenderness and love. One of Dalva’s problems is that she mixes up everything: fatherly love and sexuality, the father and the youth worker... The complex and paradoxical work of youth workers is how to repair these children without being able to give them the love they absolutely need to continue living. I worked this out a lot in the character of Jayden.

**Dalva eventually becomes aware of the situation and moves closer to her mother. It is a slow and barely detectable process.**

That’s it, it’s very progressive. We understand in the film that the father has kidnapped Dalva by making her believe that her mother no longer loves her and that he has transformed her into his little wife. He dresses and teaches Dalva to wear make-up like her mother. Dalva will take over her mother and replace her. And then, gradually, she will regain her childhood. And it is by regaining her place as a child, as the father falls from his pedestal, that Dalva will be able to see her mother not as a rival but as her mother. Moreover, when she makes a pass at Jayden, he rejects her, and rightly so. There is also Samia, the best friend, who leaves, so there is room for the mother to come back. It is all these elements that make Dalva become the teenager that she is.

**The film ends just as the father’s trial is about to begin. Why did you make this choice?**

The trial is another story; it is not the subject of this film. I wanted to tell the story of the beginning of the reconstruction, the switch from the young girl under the influence and control to the young girl who becomes aware of her father’s actions. This process takes place

over a year, and that is what interested me. Afterwards, there is the trial and still a long way to go, but I concentrated on the switch of awareness.

### **Zelda Samson who plays Dalva is extraordinary. How did you find her?**

I launched a very important casting call, which is another professional activity of mine. I shared this work with Stéphanie Doncker. She was in charge of France, and I was in charge of Belgium. We were looking for a girl from a middle-class or affluent family background who had a certain degree of command of language. I also wanted a girl who carried herself well, had a nice head carriage, and possessed the grace of a dancer. I placed advertisements in dance schools, music schools and horse-riding schools, and so did Stéphanie. We got a lot of applications, and I received hundreds of videos. Among this mass, Zelda immediately caught my eye. She was 11 years old, she was filming herself in her room, and she expressed herself with a vocabulary so rich and advanced for her age. She explained to me that she wanted to become an astrophysicist, to work on dark matter, and she imagined herself becoming a Nobel Prize winner! She also had a feminist outlook vis-à-vis the boys in her class. She was impressively mature. She also had confidence, strength, something brash and, above all, an incredibly cinegenic face. It was impossible to give her an age.

I knew immediately that she was Dalva, but I had to convince my producer and Stéphanie because Zelda didn't look like the ultra-graceful and "feminine" girl we had decided to look for at the beginning. She was a bit hunched over, looked down a lot, and had this very wild side, and a bit of a tomboy. At the end of the castings, I worked with a make-up artist, a hairdresser and a costume designer. Zelda was suddenly transformed and everyone saw the birth of Dalva.

### **As Zelda was not a professional actress, was she easy to direct?**

We had to do a lot of work with Zelda on the way she held herself to make her a little lady. I left this work to Caroline Faust, an actress, formerly a dancer, who was amazing. We worked on the acting for three months before shooting the film. What was complex was that Zelda was a rather distrusting person and we had to gain her trust. Then, she was not at all visceral and emotional like the non-professional actors I usually work with. She was very cerebral. It took me a while to figure out how to work with her, and at some point, I got it. I had to talk to Zelda about Dalva as someone who was always there, next to us in the room. I would tell her everything I knew about her, everything I had imagined. Sometimes I would also tell Zelda about personal things that had happened to me and especially about what I had felt inside myself at those times. I had to feed her as much as possible. Zelda, Dalva and I formed a trio. I would go back behind the camera, Zelda would suddenly become one with Dalva just for the time of the shot and would become herself again as soon as I would cut.

**Did Zelda have the maturity and distance to understand Dalva's situation and not be too affected by it?**

When I contacted the girls during the casting, I also contacted all the parents, one by one, explaining that the film was about incest. Most of them said that their daughters didn't know that word and that they would talk to them about it. So, Zelda first had a long discussion with her parents and she understood what it was about. After that, the filming was always a game for her. It was her first time, and everything was extraordinary for her. Incest did not carry the same weight for her as it did for us adults. I think that Zelda understood perfectly what she was playing but did not invest in Dalva's incestuous situation the same weight as we did. Moreover, I wouldn't want my film to be reduced to the question of incest. Incest is a starting point, but I wanted above all to make a film about reconstruction, emancipation, liberation, a path towards the light.

**Alexis Manenti is excellent playing Jayden.**

I discovered Alexis in *Les Misérables*, I thought he was great, and it was my script supervisor who suggested I cast him. Alexis has the acting range of a true professional and at the same time he has that ruggedness of a rock that you find in people in casting calls. He is complex, very temperamental and at the same time very gentle, with sadness and melancholy that you can see in his eyes at times. Mixing professional and amateur actors in the same film is a delicate matter for me. Faced with amateurs, the pros can seem less authentic and less spontaneous. In the same way, when faced with professionals, amateurs can seem weaker in the game. I have the feeling that thanks to Alexis, we managed to deal with this issue.

**Jean-Louis Coulloc'h is impressive in the role of the father: a silent body that reminds one of Brando in *Apocalypse now*.**

Jean-Louis is Lady Chatterley's lover twenty years later! It was difficult to find an actor for this role, many refused to cast. And I was very demanding. After many meetings and discussions, Jean-Louis's name came up. I did some research and came across a short film in which he was acting, and it was love at first sight. I am convinced that absolute monsters do not exist and I needed a complex actor, with an animal side, a wounded bear, but whose look is full of humanity, tenderness and love. He loves his daughter, not properly, but he loves her. Because of Dalva's different haircuts, the shooting was completely out of chronological order, and the prison scene with the father and Dalva was shot in the second week. Jean-Louis was so intense, so in tune and so connected to her, that something clicked in her. It was as if Zelda had said to herself, "This is it, I'm here for real." She felt she had been given a mission, to embody this little Dalva as accurately and as strongly as possible.

**The style of the film is very physical, intense, and raw. Can you talk about your directing choices and your collaboration with Caroline Guimbal, your director of photography?**

Caroline is my close friend, we have grown together since we started film school. She is the chief operator of all my short films. Her magic power is to combine proximity and modesty when she films people. I always find her at the perfect distance. On a human level, we both share the same values, the same ethics, and that makes our collaboration ultra fluid. Instinctively, we put the camera in the same place.

We were always using a shoulder-mounted camera to get a human vibe, a breath of fresh air at every moment. We were very close to Dalva but also very free in our movements. I didn't want the direction to be too restrictive for my actors. Of course, everything was thought out, it wasn't an improvisation, but there were no markings on the floor or elements that would have restricted the staging or the actors. It was important not to break their spontaneity, even less so that of the non-professional actors. I am very happy to have worked with Caroline and I want to continue with her on future films.

**What has been the journey of your film career, first as a spectator and then as a director?**

I grew up in Sedan in a family that was not at all into cinema. I never went to the cinema until I was 18. But there was this festival in Charleville-Mézières, *Les Enfants du cinéma*, which showed films whose main characters were children. My parents took me and my brother there a couple of weeks out of the year. There are films that have had such an impact on me, such as Catherine Breillat's *À Ma Sœur*, Walter Salles's *Central do Brasil*, Michel Franco's *Después de Lucía*... It fulfilled me, it answered a lot of questions I had, and I felt less alone. Then, when I was 18, I left my parents, went to study modern literature, had a few ups and downs, and then a friend transmitted her passion for cinema to me. So, I enrolled in a film option at university, and for the first time in my life, I felt that I was good at something because I was getting good grades. I realised that this was my place. I started shooting short films and that experience gave meaning to my life. I then went to this film school in Belgium, the IAD (*Institut des Arts et de Diffusion*) in Leuven. As time went by, I think I wanted to give back to the *Les Enfants du cinéma* festival in Charleville everything it had given me when I was a child. And I want to offer all of that to people. Film has this magical power.

## ABOUT EMMANUELLE NICOT

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### BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1985, Emmanuelle Nicot graduated from the IAD Film School (*Institut des Arts et de Diffusion*) in Leuven, after first studying modern literature. Her first short film, RAE, received 15 awards. In addition to directing, she works as a casting director, specializing in open casting call. Since 2013, she has worked on 6 short films and 3 feature films.

In 2016, she directed her second short film, SNATCHED (À l'arraché), which received 17 awards.

LOVE ACCORDING TO DALVA is her first feature film.

### FILMOGRAPHY - Director

<b>2022</b>	<b>LOVE ACCORDING TO DALVA (Dalva)</b>   Feature, 83'
<b>2016</b>	<b>SNATCHED (À l'arraché)</b>   Short, 23'
<b>2012</b>	<b>RAE</b>   Short, 19'



## CAST

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Dalva	Zelda Samson
Jayden	Alexis Manenti
Samia	Fanta Guirassy
Zora	Marie Denarnaud
Jacques	Jean-Louis Coulloch'
Marina	Sandrine Blancke
The psychologist	Maïa Sandoz
Lucile	Charlie Drach
Dimi	Roman Coustère Hachez
The doctor	Babetida Sadjo
The judge	Gilles David (de la Comédie Française)
Shérif	Abdelmounim Snoussi

## CREW

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Written and directed by	Emmanuelle Nicot
Produced by	Julie Esparbes, Delphine Schmit
Photography	Caroline Guimbal
Editing	Suzana Pedro
Original Music	Frédéric Alvarez
Sound	Fabrice Osinski, Valérie Ledocte, Aline Gavroy
Casting	Stéphanie Doncker, Emmanuelle Nicot
Production Design	Catherine Cosme
Costume	Constance Allain
Makeup and Hairstyling	Saori Matsui, Laëtitia Hogday
Production	HÉLICOTRONC TRIPODE PRODUCTIONS
French Distribution	DIAPHANA
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