

INTERVIEW WITH JESSICA HAUSNER



Jessica Hausner © Gianmaria Gava

**DIRECTOR OF “LITTLE JOE”, A FEATURE FILM
SUPPORTED BY EURIMAGES**

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BY KARIN SCHIEFER

THE TITLE OF YOUR NEW FILM IS “LITTLE JOE”, WHICH AT FIRST SIGHT SEEMS TO REFER TO A LITTLE BOY. THAT IS NOT REALLY THE CASE. CAN YOU TELL US WHO OR ACTUALLY WHAT “LITTLE JOE” IS?

In a way it does refer to a child. “Little Joe” is a story about a woman who is a plant breeder and who creates a little plant. She’s a workaholic, she adores her work and she is also the mother of a boy whose name is Joe. Her genetic invention, however, is called Little Joe. The story mainly revolves around the “two children” she has. There’s even a line in one of the dialogues: “Which of your children will you choose?” Meaning her work or her son. I chose this similarity to make it obvious that the plant is her second child.

YOU CO-WROTE THE SCRIPT OF “LITTLE JOE” WITH GÉRALDINE BAJARD. WAS IT THE FIRST TIME YOU HAD DEVELOPED THE ENTIRE SCRIPT WITH A CO-AUTHOR? TO WHAT EXTENT DID THIS CHANGE YOUR WRITING EXPERIENCE?

With “Little Joe” we worked together from the

very beginning. I have actually already worked with Géraldine on my two previous films, “Lourdes” and “Amour Fou”. For “Little Joe” we discussed the story right from the beginning. Each single step the project took was accompanied by Géraldine. I do the writing first, then we take, let’s say, a week to go through the treatment at an early stage and later through the script, we discuss it scene by scene and change the structure and the dialogue, and then I return to my desk and continue writing. On a very regular basis we meet for our working sessions together.

WHAT ARE GÉRALDINE’S ASSETS IN THE CO-WRITING PROCESS?

The enjoyable thing about our collaboration is the fact that we have a very similar sense of humour. Working together has to be fun, and in general we share the same pleasure about certain scenes, situations or characters. So if something makes both of us laugh, we know that we’re on the right track. If one of us is hesitating we can trust each other, since we

know that we share a common sense of what we like. Géraldine of course knows a lot about how to build a story. She has been a member of several juries and has read hundreds of projects; she is very skilled at judging a script. One of the most important elements of scriptwriting is of course conceiving the appropriate dramaturgy. And Géraldine is extremely good at that.

THERE'S ONE CONSTANT IN YOUR FILMS – A STRONG FEMALE PROTAGONIST. IN "LITTLE JOE" IT'S ALICE, A VERY TALENTED GENETIC ENGINEER AND A MOTHER WHO ENDS UP IN A POWERFUL INNER CONFLICT BETWEEN HER PROFESSIONAL AMBITIONS AND HER MOTHERHOOD. A CONFLICT, IT SEEMS TO ME, THAT TRIGGERS THE WHOLE PLOT, IN TERMS OF THE IDENTITY AND THE PERCEPTION OF THE IDENTITY OF ALL YOUR CHARACTERS?

I'd say there's one common element in all my stories – something is happening, but one cannot identify what's really going on. What interests me most is the question mark after an event. Identity is one aspect; the other one is the point that there is not one single truth. The funny thing in "Little Joe" is that you do have the possibility of a biological explanation for what is going on, but on the other hand there's also the option of a psychological one. It could also be that there's nothing "real" happening at all, and it's all about ideas in the minds of the characters. To have the two options that play against each other was the joy of creating this story. My first inspiration goes back to "The Invasion of the Body Snatchers". I love the first half of this film where people start saying, "This one is not the same as he used to be" and as a viewer you see that the person hasn't changed at all. When seed pots from outer space appear in the second half, I start getting bored. That's why I decided for my film to prolong the first half until the very end of the film.

IS THERE ALSO A PERSONAL COMPONENT, SINCE AS A SUCCESSFUL ARTIST AND MOTHER YOU ARE CERTAINLY VERY FAMILIAR WITH ALICE'S CONFLICT?

Of course there is. At the beginning of the film Alice tells her therapist she is worried that something could happen to her son and she might not be around to protect him. This is very personal. Ever since my child was born I've been worried that something could happen to him. I had never considered that before. I used to be a self-centred, cool person, but now I find myself thinking out of the blue that at any given

moment he could fall from a tree or stab himself with a pair of scissors. Crazy. Motherhood has made me vulnerable.

DOES "LITTLE JOE" ALSO PRESENT A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE FACT THAT TECHNOLOGY IS INCREASINGLY AND IMPERCEPTIBLY INTRUDING OUR LIVES?

I see a parallel with my film "Lourdes". There's a medical office at the pilgrimage site that is in charge of investigating the scientific evidence when a miracle is claimed. But this task is somehow in vain. In "Little Joe", we are confronted with a basically scientific story where the scientists are drawn into completely irrational, paranoid ideas, which might be true after all. I'm fascinated by the fact that science doesn't provide absolute truth. We are living with this vain hope that some scientist might have an ultimate answer to our questions and problems. They don't have any answers. They just guess.

AFTER "AMOUR FOU", WHICH WAS SET IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY, YOU'RE SITUATING "LITTLE JOE" IN THE PRESENT OR IN A VERY NEAR FUTURE, AND THE MAJOR PART OF THE ACTION HAPPENS IN A GENETIC LAB. WHAT WERE THE CHALLENGES THIS TIME FOR YOUR LONG-TIME COLLABORATORS MARTIN GSCHLACHT AS DOP AND KATHARINA WÖPPERMANN AS THE SET DESIGNER, TO CREATE A VISUALLY STRONG LOCATION OUT OF SOMETHING THAT IS SUPPOSED TO BE CLEAN AND ASEPTIC?

Right from the beginning we discussed the cleanness of labs in the genre of science fiction films; very often they are very white and sterile, which has become a sort of genre cliché. We have visited labs that were far from being tidy, where rubbish was piled up, as if some crazy, messy person were working there. In the labs we saw you have people working with gloves... and then suddenly somebody enters with a birthday cake for a colleague and they start to celebrate. They have this fridge for their samples of genetically modified seeds and next to it, there's a Coke and a lunch box. I like that. We will try to find an aesthetic that is full of awkward, absurd contradictions.

HAVE YOU DONE A LOT OF RESEARCH IN ORDER TO RECREATE THE WORKING ATMOSPHERE OF A SCIENTIFIC LAB?

Yes. This time it was particularly difficult for me. I had to start from zero, since I didn't have the slightest idea about genetic engineering. I had to build up a basic knowledge about plant breeding, seeds, flowers, reproduction of flowers, etc. I did a first research trip to Holland, where I visited big greenhouses. I talked to an expert in plant genetics, who by the way will assist us on set so we don't make any obvious mistakes and everything looks professionally correct. I also worked with human genetic specialists, since we had to work out what kind of element in the plant or the pollen could have an influence on the humans. I needed a lot of scientific advice.

"LITTLE JOE" IS YOUR FIFTH LONG FEATURE FILM AND YOUR FIRST TO BE SHOT IN ENGLISH. WHERE WILL THE SHOOTING TAKE PLACE?

Parts of the film, such as the scenes in the greenhouse and also the inside takes of the office building, will be shot in Austria. Most of the exterior images will be shot in England, which is where the story is set. Some of the scenes in the city will very likely be shot in Liverpool, and the scenes in the countryside will be shot in Wales, since we need a place that looks very isolated.

AS WE TALK NOW THERE ARE ABOUT SIX WEEKS TO GO UNTIL THE FIRST DAY OF SHOOTING. HOW CAN WE IMAGINE THIS ULTIMATE PHASE OF PREPARATION? WHAT ARE THE CRUCIAL QUESTIONS STILL TO BE RESOLVED?

We are very busy with the location searches. Together with Martin Gschlacht and Katharina Wöppermann we are visiting a lot of places and collecting a lot of details. When I prepared "Amour Fou" our research focused on the goal of recreating a world in the past. This time we have to create the world of science. This week we have spent several days in a plant lab. We try to collect as much information as possible, so that in the end we're able to create a credible, original and interesting setting.