

**DECLARATION
OF WAR**

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SEMAINE
DE LA CRITIQUE
CANNES 2011
OPENING FILM

DECLARATION OF WAR

A film by
Valérie Donzelli

starring
Valérie Donzelli, Jérémie Elkaïm

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Synopsis

A couple, Romeo and Juliette.
A child, Adam.
His illness, their battle.
And above all, their great love story.

A conversation with Valérie Donzelli

The theme of *Declaration Of War* is tragic but the film is neither a tragedy nor a comedy. You'd be tempted to call it a living film.

I'd find it hard to describe it myself. I don't think it's a drama, or a tragedy, nor a melodrama. With hindsight, Jérémie Elkaïm and I tend to see it as a physical film, intense and alive...

At first I wanted to make an action film, a western, a war film, hence the title. I liked the idea of opening a door and watching what happens behind it: the encounter with a young couple living a real adventure, rather than a cardboard cut-out adventure. It's as if Romeo and Juliette had met in order to go through this great ordeal together.

The film is run through with the notion of fate: fate that is accomplished rather than submitted to.

For me life is a succession of trials to overcome, difficult or not, fortunate or unfortunate. You climb the mountain, step by step. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger.

Adam is the result of Romeo and Juliette's union - why is he afflicted by this disease? When Romeo asks Juliette this question, she replies: "Because we can overcome this." The ordeal takes an almost mystical turn; it's no longer a question of bad luck or injustice.

***Declaration Of War* is the story of a sick child but above all, it's the story of a couple faced with the ordeal of disease that you film.**

What interested me was telling a love story experienced through this particular ordeal. Romeo and Juliette are young, carefree lovers, not at all prepared for war - I think we are a generation of spoiled children, none of us are prepared for war - who are going to be surprised by their ability to fight and become heroes in spite of themselves. Because waging this war is a form of heroism. Faced with this trial, they become a couple; they become responsible adults.

I also wanted to talk about the fact that our own children overtake us. Adam has a brain tumour, something his parents have not experienced. Powerless in the face of this, they can only accompany him. Juliette and Romeo's parents are powerless as well in the face of what their children are going through, it's a system they're caught up in, a Russian doll mechanism. Our children are not extensions of ourselves, but people in their own right, with experiences of their own. Adam's experience starts very early - he's eighteen months old when his sickness is diagnosed.

The test of illness will both strengthen and destroy the bond that unites them. As the narrator says at the end of the film: “They were destroyed but solid.”

The love relation is by nature carefree and rests on the conviction that nothing can destroy it, but Romeo and Juliette are caught in a routine, the hospital makes them withdraw into themselves. Something must die so their child can survive - their relationship. At the same time, this ordeal helps them build and strengthen their bond. They complete each other perfectly: they are truly man and woman, yin and yang. I wanted to show a very contemporary couple. I loved the fact that it's he who does the housework and looks after Adam while she works. They are still trying to find what they want from life, they have ideals but have to work to pay the rent. I wanted to be connected to my generation, to talk about what I know, what I experience in life. The film is autobiographical insofar as Jérémie and I have had a child who fell gravely ill. The facts are very close to what we went through, but the film isn't our story.

How do you go from the intimate, visceral pain caused by tragic events to a film everybody can identify with?

To me, that's specific to cinema: you start from contemplating your own navel then zoom out to tell a universal story: our relationship with how we bring up our children, the fact of being confronted as parents with the worst that can happen - your child suspended between life and death. To talk about the connection to life itself! Jérémie has a beautiful way of describing the fact that we've managed to make a film about our personal story: “We got rid of the bad to keep only the good”.

The Queen Of Hearts is a film about a break-up; I made it when I felt depressed. *Declaration Of War* used the same process: sad events in my life were used to produce something positive. The film gestated inside me for a long time until I knew it was the right moment to do it.

To work at making a film allows you a distance from your experience. Cinema reproduces reality; it's a game. Everything is made-up; nothing is real but there's a desire for reality, for truth.

Your characters never feel sorry for themselves.

They don't have time, they're too busy. Romeo and Juliette is a two-headed war machine! The mundane issues of life no longer exist in the face of this great calamity; they have only one enemy to fight, one targeted enemy - which is often easier than ten thousand unknown small ones. They know their target and they draw strength from that. All the more so since cancer is a peculiar disease, a living disease, an alien we manufacture ourselves in a way, because it's a cell inside us that goes awry. We don't know why. Why does it appear in one person and not another? Nobody is safe. Moreover, when Romeo and Juliette understand their child is cured, Doctor Sainte-

Rose corrects them by saying: “Yes, that means he's just as likely as anyone else to develop cancer.”

All the characters give their best faced with this terrible ordeal, not just Romeo and Juliette. Juliette's mother is portrayed as poisonous but she also reveals herself ever more capable of greatness. I wanted to make a film filled with hope and ideals, that's why it isn't in any way a melodrama.

In hospital they read a newspaper with a headline about “the power of laughter”. Knowing your style of cinema, would it be safe to say it isn't a coincidence?

Yes and no! The day we shot this scene I went to the kiosk in the hospital and looked for the headlines that appealed to me. I didn't pick one at random but it just so happened that this particular headline was on the front of *Aujourd'hui en France* that day.

Romeo, Juliette, Adam... names with a universal and mythical resonance...

We didn't know what to call the lovers at first. I wanted them to be identified as a couple straightaway. We thought about Paul and Virginie... “Why not Romeo and Juliette?” Jérémie suggested. “OK, but it has to be played that way.” So they meet at a party, they fall in love at first sight, they can't believe their names are Romeo and Juliette, and wonder about their tragic destiny together.

As far as Adam is concerned, it's a different story. I wanted a universal name. Adam is the original man; there is something magical about that. And it's a gentle name; we don't tire of hearing it. As it's spoken often throughout the film, that was important.

The Queen Of Hearts was a very “artisanal” film; were you worried about working with an established producer?

No, with Edouard Weil, it was a real meeting of minds. I think that cinema is something artisanal in a way, and Edouard worked with me along those lines. He's a remarkable man; he accompanied me for the entire time it took for the film to be made with only one watchword: “I trust you.”

Only four people worked on *The Queen Of Hearts*. This meant many constraints but great freedom as well; I didn't want to fall into the world of big budget filmmaking where you're dependent on others.

When I met Edouard Weil and told him about my project, he asked me: “When do you want to shoot?” “October.” “Ok, let's do it, the same way you did your previous film. Only difference, this time, you don't make the sandwiches!”

We worked comfortably, but it wasn't a big budget, there was a consistency between the production and the spirit of the film. I liked the fact that the money spent was spent only on the film. What's vital is to gather a good team, to be surrounded with good people. Cinema is a collective art; you can't make films on your own.

How did you choose your crew?

From people I knew. For the image and the sound, it's the same team as on *The Queen Of Hearts*. As DP, Sébastien Buchamn and André Rigaut for sound. The crew was stripped back to a minimum, and as a result, everyone wore more than one hat. I'm not interested in someone who just turns up on the shoot, but in someone who really works for the film. As a result they all got involved early on in the process. I don't work in a traditional way, I allow for spontaneity from each member, from the preparation stage onwards.

Even if the film doesn't give Adam's disease centre stage, the hospital plays a big part.

I wanted to make a film strongly rooted in the real, in the reality of hospital life, and that meant shooting in a real hospital as opposed to a studio, and using people who were already there rather than extras. We had to contact the hospitals a long time ahead, so we could explain our project without scaring them, in order to convince them to give their consent.

I don't know what we would have done if they had refused. Each time we got a yes, Marie, the first AD, would say: "It's like getting a yes from the CNC !" And it's true. It was even more important for me!

How did you convince the hospital staff to support your project?

First of all they remembered us very well. We spent a lot of time there, and our son was cured, so they remembered us even more... It was easy to contact them, I gave them the screenplay, explained the project...

Generally speaking, no sets were touched except the apartment where work is being done and Romeo and Juliette's apartment at the beginning. We took places as they were. I love the idea of "making do" with real material.

How do you go about shooting in a busy hospital?

We were very well prepared. Sébastien and I searched for the most naturally well-lit spots in the Gustave Roussy Institute. We planned exactly where we were going to shoot - we had some surprises, but not too many. At Necker, we'd plan our schedule a day at a time, according to the emergencies. The idea was to be discreet, that's why we chose to film with a stills camera.

A stills camera?

Yes, we shot the whole film with a Canon in natural light. At Locarno, where *The Queen Of Hearts* was selected, I was a bit bored at a party and noticed a photographer taking pictures. I asked him about his camera, and he said: "It's amazing, you can even film in HD!" A stills camera you can film with, it's fantastic, because no one suspects you are filming... We spent the evening doing tests with his camera and I told myself:

"I'm going to shoot *Declaration Of War* with this camera."

The direction was planned with obtaining the most from this camera in mind. For example, focusing was difficult to achieve because I had first envisaged a hand-held camera, so we had to cut a lot more and shoot with the help of a tripod. The only shots filmed in 35mm are the ones at the end, in slow motion. I wanted a really beautiful slow motion, which is hard to achieve with the stills camera.

Your desire to be rooted in the real is also apparent in the sound.

Yes, it is all real sound and we were very careful during the edit to not clean it up too much, to preserve the film's minimalism, its rawness, and its realism. And apart from some musical intervals in stereo, everything is in mono so that we stay focused on the image, so that we "keep our head in the film"...

Voice-over, iris, slow motion, music... you use everything available without ever losing either the tone of the film or the audience.

I'm working on my new screenplay with Gilles Marchand at the moment, and he told me that due to the way I work, screenplay problems get fixed from all sides: by an actor, some music, a costume... Everything is forming at the same time, all the time. That's why I like to give birth to the film quickly... it quickly becomes exhausting!

Everybody knows the "Radioscopie" title music, composed by George Delerue for Jacques Chancel's radio show. I heard it by chance on the radio and thought it was exactly what I needed for the opening of the film. I was also very inspired by some of Vivaldi's compositions. Jérémie is a music-lover and he knows what I like, he introduces me to a lot of different music. They're like light bulbs going on; they allow me to see the next scenes. Jérémie is more than a co-writer and an actor for me, he's there for each step of the process, there's a constant dialogue between us.

The voice-over is spoken by different narrators....

Yes, a man and two women. The man is Philippe Barrassat, who narrated *The Queen Of Hearts*. The first female narrator is Pauline Gaillard, my editor. There was one missing voice-over, she recorded that temporarily in the editing room and when I heard it I thought it would be great to have several narrators, as if they were taking over from each other. The third voice is Valentine Catzéfis, who had a small part in the film that ended up on the cutting room floor. She has a magnificent voice. I love voice-over: it's a way of telling the story that allows great freedom during editing.

And when Romeo and Juliette start singing?

At that moment, the strength of this couple is to tell each other how much they love each other.

You seem never to question if there is too much music, too much emotion, if “this is done” or not...

No, I follow my intuition. Cinema is like a game we play in order to make something. It's difficult, it creates many anxieties and questions, but it's not life threatening. Filmmaking is joyful, you have to allow yourself to follow what you want. Perhaps it's because I'm an actor first that I feel this sense of playfulness so strongly.

Is that where the magic apparitions stem from?

Yes, I'm all for anything goes, you clap your hands and a Christmas tree appears! I'd love to use a magic wand in a film one day. "Cinema is more cheerful than life," as someone said...

This tonal freedom, this joy, helps to erase the line between drama and comedy... the character of the paediatrician, who is almost comic, despite being the bearer of bad news...

This character is a blend of different things. First, there's the actress, Béatrice de Staël, my absolute idol, who had a part in *The Queen Of Hearts*. I love directing her, she's a fabulous comedienne. I had some glasses made for her to make her eyes look bigger; I thought it would be funny to give her owl's eyes. Sometimes she wore them on the tip of her nose because she couldn't see a thing and it made her look like an intellectual, the post '68 paediatrician type, like Dolto. (Françoise Dolto, French pioneer of child psychoanalysis). And when I saw the toy telephone on the paediatrician's messy desk, I had the idea of asking Béatrice to pick it up instead of the real one when she has to call her colleague. I knew she'd do it very well. These ideas always balance on a razors' edge, they work because everybody goes with it, shares the same vision, the same feelings, and the same trust. It's a bit magical. When you see the finished film, we kept only what worked.

Another dramatic moment when burlesque bursts in: the scene where Romeo and Juliette start imagining the worse that could happen to their child.

At first the scene was shorter and more realistic, about real fears, but Jérémie thought it would be good to push it further. As a result, their fears become absurd.

How do you manage to find the right balance of such disparate moods and tones?

The editing was very complicated; we were faced with material that was a little difficult to tame. It was a matter of instinct and subtle balance, a bit like lace. A scene or a shot can capsize very quickly. The film was strong but its equilibrium was fragile, it was vital not to damage it. Pauline Gaillard is a very intelligent, very sensitive editor, with whom I share a deep bond. We love working together.

The film rests on the suspense of day-to-day situations, but you make no recourse to suspense as regards the outcome. Because the story is told in flashback we know that Adam is going to come out of his illness alive.

To use Adam's recovery as objet of suspense would be to take the audience hostage. From the onset I wanted the audience to know he would make it at the end, so we can wonder about what is going to happen before we get there. Once again, this is the story of the couple above all.

How did you find directing a child?

At first I thought I'd use the son of friends but I realized it would be too complicated. Not everyone is ready to entrust their child to someone else's care and make them available for more than twenty days of shooting. It was better to do it more professionally. So we held a casting. When I met César, who plays Adam, it was obvious that he was the right one. His parents were very helpful; they trusted us entirely. They didn't start off by wanting their child to act; but when César was born his mother took a lot of pictures of him and, when she was bored, created a blog where she posted them. César's father wanted to take them down later but they couldn't work out how, so the photos stayed up. Numerous casting and advertising agents contacted them but they always refused, until Karen Hottois, my casting director, called them and told them the story of *Declaration Of War*.

What made you decide to play your own story with Jérémie Elkaïm?

It was easy to act in *The Queen Of Hearts* because Adèle is a purely comic character. At first I had no desire to play Juliette, because she was very close to me, but mostly because it was a very emotional part. I was afraid of acting badly, shamelessly. On the other hand I had no doubt about Jérémie because even if he was also very close to his character, I was going to direct him and I just love his acting. But who could play opposite him? It was complicated. At one point I thought: "Not him either" but because I couldn't find others to play this couple I finally thought: "It's simple, I'll play Juliette myself."

Replaying these events, going back to these places: weren't you afraid of reawakening the pain?

On the contrary, it was very healing to go back to the scenes, but accompanied, and working.

Nonetheless, this doesn't feel like a film made to exorcise the pain...

That's true, I certainly didn't make this film to exorcise whatever. I just wanted to make a film. I don't think cinema exorcises anything.

What about the rest of the casting?

The hospital staff is a mixture of actors and real health care workers, like Doctor Kalifa. I had asked Doctor Sainte-Rose to play himself but he told me he was a very poor actor. He let me borrow his coat, his office and his secretary though! Finding the actor to play him was difficult: the real-life Sainte-Rose is so exceptionally charismatic. Finally I decided that I shouldn't stick with reality and find someone less extravagant but whose humanity would shine through. Jérémie had told me about Frédéric Pierrot and I ran into him in Dr Zucharelli's waiting room, at an occupational medicine appointment. I thought he had a beautiful voice. I wanted good actors for all these supporting roles, but not too well known. For Fitoussi, I thought of Anne Le Ny immediately because I am very fond of her acting.

We're often reminded of Truffaut in your film – voice-over, iris, the desire to film contemporary youth, Vivaldi – but not for a moment do we think it's a reference. In that sense you really do belong to the spirit of the New Wave and Truffaut who wanted to make personal films who resembled their author.

It's true that I work in a very personal way. No doubt I do things that Truffaut and other directors I like have experimented already, that's the way things are, we're unconsciously nourished by everything we see and love, but it's not a question of reference, just what's necessary for the film.

A conversation with Jérémie Elkaïm

You're the co-writer and co-star of *Declaration Of War* but you occupy a special role in Valérie Donzelli's films. How would you describe it?

It's very difficult to explain exactly my role in Valérie's work. What I can say is that we're in permanent communication, have been for years, and that I'm some kind of counterpoint. I bring her a frame, I help put her ideas in order. Valérie can push her ideas very far, she doesn't know what fear of ridicule is, and she's not concerned with "respecting her subject". She doesn't try to be a good student, she is a strong believer in the fact that rules are not necessary to accomplish a film. She applies this conviction everywhere, all the time. What matters to her is that it is made, that it exists. She is not a cunning person in the pejorative sense, she's always overtaken by herself, and she does with what she is. Pauline Gaillard, her editor, describes her very well: "She carries her subconscious slung across her shoulder".

At the beginning of *Declaration Of War*, Romeo throws a peanut that lands right in Juliette's mouth. This, to me, symbolises Valérie's work: she makes a gesture, and because she has good instincts and knows how to surround herself with good people, it hits the mark. Valérie has good instincts: she is like a sculptor carving the stone. She works with gestures, the making of the object takes prime position very quickly and she forgets about herself.

How did you approach the project of this story you had both lived?

I think we're always inspired by what we go through in life, by what we are ; but *Declaration Of War* is clearly autobiographical, and that made it very difficult to write. How do you incarnate something that has really happened? It is very complicated; it's very easy to feel yourself beneath reality. Having gone through something very intense oneself doesn't guarantee that it will be intense for others or that it can make a film. We did not want to take a complacent approach and hold the audience hostage. So trying to stick to what actually happened seemed the wrong way to go about it. We had to find the right angle to bring this experience alive and tell a story. The angle of the couple allowed us some distance from the illness in order to be able to embody it better.

After *The Queen Of Hearts* we began a number of projects. If we threw ourselves into this one it is because in real life, our son was cured. We thought we could share something beautiful with the audience. The thought of getting rid of the bad to share something good made this project appealing. The desire to convey an ideal of life through cinema is something Valérie and I share strongly...

There's a lot of humour in the film...

The fact that we really went through this story ourselves allowed us to talk about it with as much self-mockery as we liked. At first we wanted to go even further in that direction but the film itself imposed a certain intensity.

How did you write the screenplay?

Valérie kept a diary while we were involved in the fight against our son's illness. Not everyone gets to live such intense experiences as this one. Matters of life and death push us to reveal ourselves as heroic, as better than we thought. At the time we almost went through it as if it was an opportunity, as work.

We tried to extract a structure from this disorderly diary, in the same way as if we were trying to adapt a book of correspondence. The trick was to get some distance from the facts and bring fiction in. It was possible because of this goal we had from the start: getting rid of the bad to share the good.

We wanted to make a film with a very high level of energy because that's how we went through this adventure. We pictured it like a hold-up in the hospitals. When we finished the screenplay we really had the feeling that we'd written an action film. Edouard Weil, the producer, was part of this dynamic, he threw the sluices wide open. He understood the film right away, and went along with us like I've never experienced before. He carried the film, he's a dream producer, like you imagine them from the biographies you read, a modern-day Anatole Dauman! The writing and the preparation went very quickly; it took us less than a year for the film to be made.

Notably, *Declaration Of War* is neither optimistic nor pessimistic but bursting with vitality.

I aspire towards ataraxia: to no longer experience troubles of the soul or existential anxieties, to be ready for life always to be an adventure, happy or sad, it doesn't matter. But to reach a state of total ataraxia must be a little morbid; you'd find yourself passive, ready to accept everything. Too great a wisdom means you don't get off your ass! When we went through his ordeal we were caught up in the life drive, no matter the cost.

This impulse towards life is shown in the characters' ability to stay focused during action.

Yes, we very much wanted Romeo and Juliette to be in the present. If they were to look to the future it would bring something unhealthy. "No useless speculations!" Romeo says at one point, and he is right. Life has more imagination than we have, no point in speculating, so let's just be there, let's live what we have to live. Romeo and Juliette share this energy of the present, it unifies them. This view of life is intuitive for them; they're guided by pleasure.

What was your contribution on set?

The dialogue with Valérie continued, my contribution wasn't only as an actor. But that was the case with all the members of the crew: there were less than ten of us on set, and that forces everyone to be versatile. We had invented the

concept of the Swiss army knife technician! When there are ten of you on set, the energy is entirely different than when there are fifty. It allows everyone to talk to one another much more, your eyes are all on the same target, it makes for completely different films. It is more like a family than a bunch of professionals gathered to make a movie.

What does this mean in practical terms?

That hierarchy is overturned. If you notice an object in the frame that shouldn't be there you're not going to wait for the person in charge of objects to remove it, you do it yourself. If I notice my make-up needs touching up I'll do it myself; if the grip has to become an extra because one of them happens to be missing, he'll show me how to do a travelling shot. We all learn how to do much more than our jobs. Valérie is very good at dealing with anything, at accepting accidents. An actor walking out, a faulty set... She always bounces back, accepts rejections or unforeseen problems in a positive way.

Like Romeo and Juliette....

Yes, as a result we move forward and the film is built with what happened on the shoot and is a testimony to these mishaps. Wong Kar-wai says: "To make films is to resolve problems", I think that fits Valérie well.

What about the decision to play yourselves in the roles of Romeo and Juliette?

I was concerned we wouldn't have enough distance but not too worried because I had the feeling we'd already largely solved the issue in the writing. It made sense that we both acted in the film: we had written the screenplay together, we had thought of the film together... and it meant two less people on set!

How did Valérie Donzelli direct you?

We know each other so well, we can understand each other without communicating, everything is quicker, simpler. And because I had participated to the construction of the character, a lot of paths had been cleared; it took less time to become the character. Valérie has a benevolent gaze that follows the direction of what people really are. Some directors want you to go where you're not so good; Valérie pushes you towards what you're best at.

Weren't you worried to having to replay this drama, having to go through these long hospital corridors again?

No, it was actually quite fun to go back to some of the situations that we had gone through fighting, with such lightness this time around, a film crew and the will to tell a story the ending of which we knew for certain. It was quite refreshing - again and always - to get rid of the bad and keep only the good. It was also moving to see the

hospital staff again, so devoted, so wonderful...

You never wanted to co-direct the film?

In my work with Valérie she's the one who carries everything: I'm on the side, like an advisor. The balance between us works because of this complementary relationship. Valérie is good at being the engine of her films, surrounded by the team she has chosen and of which I am a part. We couldn't both be the engine. I'm good at her side because I don't have to carry the responsibility of the film. She manages to let go while carrying the responsibility.

Romeo and Juliette emerge from this ordeal "destroyed but solid."

Yes, they are separated at the end but forever ennobled and unified by this extraordinary experience they shared. They'll never be able to be together like a classical couple, as this trial has had consequences on everything else in their lives, but they have reached a superior understanding. With just a look, they know what they have gone through.

I can't remember which director said: "All films ask only one question: does love exist?" It's really the question of ideals, and if we can start to answer it I'm clearly leaning towards saying: "Yes." I am a believer - not in the religious way - but I believe very strongly in life, in the bond, in listening, in respect... I don't see anything stupid in these values, but rather a greatness that I want to share. I have a death drive like everyone, but I prefer works that make me share the life drive.

Interviews by Claire Vassé

CAST

Juliette	Valérie Donzelli
Roméo	Jérémie Elkaïm
Adam 18 months	César Desseix
Adam 8 years	Gabriel Elkaïm

The Families

Claudia	Brigitte Sy
Alex	Elina Lowensohn
Geneviève	Michèle Moretti
Philippe	Philippe Laudenbach
	and
Nikos	Bastien Bouillon

The Doctors

Dr Prat	Béatrice de Staël
Dr Fitoussi	Anne Le Ny
Professor Sainte-Rose	Frédéric Pierrot
Dr Kalifa IGR	Elisabeth Dion

CREW

Director	Valérie Donzelli
Producer	Edouard Weil
Screenplay	Valérie Donzelli Jérémie Elkaïm
DP	Sébastien Buchmann
Editor	Pauline Gaillard
Sound	André Rigaut
Sound editor	Sébastien Savine
Dialogue editor	Ludovic Escallier
Mix	Laurent Gabiot
1st assistant director	Marie Weinberger
Wardrobe	Elisabeth Méhu
Hair & Make-up	Valérie Donzelli
Sets	Gaëlle Usandivaras
Casting and Child Coach	Karen Hottois
Line Producer	Serge Catoire
Production Manager & Studio Manager	Diego Urgoiti-Moinot
Artistic and Musical Advisor	Jérémie Elkaïm

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