

INTERVIEW WITH ANNA FALGUÈRES AND JOHN SHANK



**DIRECTORS OF “POMPEI”,
A FEATURE FILM
SUPPORTED BY
EURIMAGES**

SEPTEMBER 2018

BY KARIN SCHIEFER

John Shank and Anna Falguères © Florian Berutti

THE TITLE OF YOUR PROJECT, “POMPEI”, EVOKES A HIGHLY DEVELOPED CIVILISATION ERASED AT A STROKE BY A VOLCANIC ERUPTION. WHAT WERE YOUR THOUGHTS BEHIND THE CHOICE OF “POMPEI” AS THE TITLE FOR A CONTEMPORARY STORY?

Anna Falguères: “Pompei” represents a cataclysm that occurred without any warning. We wanted to evoke a danger that nobody saw coming. “Pompei” is also a particular place that opens a gap in time, gives access to the past.

John Shank: “Pompei” evokes both something very near and present, as well as a faraway, distant time. You mentioned the destruction of a highly developed civilisation: How can a city just disappear? And how come there are so many remains of it so many years later? There are so many traces left behind, so many things that can open our imagination. “Pompei” is a strange window, an opening into the past and into time.

A.F.: There’s also the idea of a special place and time where anonymous people have left a memory and a trace of their lives to numerous generations without being aware of it. That’s something that moved me very deeply.

“POMPEI” IS THE STORY OF A YOUNG GENERATION THAT SEEMS ABANDONED BY THE WORLD OF ADULTS. IS IT A STORY ABOUT A SOCIETY THAT HAS GIVEN UP ON ITS FUTURE? WHAT’S THE STORYLINE OF THE FILM?

J.S.: I’m not sure how much we wanted to talk about a society that has given up on the future. We had questions about what opens on to the future. The characters in the film have very few clues as to how to move forward towards the future; that’s something we’re interested in. They are characters without anyone to show them the way. They have to move forward as best they can with what they have – and they have very little. The fact that there are only a few

adults is something that arose very early in the writing process. I'm not sure exactly why.

A.F.: What seemed interesting to me was to think that they act without limits, without guidelines, because they have no one to pass something on to. There will be nothing left of them. We wanted to reflect about transmission, about our belonging to a time. What consciousness do we have of a time that is greater than ours? I'm talking about a geological time. "Pompei" is the story of a woman who deeply wants to experience love when everybody thinks there is no reason, no place, no more hope for love, as if feelings were no longer relevant. Our protagonist wants to be a kind of kamikaze of love; she aspires to be a romantic figure like heroes she's read about in novels by Dostoevsky.



"Pompei" © Tarantula, Good Fortune Films, micro_scope

BILLIE, YOUR FEMALE PROTAGONIST, HASN'T GROWN UP IN A LOVING HOME, SHE HASN'T EXPERIENCED LOVE HERSELF. HOW COME SHE IS SO DETERMINED IN HER QUEST OF LOVE?

A.F.: At the beginning of the movie you can sense that her imagination has saved her from despair. She has been fed with images she had in her room, maybe through a few books. There are only very few strings she can hold on to, but she hangs onto those strings like a matter of life and death.

J.S.: Her determination to pursue her quest without having experienced love in her home brings up another question: What do you believe, what do you imagine love to be? If she hasn't truly experienced love, she probably doesn't know what love is, but she nevertheless continues to rely on her imagination and to believe that it's something she needs, that it's absolutely necessary to her. The question of representation, imagination, projection of what love is, what sharing love could be, runs through the film.

The idea that imagination can be a way to change when something is missing was important as we built the film.

A.F.: Feelings can be experienced differently by each individual. The essential questions were: What kind of memories do we want to keep from our stories, our childhood, our first experiences? But also, what do you do with memories you don't want any more, what kind of memories will you be able to erase or change? Is this a way to influence the future?

YOU MENTIONED BEFORE THAT YOUR CHARACTERS HAD ONLY A FEW CLUES ABOUT WHAT TO DO, WHERE TO GO. HOW DID YOU PREPARE THE ACTORS FOR THE SHOOTING? DID THEY KNOW THE WHOLE STORY WHEN YOU STARTED SHOOTING OR DID YOU GIVE THEM AS LITTLE INFORMATION AS POSSIBLE AND LET THEIR CHARACTERS TAKE SHAPE WITH THE SHOOTING?

J.S.: All the older actors read the script. Then there were seven children between nine and eleven who did not all read

the script, but we told them the story. They knew the trajectory of the film and what characters they were playing.

A.F.: The children read the script very late. Before that, because we rehearsed, they knew that their characters were like little adults, as if they had grown up too fast, and that they were part of a tiny world with no sense of intimacy. But what was so beautiful with them was that what interested them most was the moment in the movie when one of the main characters – a little boy – manages to say no to something he doesn't want to do.

HOW WAS SHOOTING WITH THE VERY YOUNG ACTORS?

A.F.: I really enjoyed it very much despite the constraints. I loved their frankness, their imagination. There's one scene where they pretend to be bored, waiting for someone to come. One of the boys made me think of Antonin Artaud, and he was kind of the poet of the gang. I asked him if he knew a poem by

heart and told him to say it quietly during the take. He started to recite a poem beautifully, by Paul Verlaine. Every day we had this kind of gift from the kids.

J.S.: Shooting with children was very particular in the case of “Pompei”. The film takes place in a world that looks a little bit like our world, but is not exactly our world – there’s a form of artificiality to it. It’s something very real and unreal at the same time. Working with children was interesting, because they are children and they can only be children in the film. You can’t transform them into something completely different. Yet they are part of this world that is slightly different from our world. It was interesting to confront the reality of their childhood with the reality of the artificial film world we were working in.

YOUR COLLABORATION STARTED WITH JOHN’S FIRST FEATURE LENGTH FILM “L’HIVER DERNIER”, FOR WHICH ANNA CREATED THE SET DESIGN. NOW THAT AS ONE OF THE DIRECTORS OF THE PROJECT YOU HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR ALL STAGES OF THE FILM PRODUCTION, I IMAGINE THAT SPACES STILL MUST PLAY A VERY PARTICULAR ROLE. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE SPACES IN “POMPEI” AND HOW YOU USE THEM?



“Pompei” © Tarantula, Good Fortune Films, micro_scope

A.F.: I truly believe – because I experienced it when I was a child – that objects, architecture and lines around us have an impact on our feelings. Especially in movies, sometimes, colours are telling us something, a perspective can underline a feeling. These are things we like to work on. While writing, we wanted powerful sets with little need for intervention. We also wanted places with memories. We rely a lot on our feelings and try to understand them and trust them. So that’s how we worked: when we liked a location, we shot there.

WHERE DID YOU SHOOT “POMPEI”?

A.F.: We shot the film in the South of France, near Arles, on the plateau of Larzac and near Narbonne. We needed a dry environment with rocks and wild spaces so that we and the crew were completely isolated, and we had the silence we needed.



“Pompei” © Tarantula, Good Fortune Films, micro_scope

J.S.: We are both interested and sensitive to the question of spaces. Spaces are extremely important in terms of creating the environment of the world, in terms of the relationship of characters to their world and what’s around them. I think we have tried in the film to create a true relationship between the characters and their environment and the landscapes.

J.S.: We shot in areas that were isolated because we like working in those environments with the crew and the actors, but also because the film called for locations with very few signs of the contemporary world. We shot in places that were very bare, very empty. When they were not empty, we emptied them as much as we could. We tried to create as much emptiness as possible around the characters, whether in landscapes or inside an abandoned office building. We tried to strip the locations as much as we could.

YOU ARE CREATING “POMPEI” AS A DIRECTORIAL DUO. HOW DOES YOUR COLLABORATION WORK OUT? DO YOU DIVIDE UP THE TASKS OR SHARE ALL OF THEM?

J.S.: In the scriptwriting, Anna was more present than I was. She wrote the script more than I did, but it was a continuous discussion, like a conversation that kept moving forward. On set we didn't split tasks: there's not one person who worked more with the actors and the other who worked more with the technical crew. We shared all the aspects of directing the whole time, every day, and kept the conversation going. And that's how we plan to finish the film.

A.F.: In the beginning, I simply suggested developing a script together with John while he was writing another project on his own. The desire to direct together came later, during the writing process. And finally I realised that it was also John agreeing to accompany me in my first directing experience. In this sense, it's really a first movie.

YOU MENTIONED BEFORE THAT THE FILM COULD STILL CHANGE DURING THE EDITING. THIS SOUNDS LIKE A VERY OPEN AND CREATIVE EDITING PROCESS. WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES YOU'RE FACING IN THE EDITING ROOM RIGHT NOW?

J.S.: We've just begun editing. We are not very far in the process. Things can change and we're open to change, yes. Up until now, we've just focused on the material that we shot and tried to see it for what it is, for what is there now, and not stay stuck on the script. We remain attached to the ideas and feelings that were important to us from the beginning. But we also try to be very open to what is in the images and discover new things. And that's what's happening. The structure of the film will probably be our main challenge, because editing is so much like entering a writing process again.

A.F.: I think we will face the challenge of how radical or not we will be about the narrative. The movie is a lot about reminiscence and sometimes the material is telling you something, and it's important to be open to it and still keep in mind what we need to feel, what we want to convey to the audience. The challenge will be to share those feelings and not stay stuck on something we like but that will not be accessible. This will certainly be the most beautiful part of our coming work.