

Waiting for Cinema presents

THE LADY IN THE CAR WITH GLASSES AND A GUN

A film by Joann Sfar

starring

Freya Mavor, Benjamin Biolay, Elio Germano, Stacy Martin

France - Running time: 1h33 - Image: 2.35 - Sound: Digital 5.1

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SYNOPSIS

She's the most beautiful, most short-sighted, most sentimental, most perplexing, most obstinate, most untrustworthy and most troubling of heroines. The lady in the car has never seen the sea. On the run from the police, she keeps telling herself she's not crazy. Only...

INTERVIEW WITH JOANN SFAR

"Most of my relatives had started to think that this third novel would never materialise."
(Author's preface)

That's what happened to me. *The Rabbi's Cat* and *Gainsbourg: A Heroic Life* were released a few months apart, but were made at the same time. Once they were done, I went through an awkward phase and refused everything that was proposed to me. As soon as a biopic went into production, it landed on my desk. If a film had a Jew in it, then it was for me. I also turned down all sorts of family comedies. They weren't what I was interested in; I wanted something different. So I worked for a year with David Heyman - producer of the Harry Potter series - and Guillermo del Toro. The idea was to make a horror film, a monster movie, in English, but it never materialised. Then this script came my way. It was a kid's dream. Everything I loved as a boy was in it: a beautiful woman, a *really* bad bad guy, violent on-screen deaths. It was a thriller, a genre I love and which provokes simple emotions. Above all I saw it as a way of satisfying my passion for American cinema, but at the same time felt justified as a Frenchman since we'd be playing on the neuroses of my country.

Recently I realised that I did make my horror film after all. For two years I'd wanted to make a new version of *The Bride of Frankenstein*. *The Lady in the Car* tells the story of a girl who is subjected to injustices and ends up grabbing a gun. When you want to make *The Bride of Frankenstein* and you accept a script like this, you can tell yourself whatever you like... you'll still end up making a monster movie of sorts... only it is hidden in the closet."

"And then this."

This? This would be the turnkey screenplay that Gilles Marchand and Patrick Godeau delivered to me. I think they thought of me because they both liked the Gainsbourg and Bardot sequence in *Gainsbourg: A Heroic Life*. They must have thought I'd be able to do the 70s. Personally, I didn't at all want to fall back on cynicism or easy irony. What really interested me was that for the first time I'd be directing a film I hadn't written. As a result I had to fight, sometimes with and sometimes against the script. In Japrisot's novel, everything is explicit - sometimes too explicit. Naturally, many things had been taken out for the screenplay, what was left was the basic facts which I played with, on the sly, and filled out with recollections of the novel and certain cinematic memories (references to *Rider On the Rain*, oddly enough, and to all the 70s movies that shaped me). Coppola said that "*to adapt a novel isn't to copy its structure, but to find its language.*" So sometimes I'd cut out parts of the screenplay and use sentences from the novel - even insignificant sentences, just to get a feeling, a colour, a more faithful impression."

"She was driving through a dream, lights blazing."

There aren't so many great French thriller writers. I grew up reading the detective novels by Jonquet, Manchette and Japrisot. They fed me to the point that my imagination owes a lot to them. Ideas of the double (that can be found in many of my graphic novels and films), of dreams, and guilt: I owe a lot of that to Japrisot. What I like most about his work is the subtext. The fairytale aspect of his books gives remarkable depth to plots that could appear quite shallow. In *The Lady in the Car*, a girl poses as another girl to cover up a crime. But behind the thriller, Japrisot is exploring fundamental topics and digging into the French psyche.

We often forget that this is a novel about the war. The heroine's mother was a collaborator, her head was shaved; her father was a smuggler who was killed by a train. For me, the story's central question isn't "Is this girl crazy or not?" but on a deeper level: "What is French guilt?" What is a French woman with a corpse in the trunk of her car? It's breathtaking and it questions our society. It also strikes me that a Japrisot heroine has appeared at regular intervals in recent history. In the 70s, there was *Rider on the Rain*. *One Deadly Summer* left its mark on the 80s' generation. A *Very Long Engagement* was important, if only at the box office. And now *The Lady in the Car...* Like the film, the novel talks about sexual liberation - two women, one of whom has had an abortion, the other of whom has had many lovers, a sexual rivalry... The reason, deep down, I think I agreed to make this film, is because we're all still wondering what happened to *One Deadly Summer*. It's a film that really struck me: it was the first time I saw Adjani, I found it cruel, shocking. People talked about all these raw themes and I found them there, treated in a language and with a music I liked."

"In the studio, the artists talked about cars and Kiki Caron."

Strictly speaking, I haven't made a period film and it isn't the 70s you're seeing. I chose a very particular aesthetic that I treated in an almost fetishist way, allowing me to return to my cinematic memories, a little bit of sparkly pop magic. I have a strange relationship with all that. My mother was a singer, she was voted Miss 'Age tendre et Tête de bois' (a popular 60s TV music program) by Eddie Barclay, and she died before my fourth birthday. In my mind, the pop stars of that era are in no way cheap; this is the imaginary world I grew up in, it's why I made *Gainsbourg: A Heroic Life* and why I made this one. Things some find frivolous can be very serious for me. The entire world of the film was built around my heroine, in fact. I loved looking for a young contemporary woman and dressing her in the fashion of that era. It's both beautiful and extremely difficult to wear (the high heels, the tight-fitting dresses) and Freya [Mavor] has had to adopt a very feminine and fragile way of walking. In fact, it's just like my graphic line (the music, the sets...). I begin by asking myself which rules I will adopt. In this case it was immediately clear: horizontal, minimalist, black-and-white movie style lighting, but with colour everywhere and a very specific language. The language of the films I saw when I was a kid, between 1975 and 1980: Claude Sautet, François Truffaut, American B movies..."

"He missed America a lot."

I re-watched a lot of films, mostly American. Because I wanted to make cinema and when you want to make cinema, you have to watch films. Some had no obvious connection with *The Lady in the Car...* *Rambo*, for example. It was the immediacy: Rambo is the hero, he knows what he wants and he gets it. Everything's on the table right from the start, and it's super-efficient. This script was very wordy so I needed immediacy. I also looked to Roger Corman, for a certain type of energy. But the real underlying reference is the western, and for me, Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* is the seminal western. A hero with no name rides into town and sorts everything out. I don't know if it's apparent but in the framing, in the music (the rhythm sounding like Japanese drums), Kurosawa's film was never very far from me. And yet, more than my love for American films, I needed some very French material. Renoir said: "A film takes its nationality from where it was filmed, not from its director." When Lubitsch or Fritz Lang moved to the US, they became American and made American films. As for us, we're French. It might be a drag, but that's how it is. And French cinema is extraordinary. Including its fantastic aspect. I consider myself a child of Feuillade. When certain critics told me my *Gainsbourg* came from nowhere, I thought, these

people must never have seen anything by Feuillade or Cocteau. But it went further... Today everything is mixed, and *The Lady in the Car* is a symptom of this impurity. I looked for ideas in classics of the New Wave as well as in old gangster movies and 60s melodramas. In Lautner's *Galia* and in Godard's *Weekend*. In *Rider on the Rain* (that I quote in the film) and certain films of Truffaut's. *The Lady in the Car* is there, in this space.

"I'll tell them: it was me and it wasn't me."

Perfect casting was key to the film. The first task was to find Dany - the lady in the car. My heroine. When you're going to be filming an actor for more than 700 shots, you want to be sure you won't get bored, that she'll never be the same... that there will be a multiplicity of emotions. I needed a real gem. The absolute luxury for me, even before making the film, was to choose not only a supremely talented actor but also one the audience doesn't know yet. And I found this in Freya. She's famous in the UK because of the TV series *Skins*, but on the big screen, in France, she isn't known yet. So she was perfect for the part.

Biolay was also perfect. I remember he came with a very precise idea of the character. Straight away he said: "Well, this boss, he's President Chirac." Chirac is a seducer and Biolay truly played the part with him in mind. But if he's genuinely very charming, there are also times when he's not afraid to be a real pig. This intensifies the idea of social justice (an omnipresent subtext in the novel). The character of Elio Germano was cut down from the book due to a structural problem: a bit of a false lead that we couldn't develop as much as in the novel without losing the audience. But I didn't want him to disappear. He's like Molière's Scapin, like my Rabbi's Cat or the Devil in *Gainsbourg* - an essential presence. Elio brought an extraordinary ambiguity to the part. When you see him, he reminds you of something between the young De Niro in *Taxi Driver* and Daniel Auteuil in his early roles. He's in between the Mediterranean romantic type lead - cunning, driven, full of energy - and a cerebral bastard. I worked a lot with the actors and made many drastic changes according to what they brought me. I wasn't looking for madness with them but strangeness, and we achieved this in no small part through dialogue, a true language, if not everyday speech. It's no coincidence that of my four leads only one is French-speaking (a singer); the other three all have dual nationalities or cultures. For Stacy it's England and France, Freya Scotland and France, Elio is Italian and speaks pretty good French. It makes for a slightly dissonant film... which is what I'd envisaged. Bizarre, out of kilter... My love for Gainsbourg didn't go away with the film: I imagined the dialogues put together like 'talk over', almost like Alain Bashung, to reinforce the notion of the "everyday fantastic".

"The blondest, most beautiful, most short-sighted (...) of heroines..."

Freya isn't short-sighted but she *is* the most beautiful. And she's blonde. She had to be blonde in the film because she's blonde in real life. But the day before we started shooting something went wrong with her dye job and she emerged a redhead... As it was her fourth change of hair colour we figured enough was enough. We also figured it would work as a reference to Marlène Jobert in *Rider on the Rain* - a lovely echo. Parmenides explained that "Being is and non-being is not." Truffaut said it more prosaically: "A film is the total of your regrets."

CAST

Dany - Freya Mavor
Michel Caravaille - Benjamin Biolay
Young Man with Dark Eyes - Elio Germano
Anita - Stacy Martin
Mechanic - Thierry Hancisse (Comédie-Française)
Mechanic's Wife: Sandrine Laroche
Man at Gas Station 1 - Fred Etherlinck
Man at Gas Station 2 - Alain Bellot
Truck Driver with Bunch of Violets - Edouard Giard
Truck Driver at Transport Café - François-Dominique Blin
Sylvie Caravaille - Noémie Morales
Mechanic's Little Girl - Lou Lambrecht
Lady Who Saw - Vera Van Dooren
Pretty Brunette - Chloé de Grom
Girl with Her Hair in a Bun - Ines Dubuisson
Hotel Receptionist - Alexandre Von Sivers
Biker - Olivier Bonjour

CREW

Director - Joann Sfar

Screenplay - Gilles Marchand and Patrick Godeau

Adapted from the novel by Sébastien Japrisot

D.P. - Manu Dacosse

Original Music - Agnès Olier

Production Designer - Pierre Quefféléan

Editor - Christophe Pinel

Costume Designer - Pascaline Chavanne

Sound - Pascal Jasmes / Emmanuel de Boissieu

1st Assistant Director - Yann Cuinet

Production Manager - Frédéric Sauvagnac

Casting Director - Michael Laguens

Production - Waiting for Cinéma

Producers - Patrick Godeau and Karen Monluc

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