

INTERVIEW WITH ANNE FONTAINE



Anne Fontaine © Marcel Hartmann

**DIRECTOR OF “THE INNOCENTS”,
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED BY
EURIMAGES**

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BY TARA KARAJICA

Before becoming a filmmaker, Luxembourg-born Anne Fontaine was an actress known for her roles in comedies such as “Si ma gueule vous plaît...” (1981) and “P.R.O.F.S.” (1985). An opportunity to be assistant director came with a 1986 stage version of Céline’s “Voyage au bout de la nuit” (“Journey to the End of the Night”) at the Renaud-Barrault theatre. Fontaine’s first project as solo director, “Les histoires d’amour finissent mal ... en général” (“Love Affairs Usually End Badly”), won the 1993 Prix Jean Vigo. She wrote and directed the successful “Nettoyage à Sec” (“Dry Cleaning”) that won the Best Screenplay Award at the 1997 Venice Film Festival and is generally considered a milestone on Fontaine’s way to becoming “an important figure in contemporary French cinema”. Many other films followed, including the critically acclaimed hit “Coco avant Chanel” (“Coco Before Chanel”) in 2009, her biopic of Coco Chanel, nominated for six César awards, four BAFTA awards, three European Film awards and one Academy award. Fontaine’s work is not easily categorised, though the phrase “psychological drama” is often used.

Tara Karajica talks to Anne Fontaine about her 2016 film, “The Innocents”, a powerful tale about the sexual abuse of nuns in wartime Poland, inspired by the exploits of Madeleine Pauliac, a Red Cross doctor sta-

tioned in Poland in the aftermath of the Second World War.

HOW DID “THE INNOCENTS” COME ABOUT?

I was offered the film by the producers – Eric and Nicolas Altmayer – who had developed the story, loosely based on real events. It felt very familiar to me on an emotional level. I didn’t hesitate and immediately jumped on board.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE TITLE AND ITS VARIATIONS IN DIFFERENT LANGUAGES (“LES INNOCENTES” AND “AGNUS DEI”)?

I can’t say much about these changes. “Les Innocentes” was our original working title. It is our sales agents who suggested “Agnus Dei” for some countries. I guess the various distributors did choose from those two options – “Agnus Dei” or a local translation of “The Innocents” – based on market-related considerations. My only remark would be that the lack of gender in the English term “innocents” implies that we refer both to the children and the nuns, whereas the feminine form of the French word (“innocentes”) refers to the nuns as a priority. I’m fine with both.



"The Innocents" © Anna Wloch

THE FILM DISTINGUISHES THE NUNS FROM ONE ANOTHER IN THEIR RESPONSES TO THE BRUTALITY THEY HAD EXPERIENCED AND THEIR DIFFERENT ABILITIES TO COPE WITH IT. THEY ARE INDIVIDUALS WITH THEIR OWN UNIQUE FEELINGS, CONVICTIONS, PERSONAL HISTORIES AND VARYING DEGREES OF FAITH. CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT?

I think we often make the mistake to assume that any strong community is united, which is almost never the case. I spent some time living with – though not quite “inside” – a group of Benedictine nuns before making this film, and I was impressed by the diversity of their personalities, expectations and motivations. Though the rules of their order may give a homogeneous impression on the surface, these institutions are not really stable – it’s a living and moving body, constantly reinventing itself.

“THE INNOCENTS” ALSO EXPLORES HOW THESE ATROCITIES TEST THEIR RELIGIOUS FAITH. COMMENT?

Yes, that’s pretty much what the subject matter is about because there is no faith without doubt, as summed up by Sister Maria’s statement – “twenty-four hours of doubt, one second of hope”. I think this paradigm is not restricted to religious issues. All beliefs are sort of self-challenged, whether we’re aware of it or not. What the sisters go through here is the utterly dramatic expression of a universal paradox. Life – or God, if you’d rather – generally takes us to the exact place we’ve been running from.

THE CORROSIVE NATURE OF SHAME – PARTICULARLY IN A SITUATION WHERE IT IS UNDESERVED – IS ONE OF THE KEY THEMES IN THE SCREENPLAY YOU CO-WROTE WITH SABRINA B. KARINE, ALICE VIAL AND PASCAL BONITZER, DELVING INTO AN IMPOSSIBLE SITUATION FROM EVERY POSSIBLE MORAL, SPIRITUAL AND INSTITUTIONAL ANGLE. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THAT?

I hope the film talks about this better than I could myself! Let’s say that transgression usually seems to me the only way out of what you call “an impossible situation”. The two leading figures in the story, Doctor Mathilde and Sister Maria, both cross lines, strictly defined lines, be it by the military or the religious authorities. They seem to disobey their respective sets of rules but, in fact, by doing so, they save the higher purposes the rules they’re breaking were meant to protect and no longer can.

IT ALSO WEAVES TOGETHER VARIOUS OTHER THEMES SUCH AS THE INFLUENCE OF RELIGION ON THE DEVOTED, THE UNIQUE WAY IN WHICH WOMEN BOND WITH EACH OTHER AND THE IMPORTANCE OF REMEMBERING HISTORY AND THE HORRORS OF WAR. CAN YOU DELVE INTO THAT?

I would mostly insist on the last point. Women – religious or not – are being raped, abused and victimised in virtually every single country at war, and it seems that it’s happening even more today than before. I don’t believe I’d be able to deal with a historical subject matter, or a “period film” more generally speaking, if it didn’t resonate very clearly in our contemporary world, whether on collective or individual terms.



"The Innocents" © Anna Wloch



“The Innocents” © Anna Wloch

THE FILM RESPECTS FAITH BUT REFUSES TO PARTAKE OF IT. IN THAT SENSE, IT IS ALSO DEFINED BY THE PUSH-PULLS OF THE CHARACTERS’ OPPOSING WORLD VIEWS. CAN YOU COMMENT ON THAT? HOW DIFFICULT WAS IT TO ACHIEVE THIS BALANCE AND HAS IT EVER BECOME PERSONAL FOR YOU ON ANY LEVEL?

I’m not sure I’d talk of “push-pulls”, but rather of “meeting halfway”. Both Mathilde and Maria have conflicting beliefs and – yes – opposing world views. They both get a glimpse of the other person’s perspective and they both find a way to push back their ideological boundaries, because the unheard-of situation they’re confronted with calls for unheard-of solutions that can’t be found in their usual “boxes”. The balance at stake is not directly personal, as I’m not a believer the way the characters are, but I can certainly relate to their need to break the mould.

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT MATHILDE, SISTER MARIA AND THE REVEREND MOTHER? HOW DO YOU SEE THESE THREE DIFFERENT WOMEN?

I believe my views on Mathilde and Maria have already been dealt with throughout my previous answers to you. The Reverend Mother is someone we paid much attention to, with precious help from Agata Kulesza, the wonderful actress who plays her part. It’s a character that is very hard to portray, in terms of writing and performance. Her doings are dreadful, but her motivations are extremely complex – not unlike some figures in Greek tragedy. Her final statement, the last words we hear her saying, shows that she is in no way unaware of what she’s done: “I’ve

damned myself in order to save you”, she tells the other sisters. Her sacrifice has been achieved by the most reprehensible means, but it’s a sacrifice nonetheless.

WHAT WAS THE RESEARCH PROCESS LIKE?

It was on three levels, I would say. Firstly, studying the diaries of Madeleine Pauillac, the real “Mathilde”, on the basis of which Alice Vial and Sabrina B. Karine had written the initial script before Pascal Bonitzer and I got involved. Secondly, factoring into the development my experience at the Benedictine community and my various conversations with Brother Jean-Pierre Longeat, a remarkable man of faith – and doubt! – who then became an adviser on the film. Thirdly, finding a convent location in north-east Poland, which proved very inspiring and gave the story the sense of reality that I was actively looking for.

AND, WHAT ABOUT THE SHOOTING PROCESS?

It was a very special two months. The cast and most of the crew were all living in the same hotel, a few miles away from our main location, just outside a very small town. We were sort of reproducing a closed community, not unlike the sisters in the film, deprived of any mundane distraction. The wonderful Polish actresses, led in real life as on screen by Agata Kulesza and Agata Buzek – also the best of friends off screen – were sharing all their meals, with brave Mathilde and the equally brave Lou de Laâge gradually integrating into the group. It was a striking case of art imitating life and vice versa.



“The Innocents” © Anna Wloch

CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THE FILM'S AESTHETIC, ITS VERY PAINTERLY AND OPAQUE CINEMATOGRAPHY, COURTESY OF CAROLINE CHAMPETIER?

This is my third collaboration with Caroline, who is possibly the most dedicated and work-absorbed person I know. Of course, we had discussed art references at length and studied many paintings from the past. But the challenge was to keep the whole thing alive and breathing, to retain the beauty without the stillness. Caroline's fervour and ardour were crucial assets to ensure that the film would keep moving and living.

"THE INNOCENTS" WAS MAINLY MADE BY WOMEN IN KEY POSITIONS BEHIND THE CAMERA. CAN YOU TALK ABOUT THIS CHOICE AND THIS COLLABORATION? HOW IMPORTANT IS IT FOR YOU TO WORK WITH WOMEN ON YOUR SETS?

It is not really an issue in itself for me. We – Caroline Champetier, the producers and myself – interviewed a number of crew members. Most of them I didn't know because I had no previous experience in Poland and we went for those who sounded the better adapted to our needs. In general, I simply try and choose whoever seems the best fit for a specific story and under specific circumstances, even though I can't deny that in this case we were not indifferent to a certain collective female sensitivity. But I don't see gender as a stand-alone factor.

THERE HAS BEEN A LOT OF TALK ABOUT THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN FILM IN THE PAST TWO YEARS. WHAT IS YOUR OPINION ON THE MATTER? HOW IS IT IN FRANCE?

Based on my exchanges with foreign colleagues, it seems I'm lucky enough to work in France, where film-making is far from being a male monopoly. I've never felt my womanhood to be a professional issue. I'm aware this might be different in a number of other countries.

"The opinions expressed in this interview are those of the director concerned and in no way reflect the official position of the Council of Europe or the Eurimages Film Fund."