
72 Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin
Berlinale Special Gala
ISABELLE HUPPERT
ABOUT JOAN
LARS EIDINGER
SWANN ARLAUD
FREYA MAVOR
A FILM BY LAURENT LARIVIÈRE

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SYNOPSIS

At the corner of a street in Paris, Joan Verra runs into her first love, a once young Irishman. Overwhelmed, she leaves for her country house and revisits the last 40 years, building a fantasized picture of her life. Her son Nathan, just back from Montreal, accompanies her in these moments. A long-awaited but liberating journey about coming to terms with the stories we tell ourselves.



INTERVIEW WITH
LAURENT LARIVIÈRE

N.B.: This interview contains spoilers about the story's essential elements. Please read it after having seen the film.

What was the starting point for *About Joan*?

The experience of directing *I am a Soldier* brought up a number of questions that I wanted to explore. My co-screenwriter François Decodts and I wanted to write a fictional story that would be the portrait of a woman, through different periods of her life in several countries. A melodrama with comedic moments.

The flashback format allows you to remain mysterious about a particular event in Joan's life, and more generally to question what a life story actually consists of.
Above all, I wanted to make a portrait of her relationship not only with her son, but with the world, with her sense of freedom, fantasy, humor and authority. A portrait underpinned by the desire to believe the stories that movies tell us. When Joan addresses the audience through the fourth wall at the beginning of the film, she promises to take us on a journey through her memories that are in part invented. I cherish this pact between the audience and a movie. We know it's make-believe, it's cinema, but we want to believe. Passionately. It's a form of sharing and togetherness that moves me deeply.

Would you say that *About Joan* is a movie about the power of fiction?

Yes, it's precisely that! Everyone tells themselves stories. All of the time. We invent and reinvent our lives to give them meaning, put them into a context so that they are less absurd and painful to face. Fiction helps you to live, it's an illusion necessarily inherent to our human condition. When after several years Nathan appears to Joan around a street corner, alleviating her pain, we understand why she accepted this deceit which allowed her to continue to live despite this insurmountable ordeal. This illusion – or *deliberate denial* – made her life livable again. It reminds me of what Paul Valéry said: Every moment tips over into the imagination at every moment. We know it well – reality is entirely subjective.
It is of major importance for the audience to



embrace Joan's story, in order for the deceit to be in synch with what she is feeling. The most important isn't the fact that she lied to herself, but that we are able to access what had been her pain, and why she had to lie to herself. This revelation doesn't operate like a surprise but an intimate understanding of what she is going through.
In the end, everyone does as best they can.

Going back and forth between different time periods portrays things that are more in the realm of feelings than explanations. We shift from one time period to another upon a look, or the memory of something.

At first this story can seem complicated, with its different time periods and diverse interpretations that can be read between the lines. My first obsession was to make sure that the film would flow. The editor Marie-Pierre Frappier and I found links that weren't necessarily written into the script. I'm thinking in particular of the edit where Doug takes Joan into his arms in a café. She closes her eyes, and we find them embracing when they are younger. This transition comes from using continuity in sensations.
At other moments, the link shots are more humorous. For instance, when Joan says: "Purity, that's me to a T," and we then see her walking along to hard rock music, entirely dressed in leather, her hair dyed platinum blond. The sequences are at times a direct echo of a question that could have been asked, or at others in direct contradiction with what is happening. We tried to mix up the back and forth to avoid falling into a system. We felt it was very important for the audience to be surprised and share an entire range of emotions.

Paradoxically, this portrait of a woman through various eras in her life doesn't recount the passing years. Joan doesn't look back upon her life, she is always in the present, as if time had stood still.

When a child, you think that the elderly are very different from yourself. But when you age, you realize that no, getting older means continuing on the same path! With more experience of course, hindsight and maturity. But fundamentally, you are the same person the whole time and I was interested in portraying this very essence of someone.
Naturally, we needed two different actresses to play Joan but in terms of casting or the work on costumes and hair, we didn't so much look for them to resemble each other but focused more on a continuity in their energy, how they phrased their speech, body language, the character's state of mind. We worked with the three actors who play Nathan in a similar manner.

We can tell that your film is nourished through and through with your love of cinema. And Isabelle Huppert also arrives with her long filmography.

Naturally, actresses of this level arrive with all the roles they have already played and that's a fortunate thing. It's one of the pleasures of cinema to see certain actors and actresses on screen time and again. To see them evolve from one role to the next in different universes. And finally with the hope, when you are making a film, to show a side of the actress the audience still hasn't seen. The more movies an actress has made, the more complex it is to show an unrevealed side of their art. For Isabelle Huppert, I wanted to lead her to a place where I had the feeling we haven't often seen her these last years: more head-on, fully accepting her emotional range, almost melodramatic.
I think Isabelle Huppert is an acting genius. She is so intelligent about text, context, depth of feelings and their complexity.

At times there is a feeling of wavering, as if the scene suddenly looms up upon us with all its ghosts, and the possibilities of what could have been.

That's an odd feeling. It is probably due to the writing, which was a long process with numerous versions of the screenplay. Almost as if the film still had traces of the earlier versions. And this is also due to the performance. When Isabelle played a scene,



I felt as though as I was seeing the scene I had written along with its complete opposite and all the nuances in-between. It felt like a reinvention or discovering the screenplay anew.
Isabelle is so much in the present of what needs to be played that all the rest completely fades away. She doesn't have just an intellectual intelligence but also a deeply human understanding of things. Her faith in cinema allows her to go beyond the anecdotal nature of scenes, fleshing them out with what is being played out invisibly. She plays the situation of course but she also embodies the meaning. I don't know how to describe it. It's rather mysterious. And appears effortless. It's just there. Isabelle Huppert is an epiphany in each and every shot!

How did you work with the cinematographer Céline Bozon? In particular, for the different eras, all the while conserving a unity in tone?

I wanted something that would be extremely beautiful without being mannered; contrasted in order to identify the different time periods but without it being fake or overly head-on. I wanted to glide smoothly from one era to the next. The work on the images was in continuity with our overall goal to have a story that flowed seamlessly.
I am very happy to have worked with Céline Bozon. She was able to translate and even transcend my wishes, which were at times difficult for me to put into words. Concerning the color palette, we went with strong contrasts. In Ireland, we chose warm colors : brown, orange, grey. The ambiance is colder in the Germany period, the atmosphere is imbued with a blueish hue. And in Mariposa, the family home, we go into something sunnier, with yellows and greens. We also worked on texture, notably adding a grain to the image in the Irish period.
Memory is recreation. The image isn't meant to be realistic. I wanted this imperfection to permeate our esthetic choices.
Beyond the anecdotal nature of a situation, which can be funny or dramatic, what interests me is to film what can't be seen, what passes between beings, what happens between the lines. I make movies to film the invisible.

An invisible that at times you shoot in a very visible manner. How did you tackle the staging of Nathan's character?

When I speak about the invisible, I'm referring to the implicit meaning hidden in the scenes, which should be worked out in the viewer's head. In reference to Nathan, I had no doubt that I had to take Joan's point of view and thus film him very much alive. The only thing we made sure of was that Nathan, from the moment he is an adolescent, interacts with no other characters than Joan. When for example he shows up on the soundstage of a German TV show, then Tim arrives, Tim doesn't look at him.
There are other clues about Nathan's "state" – the locked bedroom door in the Mariposa house, his absences then his sudden reappearances... I've given the viewer the means to think in hindsight: "Of course I knew it; it was there from the beginning." But in the moment when the story is being told, who could imagine Joan inventing a son who is so far from ideal, and with whom she bickers so intensely although he has just arrived from Montreal?!
Telling herself that he has gone to live on the other side of the ocean also allows Joan to restage, in her own way, this wrenching separation that she lived through.
Swann Arlaud is a great actor. His slightly peculiar, ageless presence was perfect for playing Nathan. He brought contradictory aspects to the character (and nothing interests me more than creating singularity in a character) through being at once concrete in his acting with an ephemeral presence.

Dimitri Doré, who plays Nathan as a teenager is also "ageless"...

I chose Dimitri for his singular profile. His youthful physique is coupled with a great maturity. I found it interesting to choose a 23-year-old actor to play a 16-year-old teenager. When you remember someone, it's also a period you are remembering. Dimitri incarnates the period of adolescence, as if he embodied a decade in one's life.

Do you think that Tim knows Joan is maintaining this relationship with Nathan?

Perhaps not in detail, but yes, I think he knows that she speaks to Nathan. When Joan tells him at the end: "You saved my life, Tim Ardenne," it means that she was able to survive this ordeal because Tim was there, and he allowed her to do what she needed to do. He supported her, despite their rocky beginnings.
Tim's character wasn't easy to play. He's not very likeable at the beginning and his excessiveness can be annoying. There is something slightly parody-like in this alcoholic writer character, whose appearance was inspired by Charles Bukowski and Richard Brautigan. The role called for a skilled actor like Lars Eidinger to portray a fragile balance, even when being excessive, without falling into caricature. He depicts Tim's appalling side with such vulnerability that you have the feeling there has to be something beneath the veneer. As an actor he absorbs everything. He is often on edge, extremely sensitive, and reactive, and at the same time, he has a crazy strength and liberty about him. It's extremely impressive.

And Freya Mavor to play a young Joan?

I find there is something extremely concrete about her presence that is natural, lively and yet effortless. And her gingery, freckled coloring functions with Isabelle Huppert's. I also liked that she's bilingual and could have fun forcing her French accent. She brought a great deal of joy and sensuality to Joan's youth.
As for Éanna Hardwicke, who plays young Doug, I had never heard of him. It's the Irish casting director who made this wonderful suggestion to me. Éanna has a luminous smile and a devastating charm that makes you understand at once why Joan falls in love with him. He has a bad boy side to him with a charisma that makes him appear as sweet as an angel! And he is a very precise, nuanced actor.
It was a huge pleasure to work with Florence Loiret Caille, to see her push her limits very far during certain takes. She fully fleshes out the character of this woman who is so filled with desire that she willingly succumbs to her rash folly, which is exhilarating.
Showing Madeleine to be so emancipated was important to understanding Joan. This mother undoubtedly hurt her by leaving, but she also transmitted her relationship with the world, her unbridled desire, and freedom. Her bold courage. And in her final letter at the cemetery, she delivers the key to the film: yes, we tell ourselves stories, but sometimes it's the only way to face reality.

Jérôme Rebotier's music adds to the film's romantic, storytelling qualities.

I asked Jérôme to work on something that was rather spirited, in the image of Joan, who is on the side of life, always. I find the way in which he was able to successfully mix this liveliness with melancholy very beautiful, like the title of the film. "About" gives momentum to the title, something very much alive, like in an ongoing conversation – or story.

Interview by Claire Vassé.



CASTING

Isabelle Huppert	Joan Verra
Lars Eidinger	Tim Ardenne
Swann Arlaud	Nathan
Freya Mavor	Joan Verra, 70's
Florence Loiret Caille	Madeleine
Stanley Townsend	Doug
Éanna Hardwicke	Doug, 70's
Dimitri Doré	Nathan, Teenager
Fabrice Scott	James
Louis Broust	Nathan, Child

CREW

Director	Laurent Larivière
Written by	François Decodts
	Laurent Larivière
Cinematography	Céline Bozon
Editing	Marie-Pierre Frappier
Music	Jérôme Rebotier
Sound	Antoine-Basile Mercier
Sound Design	Benoit Gargonne, Paul Jousselin
Mixing	Matthias Lempert
Production Design	Aurette Leroy
Costumes	Nathalie Raoul
Make-Up	Thi-Loan Nguyen, Marine Tesson
Casting	Maguy Aimé, Amy Rowan
Assistant Director	Robin Plessy
Script	Elodie Van Beuren
Calibration	Yov Moor
Production Manager	Christine Moarbes
Producers	Xavier Rigault
	Marc-Antoine Robert
Co-Producers	Reza Bahar
	Katie Holly
	Sébastian Beffa
	François Yon
	Nicolas Brigaud-Robert
	Ronald Chammah
Associated producers	Celine Haddad
	Laurence Méoc
	Evan Horan
Co-Production	Gifted Films West
	Blinder Films
	Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes Cinéma
	Playtime Production
	Les Films du Camélia