

Interview with Delphine Lehericéy



Delphine Lehericéy on location in "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", July 2018

By Marian Evans
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Your "Le Milieu de l'Horizon/Beyond the Horizon" is an adaptation of Roland Buti's Swiss Literature Award-winning novel, set in the great European drought of 1976. A Swiss/Belgian co-production mainly shot in "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", it is about Gus, his family and its farm, and stars Laetitia Casta, Thibaut Evrard, Clémence Poésy and Fred Hotier, with newcomer Luc Bruchez as Gus, the main character. What drew you to this story for your second feature, after "Puppy Love"?

Delphine Lehericéy: It was a surprise and a gift. The producers gave the book to Joanne Giger, a Swiss screenwriter who lives in Los Angeles, and decided to pass her adaptation to women directors, as well as to men. I read the first version of the script and I read the book and I said, 'I want to do this'. It was perfect for me because I want to make movies about the magic place between documentary and fiction and because it is about emotions and I want to make movies about people's feelings. I also want to make a popular movie and this is an intimate story but a universal subject, for a large audience.

The story is about a boy first and after that it is about women. It was a very interesting moment for women, in 1976, and for me this is a contemporary story because women now have to change the narrative again, to become free. The women in "Le Milieu de l'Horizon" create a women's book group where women read and exchange books and Nicole, Gus's mother, discovers herself there. I discovered myself in books and with other women in feminist groups, too.

Something had just happened in my life, as well, the same as with Nicole. When my boy was 4 I left everything to be with a woman again and the second coming out was more momentous than the first, because I was older and had a boy. All the questions were different, because as a mother you have responsibility for someone. It is hard because you have to explain, justify.

The book's rural world was also familiar to me. In the 1970s they said, "We have to produce more food. We have to change the way we raise the animals" and so on. And now we say, "We have to grow vegetables on a little farm and close to home and organic".

Joanne, the producers and I quickly agreed on the film we wanted to make and that's how this collaboration started.

What was your involvement with the script development?

DL: It has been a good, fascinating collaboration for two years. I'm not the co-writer. I'm involved in the writing because directors write and also because it was a way for me of appropriating the script before the shooting. But we don't write in the same way, the same things.

It's a simple coming-of-age movie, about what happens to a boy when drought is killing the fields, killing the food, killing the animals, killing humans and you have to fight the elements. He learns that humanity is a hard condition, that the adults are just human and have limits and you have to find your own way. You can choose many things but many things you cannot choose. And Joanne had written the screenplay like that.

So, it was really important for me that everything we see is because Gus is present to see it. My son was sad when we left home and he always looked me in the eyes as if to question me. That look was my way of entering into Gus' character's gaze, into his interior. He is a boy but not yet a man and this age of innocence is relatively gender-free.

An important questioning of the adaptation was that of the treatment of Gus' character, his place, his glance on the events he saw. In the book, the boy is the observer, the writer, remembering when he was young. I'm not a contemplative director. I need action. Gus had to take action, become a hero. He also has imagination and a story to tell. When he draws a picture he can transform reality. He can draw a cow and transform the cow into a woman; if he sees a naked woman he can imagine something different. In childhood we can leave the reality and go somewhere else. I retain this feeling from my childhood and give this power to Gus.

It was also my mission as a woman and as a director to use the story to go further inside the Nicole character. There is no return from the moment when you discover you are a woman. It is not just something in the mind. It is an action, an emotion, in the whole body.

So, we also disrupted Gus's romantic picture of Nicole. We can have complexity, even if his gaze is a young gaze. When the story starts she is perfect, just a little bit tired. She's beautiful, a hero for him. They are so close. But she becomes something else and something more. This disrupts the romanticism, is a violent change, a shock, for him and for Nicole, who is 40, and raised to have children and to live with a man.

The male characters are important because they are more than a patriarchy. The father is stuck in a cage and trying to get out. He doesn't understand that he cannot fight against the elements. The old people are important too, witnesses of the old world and the present.

It's a very visual, very sensitive book. The author translates emotions with a colour of a dress or a description of the hair. I tried to understand how he would remember childhood and to translate this into cinematographic language. What's a memory and what's nostalgia? What's the memory's color? What's its light? How I remember my childhood was important. What kind of picture do I have? Am I in the scene or outside? Seeing with my heart or my eyes? Involved or not? Is this an emotion or a picture or a color?

During the shooting I continued to change little things in the script. The landscape and the special light in "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" influenced me. The actors have influenced me. But I have a great respect for the writer and when I change something I email Joanne and say "I'm going to be doing this. It's okay?" And she says "It's okay, it's your thing" and that I have to do what I feel.

Why are you shooting in "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia"?

DL: Switzerland is really green and rich. It was hard to imagine the movie in this beautiful landscape and we thought of "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" because my Belgian producer is also a co-producer for Macedonian director Teona Strugar Mitevska, who made "I Am From Tito Veles". I loved Teona's work, set in a small industrial city with post-communism landscapes.

Macedonians wanted to be involved because they are used to work for servicing production but rarely for European auteur films and stories like this. They said to me 'I like this script, this is my story when I was a boy'. In "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" we found immense bare plains that make for a cataclysmic vision of the sense of drought, local farmers, and farms with old equipment. It is important that the story takes place away from a romantic, idealistic take on the rural world, and that the actors take on concrete tasks, guided by the real role players of this world.

You trained as a performer and have often worked for the stage. What do you do in cinema that you can't do on stage?

DL: This is the magic thing. The accuracy of an emotion comes from the integrity of the unique bond between an actor and their character. This is where directing starts. I like to work with actors in the same state of mind as the characters, as if they are in a documentary. When we play between documentary and fiction, a magic butterfly arrives in the acting space and the camera can catch something we cannot catch in a theatre.

We had very little rehearsal time but I wrote the actresses letters and sent pictures and videos of the women's liberation movement, about women who work in fields, about families. We have had some long phone discussions. They are curious about their characters and they want to imagine their mothers.

Once the preparation is done, the actors become empty, like a clown, and play. To play like this you have to ask questions, to have doubt. I work especially with Luc, who plays Gus, who asks "Who is this woman my mother? Why is she doing something really different than before?" This is something to play, a kind of anger and a kind of reflection. He thinks "What is going on in the world, the hot weather and now my mother doing this?"

What does the shoot mean for you as a mother?

DL: It is always very difficult, because I'm really involved in the life of my son and I'm really involved in my job. He's coming to "The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" for just a week because if he is always there I cannot work because I feel distracted. There's always planning. Women's heads are full of planning all the time. There is no wide understanding of what we have to do and what we can do. You can put something in your contract and say 'I want a baby sitter on the set for my child' but you have to negotiate.

I'm learning to ask for gender equality in the crew, which is 50/50 women and men, as it was on "PuppyLove". Another time I will ask the producer to have child care on set.

Reading women's books changed you. Did any women's films change you?

DL: Before I read Beauvoir, Wittig, Leduc, Woolf, I loved men's books and the masculine gaze. After that, when I tried to read Balzac and Proust, I thought "Ah this is awful, I don't recognize myself anymore!" It is impossible to go back. I like Proust and Balzac but in a different way.

All the movies in my mind were from male directors. But when I saw Andrea Arnold's "Fish Tank" something happened. This young girl was in a battle I could understand, starting to realise the injustice of being a woman. I felt that and loved the way the girl moved. The girls in a commercial movie are always like little "things". But this girl was like a boy. It was the same with Céline Sciamma's "Naissance de Pieuvres". The girls were not beautiful, not pretty, not things, they were girls. When I saw "Fish Tank" and "Naissance de Pieuvres" I was writing my first feature, about a teenager, and understood that it was necessary to explain what's going on inside the girls when they understand that they are girls. They're going to have to try something with sexuality and they're going to be hurt, even if it's beautiful. But before that I read the books and they put me in a state of mind and pushed me to write and when I started to write my gaze changed. It was unconscious. I didn't decide.



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What does the female gaze mean for you?

DL: The most important thing for me is to be a woman. If I am the director, I will present a woman's gaze. A large proportion of audiences are women and we have to make movies for them. I want my mother to see this movie and say "This story could happen to me or to my daughter". Laetitia Casta is a popular international actress, beautiful, romantic, but most of the time in movies she's appeared in a male gaze. I know she has a different woman inside.

Men are not experts on women. They observe women. Sometimes, because they are human, they have beautiful women characters. It is different, no less interesting. But it is still a male gaze. When I tell a story about women I'm an expert because I am a woman. Don't try to come on my territory. (She laughs.)