

INTERVIEW WITH DANIELLE ARBID



Danielle Arbid © Julien Lienard

**DIRECTOR OF “A SIMPLE PASSION”,
A FEATURE FILM SUPPORTED
BY EURIMAGES**

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BY SARAH HURTES

HOW WOULD YOU INTRODUCE YOURSELF TO A STRANGER?

I might say something about my Lebanese origins. However, I don't think it would define me. I do films that define me. I moved to France at 17 to study literature and journalism and then changed my mind, because I felt like it was violently trying to suppress my subjectivity. Cinema came to me out of nowhere. My attraction to it wasn't that of a cinophile – it was purely unconscious. On my very first set, when I discovered what I was truly able to do, it blew my mind away.

YOUR UPCOMING FILM, “A SIMPLE PASSION”, IS BASED ON THE NOVEL OF THE SAME NAME BY ANNIE ERNAUX. WHAT MADE YOU WANT TO DIRECT THIS STORY?

Because it tells a passionate and sexual story both at

once. It is very difficult to find a book or film that mixes romantic love and sex. I wasn't able to find many readings that explore these themes together. I want to tell a pure love story, something full of emotions, yet with simplicity, not a story revolving around a social or economic divide, nor revolving around an adulterous affair – simply about love itself.

WHY THIS BOOK?

I used to give it as a gift to all of my friends who had just fallen in love. Yet I never thought of making it into a film because it is far from being cinematographic – deeming it too difficult. However, as I was searching for the ideal source of inspiration for a great love story onscreen, “A Simple Passion” seemed like the one choice for me. It took me a lot of courage to decide to adapt it. I had to rethink the entire book into a screenplay. But as Claude Chabrol once said about Madame

Bovary: “Maybe I am incapable of making this film, but if I don’t try I will spend my life seeing myself as a coward”.



Shooting of “A Simple Passion”

DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN YOU FIRST READ “A SIMPLE PASSION”?

I think a lot of people who are in love, or have fallen passionately in love, read it.

I do believe men and women who are searching for how to deal with this feeling of aching love end up stumbling upon this book.

YOU HAVE JUST FINISHED SHOOTING A SIMPLE PASSION IN MARCH. HOW DID YOU SELECT THE MAIN CAST?

It has been two years that I’ve been trying to make this film. I’ve had to change actors two times because the production and budget kept changing. We thought the film would not even exist six months ago. There are therefore different reasons for these actors – I like to think and hope they are the most suited for their roles, that I waited for them. For example, Laetitia Dosch, who plays the female lead, is a free spirit with a rock and roll personality. Not only is she a brilliant actress, she also writes her own theatrical plays. From the age of 35 to 40, you cannot easily find actresses who are comfortable with themselves, willing to do nude scenes. She’s not obsessed by her appearance. She seems excited about the role and not for the wrong reasons. I admire her strong, honest and complex personality. She is also someone I enjoy having a conversation with on a personal level. That’s why I believe she is perfect for the role.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR MALE LEAD?

As for Sergei Polunin, I kept his image in my mind while I was writing the first draft of the script. It has never left me. When I met him I felt that he’s the Russian lover of Annie Ernaux’s book in the flesh. It’s hard not to be intrigued by Sergei Polunin. He’s a great ballet dancer who walked out of the Royal Ballet at 20. After finding himself the star of the ballet world, he became typecast as a bad boy, which I think he enjoys. It was very intense working with him, and easy at the same time. He has grace and intelligence and he’s very respectful. I think also that Sergei wanted to work on my film and to do this role because of the character’s roughness. I believe he likes to expose himself and put himself at risk – the same as Laetitia. I respect very much his tendency for rawness, because this is also how I approach life and why I do films.

WOULD YOU SAY YOUR CHOICE OF ACTORS IS PERSONAL?

Yes. It’s instinctive. I certainly care about the personality of the actors first and foremost. This leads me to also work sometimes with people who have never acted before. The script is important, but the encounter with the actor is just as important.

WHAT WERE YOU THE MOST EXCITED ABOUT WHEN IT CAME TO SHOOTING “A SIMPLE PASSION”?

Filming the whispers and the sensations. I consider myself a storyteller. But I don’t like to film only the story, I would also add the sensations as well. That’s how I see it. I require that each of my films be infused with a maximum amount of ardency, in essence, form or method. The story is important, of course, but what guides me is how I can make it real. “A Simple Passion” is a sort of golden opportunity to do this kind of film.



Shooting of “A Simple Passion”

YOU ARE OFTEN CHARACTERISED AS A RISK-TAKER YOURSELF, OR AS A REBEL FILMMAKER. WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF THIS?

It is how some people see me. I would say that escaping, breaking rules are crucial, necessary acts in my films. They are its oxygen. It's not my intention to provoke viewers. With the portrayal of bodies and the grace that emanates from them, I try to get close to painting. I try to embellish, to exalt the actors. However, I do need to feel some sense of risk-taking in order to feel inspired. "A Simple Passion" is an iconic book adored by many. That challenge of adapting something so many people love excites me. It's also testing my courage. I don't know if I am courageous enough. So I like to see what I am capable of. I consider that I make each film once so I try to be aware of the importance of this one shot. It's something that directors don't mention enough. But cinema is a frightening business, it's expensive and you never know the result you'll get in the end. This is why I particularly love it.



Shooting of "A Simple Passion"

DO YOU BELIEVE FRENCH CINEMA TO BE CONSERVATIVE?

Yes, I think the world we are living in is conservative—we are far from the 70s. And the American cinema nowadays is less interesting. I was really surprised that Roma won at the Oscars this year because it's different, it's an ode to Cinema... But I do think there is space for filmmakers in Europe to be freer. This is true in France in particular.

I IMAGINE THE LEBANESE FILM MARKET IS ALSO CONSERVATIVE?

In Lebanon my films were censored, but what can I say – I don't care. I like to extend defined boundaries; perhaps that answers best your first question on how to define myself. I can see myself doing a film in French, Arabic or English in different countries. I can see myself doing a very sensual film, then doing a comedy

after that.

I value cinema as accessible to all at all times. That's why I am not that typical or exotic – so they cannot put me into the world cinema trend, even though several of my films were shot in the Middle East and in Lebanon. But I am not a good ambassador. My films were banned from theatres in the Middle East on the grounds of depicting "overt sexual content" and threatening "national security". But I feel free. I think this is how I would like to work – in different places and on different genres. Even though my films seem to belong to the same family.

DO YOU BELIEVE THE #METOO MOVEMENT HAS CHANGED THE CINEMA INDUSTRY?

At the beginning, I was very skeptical of the #MeToo movement because who cares about these Hollywood actresses who are rich, beautiful and bothered by men. Why should I care? Yet, at the end of the day, I think it is very important what happened there throughout the world. For instance, the financing of the film industry was impacted by this movement. Actresses and female directors are more respected today. Commissioners are more willing to give a female director a chance than two years ago. I hope this new trend will last. It is not a war between the sexes, but a systemic toxic culture. Personally, those who first refused to finance my film when I started to work on this project were also women. So what happened is like a shock wave – it's leading to a general awareness.

DO YOU THINK IT MAKES A DIFFERENCE IF IT IS A WOMAN RATHER THAN A MAN DIRECTING A SEX SCENE?

I don't believe that when you film there is a difference between your point of view as a man and as a woman. There are women who are more like men, and vice versa. For example I found beautiful the sex scenes in Patrice Chereau's film "Intimacy", much more than any other film made by a woman. Ultimately, it depends on everyone's sensitivity. As for myself, I search for grace. I want to take viewers by the hand and show them how they would like to live. This is why I go to the movies: to live, not just to be entertained.