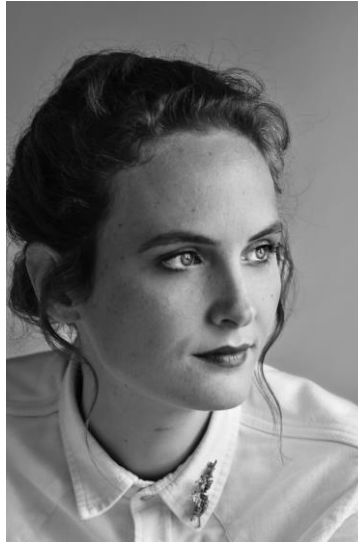


Interview with Zoé Wittock



By Tara Karajica
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Originally hailing from Belgium, Zoé Wittock entered the International Film School of Paris at seventeen. From directing to cinematography to PA, she slowly began to grasp what filmmaking was about as she explored as many different set jobs as she could. In 2008, she was chosen to participate in the Berlin Film Festival Talent Campus #6. That same year, she was also accepted into the world-famous directing programme of the American Film Institute during which she was awarded the "Hal and Robyn Berson" scholarship for excellence in directing. In 2011, she graduated with honours – the youngest person to do so – after finishing her thesis film, "This Is Not an Umbrella", which was chosen to showcase at the Directors Guild of America. Since then, Zoé has collaborated on a GIZ-funded documentary on the Middle East and directed a narrative short, "Silent words", which was purchased by OCS and Netflix. Based in Paris since 2013, she has worked as an assistant director on both American and French projects, and as a script doctor.

Tara Karajica talks to Zoé Wittock about her debut feature, "Jumbo", currently in production, and the situation of women in the film industry today.

Can you talk about *Jumbo*? How did it come about?

Zoé Wittock: Well, *Jumbo* actually came about quite a few years ago. My studies in the States were coming to an end and I was reading newspapers like I always do, looking for stories or incredible people and I stumbled upon one article about a woman that fell in love and married the Eiffel Tower and I don't know, I was intrigued. I thought it was as fascinating as it was funny and wondered about the psychological reasoning behind all this. It got me researching about her. We talked over Skype, exchanged emails, and she told me about other people in the world that were feeling the same way. In more clinical terms, they are called "objectum sexuals", but they obviously do not feel that this is a sickness or anything. I thought about it and that's when the story of *Jumbo* started coming about. It has never left me since. After talking to her, I could just understand how it arrived at that point, what got her there... And I thought that it was very endearing. I therefore stuck around with the story.

Telling it in a documentary way, for me, was not interesting because I really wanted to come to understand the point of view of this woman, go into her eyes and see things the way she could see them. So placing the story in a funfair park was just perfect because you could use all the tools that fiction has to tell the story: colour, movement, sound... You can play with all this, and it helps bring the story to life.



Still from "Jumbo" © Thomas Buelens

According to the production notes, you were heavily influenced by the artists of Surrealism who, from Magritte to Marcel Lefrancq and Paul Nougé, were all great partisans of interpretation rather than mere narration and who helped you apprehend the world that surrounds you. Can you elaborate on that?

Z.W.: I'm Belgian originally, so I guess I've always been very influenced by the Surrealist movement. I like to see reality in a different way: just take it and look for the interpretation. If I put on my filter as a human being, what will I see? If I put on your filter as a human being, what will you see? It's always going to be very different and I'm trying to emphasise that. I think it's been an influence in my work without me even wanting it or choosing it; it just came about with the stories my parents told me and the kind of artwork that they showed me when I was a kid. I think it's more of a way of thinking or applying that way of thinking to every situation to see how it turns out.

What about the title? Why is it called "Jumbo"?

Z.W.: I grew up in Africa and in some places "Jambo Bwana!" means "Welcome" and I guess that when I was looking for a cute nickname that this young girl, Jeanne, could give to this machine, it's the first thing that came to mind, probably because when I was growing up, I heard this word quite a bit. It's a nice word. It's catchy. There was no more meaning behind it.

Poetry has also been very present in your work. Can you talk about that and the way it creates a sort of gap between genres?

Z.W.: The poetry aspect also comes from this idea of using Surrealism influences in the work because I feel that we, as human beings, all have great moments in our life and there are difficult moments in it too, and I always feel that transcribing everything directly is a bit of a missed opportunity. That is why, for me, fiction is a way of escaping. That's why I try to be real and that's why in terms of the way the actors perform, I try to have them act out something very realistic, but put it in a story that's a bit more like a fairytale, a bit more poetic, where as a spectator I can see the story and feel: "Yes, I understand this person because I am bit similar." But even then, I like to add more colours, more poetry, more humour that will also help in having a good time. I don't want to feed people what they see every day. I want to show them something a little bit different. And I think that when we dream at night or when we daydream even, we all go into our own world and I just try to bring a little bit of that world into the fiction world.



Still from "Jumbo" © Thomas Buelens

Where does "Jumbo" position itself within your opus?

Z.W.: When I started writing "Jumbo", I was interested in a lot of stories that talked about the coming of age of women, the discovery of sexuality and what we see in this film is an odd way of discovering sexuality, but at the same it's really just about a girl that's finding her way to survive, to accept who she is and to find her way in this life. At that time, I was younger and I was also looking for my place in the world. I was halfway across the world and I was culturally trying to find my place and see where I could fit into all of this. That's why I found this story interesting and that's why I was naturally and instinctively driven towards it. And then the idea that this love story could only be alive because of this young girl's imagination is what seduced me completely because then we had a subject that was important for me but at the same time I was able to bring all that poetry that we have just discussed to the screen.

On the subject of poetry, can you talk about the style and aesthetic of the film? Will it be poetic? Will it be informed by Surrealism, by visual constructions between realism and surrealism?

Z.W.: Well, the idea is to up the realism a little bit to bring it towards a fairytale and to contain the surrealism a bit to find the right balance between those two worlds, because you have one world which is the main character's world, which is everyday life and is a bit closer to everybody else's reality, and then you have her world at night when Jumbo comes to life, which is moving towards the surreal, towards poetry and fantastic elements. So in order to make sure these two worlds still fit together, the idea is to bring more colour into her everyday life, to bring a lot of sensitivity and to play with something aesthetic in this reality which we already have at night when she is with Jumbo. Then, when she is with Jumbo, the idea is to always keep it at her human level, and not go too crazy with the fantastic elements but instead to find the right balance.

You are working with Noémie Merlant, who was nominated for a César for Best Up-and-coming Actress and the new powerhouse of French Cinema, Emmanuelle Bercot? Can you talk about working with them, how you cast them and how they came on board?

Z.W.: When I first arrived in France a few years ago, I didn't really know much about the French industry and who were the actors and actresses of this world that I should be looking at. And so it was all about discovering them. For Emmanuelle, I discovered her work as a director before I discovered her work as an actress. But I noticed her in "Polisse", where she had a role that was less important than the one she had in "Mon roi" afterwards, again with Maiwenn. But she has something. Her gaze is so strong. When I look at her, she has a deep, dark gaze and I guess I just fell in love with that. I really wanted to film that. She is so powerful and she is perfect for this character who is as powerful as she is a little bit fragile because she is covering up for a lot of insecurities. I felt that Emmanuelle has this duality. I sent her the script through her agent and she responded really quickly. She was up for it quickly. She's been a very, very supportive part of the film since the moment it got into financing until today, when it is becoming a reality. She is amazing. And then, Noémie... it was different. I actually looked for an actress for the longest time. We saw more than a hundred girls in casting but then when I saw her, it was clear it was her. There was not much to wonder about. From the moment she came into the casting room, it was quite clear.



Still from "Jumbo" © Caroline Fauvet

The film is produced by a female producer who produced your short film, "À demi-mot", before. Would it be fair to say you are a creative duo now?

Z.W.: For sure! This film could not have been made without her. Anaïs Bertrand is a young female producer. I am a young female director. And we didn't search for that, it just happened. She was on a jury at a short film festival where my previous short, "This Is Not an Umbrella", was screening and she came after the screening and told me that she really loved the film and that she was really looking forward to seeing what I was doing next and asked what it was. So I sent her "Jumbo" and she liked it and we started developing it together. Then, I made another short, "Silent Words", which she produced. And the relationship is growing stronger as we learn to work together and understand each other's strengths. She's been on the project from the very beginning so, yes, we are growing together.

People now tend to mix #MeToo with gender (in)equality but I want to know your opinion on the situation of women in film today. Where do you position yourself within the film industry as a female filmmaker?

Z.W.: I didn't have the same impression as you. I didn't really feel that people were confusing #MeToo and gender equality. I feel they are two very different movements that are maybe appearing at the same time because of the question of gender inequality arising. So maybe, some people are less afraid of speaking up. Some women have spoken up, but I feel like they're two different fights – for me.

I agree with you completely on that point.

Z.W.: I don't feel as though the other women or men around me on the street are confusing the two. In terms of gender equality, it's always a very complicated question. I've been trying to get this project off the ground for a while now and it's been happening for about two years really and, more significantly, first with the help of the CNC and then lately, of course, with the help of Eurimages and every other funding that we got that helped make this film a reality. But to know why it suddenly came to life in the last two years, I sometimes wonder if it has something to do with this movement that has suddenly given full support for women in the industry and is helping turn people's eyes towards the work of women and female characters. I think it's too early to say today, but I don't know if it was completely linked or if it was just serendipity that it just happened at the same time. That, for me, is a bit hard. As far as inequality goes, I feel that sometimes it's been harder being a woman, but today it sometimes feels a bit easier because we are so much in the spotlight. But what is happening is definitely interesting, and is very much needed.