

RECTANGLE PRODUCTIONS

presents

In association with **WILD BUNCH**

HAND IN HAND

a **VALÉRIE DONZELLI** film

Starring

**VALÉRIE LEMERCIER JÉRÉMIE ELKAÏM
BÉATRICE DE STAËL VALÉRIE DONZELLI**

COMEDY-DRAMA / RUNNING TIME: 1H25 / IMAGE: 1.85 / SOUND: DOLBY SRD

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SYNOPSIS

When H el ene Marchal and Joachim Fox meet, their lives could hardly be more different. H el ene runs the prestigious ballet school of the Paris Opera while Joachim works for a mirror maker in a small town.

But a strange power unites them to the point where without knowing how or why they can no longer be apart. It's physically impossible.

As if from the moment they meet, and against their will, H el ene and Joachim begin a lovers' dance they are powerless to stop.

A CONVERSATION WITH VALÉRIE DONZELLI (Director)

First a violent kiss, then they find themselves stuck to one another in an arbitrary and prosaic way... *Hand in Hand* demystifies the romantic encounter, as if love at first sight was devoid of any desire...

That's true, but I wanted first and foremost to talk about symbiotic relationships in different forms: a brother and sister who still live together (Joachim and Véro) and two girlfriends who are in an exclusive relationship (Hélène and Constance). Then Hélène and Joachim find themselves stuck to each other by a strange power, creating an arbitrary fusion that will isolate them, then bring them closer, inevitably separating them from the other two.

At the beginning, it's not a question of love between Hélène and Joachim: they are subjected to their fate and in principle they have nothing in common. But the spell throws them into each other's intimacy... and finally they realize they like and understand each other, they complete each other. Living with someone is always such a particularly intimate experience; I don't think you really know people unless you live with them.

Why did you want to tackle the subject of fusion?

I have a brother who was born the same day as me, two years apart. So we used to celebrate our birthdays at the same time... I don't know if this is why, but I have intensely close relationships: the other person is almost an extension of myself. It's sometimes difficult because the fear of abandonment lurks behind these intertwined relationships. I thought it would be fun to talk about the experience of fusion in a couple. Cinema allows you to express the difficult things in life, to make fun of them and perhaps make them more bearable.

But the film is an encounter between two people who will evolve together as the story unfolds. It's an initiatory journey. This is what my three films have in common. The encounter, the couple and what they have learned. In *The Queen of Hearts* it was the break-up that allowed her to meet Rachel and thus to be the subject of her life; in *Declaration of War* it's the loss of a carefree life and the ordeal the couple overcomes together, and in *Hand in Hand* it's a forced break-up that leads to opportunity and an encounter.

Being stuck to one another, in a literal sense... how did you come up with this idea, both metaphorical and very visual?

I think it came to me when I was colour grading *Declaration of War* - as I was writing the script with Jérémie Elkaïm and Gilles Marchand. Looking at the split screen that displays different images so you can compare colours, I thought: "That's funny, it looks like these two incongruous shots are stuck together." Even if the idea was crazy and risky, it was very exciting to watch. What's exhilarating about film is that you can do anything, as long as it's well executed. That's the real challenge, not ideas.

As in your two previous films, there's nothing 'second degree' about your characters. We're plugged directly into their inner selves; they are never manipulative or deceptive.

I like characters to follow a straight line, to speak and act in a direct way. I myself am very 'literal' in life, maybe that's why. I also like characters to have a real heart; even when they are aggressive or mean like Constance, or Rachel in *The Queen of Hearts*, they are humanely correct. That's why they can all coexist. They have a sort of stature that prevents them from being petty. To me, they are modern heroes.

Joachim and H  l  ne come from very different social backgrounds...

Yes they do, in appearance, but not deep down. In fact they look in the same direction, which is why they will love each other.

Even if H  l  ne Marchal has a chauffeur, she's in accord with Joachim politically: they share the same way of looking at life, the same way of conducting themselves. She is more attached to appearances than he is but she ends up abandoning her mask.

I come from a very mixed background. My mother came from a big family of cheese-makers; she grew up with private tutors, whereas my father is the son of Italian immigrants and is an artist and sculptor. I feel as if I know all the characters of the story, as if I've met them all, whether it's the minister, Nelly the assistant, Jean-Pierre the neighbour who suffers from depression or V  ro's family and Jojo. I thought it was entertaining to put together characters from different social backgrounds.

You play with clich  s but never contemptuously...

For me, it's always easier to start from a clich  , but to not stick to its image is always a challenge. The difficulty in *Hand in Hand* was to achieve this balance. For example, V  ro and Jojo's family is quite loaded: they live in communally in the countryside, he's a mirror maker, she's a postal

worker, her husband, J-F is a sports teacher who loves watching TV... but all this doesn't mean they have to behave like simpletons. Personally, I find J-F's character very touching and the devotion he has for his wife is unexpected.

I'm interested in stereotypical characters in film because behind this apparent simplicity things are always more complicated. Even if they appear naïve, they're not stupid, they have depth and a human intelligence. I love the fact that Véro is proud of her job, because what matters to her is to have a job, even if the money isn't great. And I also understand Héléne and Constance De La Porte. They're not fooled by the golden cage in which they live, but at the same time they don't want to be poor - and they're right: it's no fun being poor. But I don't play poor against rich. It's not a political film in that sense. What's most important isn't your job, or how much money you earn, or how you dress, or whether you carry yourself well at the dinner table... it's how you relate. In a story, what's exciting is the path the characters follow, the fact that they evolve. It is their journey we explore. By the way at the end of the film all the characters have changed.

Whether by moving to New York or having another child, what's important is that they find the life that suits them...

Véro says it: "There's a difference between the life you fantasize about and the life that suits you." To which her husband replies: "I don't know, I've never fantasized about my life."

The film takes off like a shot with the editing alternating between Joachim and Héléne....

I like it when parts of the story go very fast, with voiceover speeding up the story and explanations. Philippe Barrassat is the narrator for my three films.

One inevitably thinks of Truffaut, in the way you need the tools with which he has already experimented, rather than any desire to place yourself in his lineage...

Yes, because it's necessary for the film. I act instinctively. It's like cooking, you fiddle with this and that... you get your hands dirty. I love this voiceover that tells us stories and repeats certain things, in case we haven't understood. I also like the moment when each character intervenes to give his own explanation of why Joachim and Héléne are stuck to one another. All these doctors in one surgery, it's hardly realism, but I'm not interested in reproducing real life, at least for now.

How was the shoot?

The idea was to spend as little as possible, as with my previous films. There were fifteen of us on set, which isn't a lot, but shooting at the Opera was fraught because the place is so big, always busy and requires real organisation, which isn't my forte. Even if they (Brigitte Lefèvre and her team) were great and rolled out the red carpet for us, shooting in such enormous locations, when there are shows and rehearsals taking place all the time, required great preparation and tons of energy. Another complication was that the film began before the adventure of *Declaration of War* was over. The shoot stopped and stretched out from October to February. So we were alternating between promotional commitments for *Declaration of War* and preparation for the ongoing shoot.

Then I realised that the direction and rhythm of my other films were influenced by the fact that I acted in them. This time was a very different and enriching experience for me, working with a professional actress - Valérie Lemerrier - who carries the film with Jérémie.

Why did you choose Valérie Lemerrier to play Héléne?

That was the basis of the whole project: to write a film for Valérie Lemerrier and Jérémie Elkaim. I thought they made an interesting couple. I wanted to see them in a film together. I also love the Paris Opera: I love ballet, the junior dancers, the tutus... I wanted the action to take place in that atmosphere. I knew Valérie was also very fond of dance. I thought she was credible as the director of the Paris Opera. I didn't think her talent, her elegance and class, were being fully used. She wasn't acting in the kinds of film I wanted to see her in. I wanted to show another side of Valérie. It was a challenge: to bring her towards what I wanted and nourish myself with her personality at the same time. Valérie Lemerrier is a great actress, always serving the film; she has a phenomenal capacity for work. She's ready for anything, has fun with everything, and her energy is infectious.

What about playing Véro yourself?

At first, I didn't want to act in the film. Jérémie and Paul Gaillard convinced me. It was fun playing brother and sister with Jérémie. I love Véro and the good-natured way in which she dances in front of Héléne Marchal. She believes in it, she's sincere, she has no ulterior motive, she's having fun, it's show business.

And Jérémie Elkaim as a junior dancer at the Opera?

Jérémie has a gift for dancing. He took a few ballet lessons because he'd never done it before. Michael Denard, ex-principal dancer at the Opera, was his teacher; he also plays Héléne

Marchal's chauffeur. I liked the idea of throwing Jérémie in tights into the middle of a bunch of little girls. If the character had been a woman it would have been humiliating and ridiculous, yet here it's funny. And Jérémie in tights is quite irresistible. Joachim is the exact opposite of what one imagines a macho man to be but at the same time we feel he's very comfortable with his sexuality. He is very reserved, quite submissive, but has real strength, like all submissive people. When he decides to stop, he stops. He's a very healthy character. He's free of his image... he skateboards. It was important to me that we feel he and Valérie find fulfilment in their relationship; that he's not a little boy who has found his mother, or vice versa.

This fulfilment is developed, it's not a given at the beginning... they are stuck together but not sexually attracted...

Yes, that's not the central issue of their encounter. It is even inconceivable at the beginning for both of them. Desire creeps in little by little when they truly get to know each other. Sexuality is indispensable in a couple but it's something extra, the consequence of getting along, of grace and love. You can have a good sexual relationship but it's not conceivable in the long run if you are not moved on a deep level. Héléne and Joachim love each other and are together for the right reasons, there's nothing corrupt hidden beneath.

They have to leave each other for their love to succeed. Joachim tells Héléne: "It's not you I want to leave, it's me I want to find again."

Yes, at that moment in their relationship he feels a great anxiety. She's so neurotic that she likes it that way, she can go on like this, but he's reached his limit and has to leave. When they find each other again, they have experienced solitude, their union is a choice, not something imposed on them. They respect and can love one another, without narcissism, not because the other reflects something back to them, but because he or she is who he or she is: a magnificent entity.

Your characters are always forging ahead but never forget where they come from: the past weighs heavily, we're not in utopia...

The characters in *Hand in Hand* are honest: they don't turn the page and forget where they come from. They all carry some kind of handicap in life and have to grow with it. Joachim and Véro lost their parents in a plane crash and were brought up by their grandmother. Such a loss isolates you and leaves an indelible mark I imagine. Héléne probably had pretty toxic parents who never understood her. She removed herself from all that while remaining faithful to the cultural link - dance - which is why she is a dance teacher today. As for Constance, there's a real mystery to her. She's disobedient, rebellious, a free spirit, she was born a punk!

At one point, Joachim performs Gershwin's *The Man I Love* in sign language in front of H  l  ne...

It's a Pina Bausch choreography that Gilles Marchand showed me. I loved it and thought it would be beautiful if Joachim would perform it: H  l  ne would be astonished, and would wonder where he found it. I like the idea that culture isn't reserved only for the elite. It's very touching to imagine Joachim learning this choreography, perhaps just for himself, simply because he loves it. It's very endearing when people make something themselves and reveal this intimate thing out of the blue. The beauty of this choreography is something Joachim and H  l  ne have in common, something that shows they're not so different. When she asks him: "Are there other things you find beautiful like this?", he replies: "Yes". This 'yes' means her, it's H  l  ne.

It's after Constance's funeral that things finally become possible between Joachim and H  l  ne...

The funeral scene is one of my favourites. You don't know whether to laugh or cry. This ceremony has to take place, out of respect for Constance, but it's also absurd - a sombre farce. The master of ceremonies is a clumsy oaf, H  l  ne is awkward, there's a problem moving the coffin... When she places the red notebook in the coffin, H  l  ne is very moving. This gesture tells more than it shows, it indicates that she has had to go and get it. She is suffering the loss of someone, this person will become only a memory, and she needs to hang on to very concrete things. I lost my mother during the screening of *Declaration of War* in Cannes. This loss marked me deeply, the cutting off as well as the relationship to the funeral ceremony and its absurdity... *Hand in Hand* is less overtly autobiographical and crazier than the previous film but I almost think I reveal more about myself in it.

Interview by Claire Vass  

CAST

Hélène Marchal - **VALÉRIE LEMERCIER**

Joachim Fox - **JÉRÉMIE ELKAÏM**

Constance De La Porte - **BÉATRICE DE STAËL**

Véro - **VALÉRIE DONZELLI**

J-F - **SÉBASTIEN NOIRÉ**

Jean-Pierre - **SERGE BOZON**

Minister - **PHILIPPE LAUDENBACH**

Nelly - **LYN THIBAUT**

New Minister - **ANTOINE CHAPPEY**

CREW

Directed by
VALÉRIE DONZELLI

Screenplay by
VALÉRIE DONZELLI
in collaboration with **JÉRÉMIE ELKAÏM**
and **GILLES MARCHAND**

Producer
EDOUARD WEIL

Original Music
PETER VON POEHL

D.P.
SÉBASTIEN BUCHMANN

Sound
ANDRÉ RIGAUT

Editor
PAULINE GAILLARD

Costume Designer
ELISABETH MÉHU

Valérie Lemercier's Wardrobe
VANESSA SEWARD

Production Designer
GAËLLE USANDIVARAS

Production Manager
SERGE CATOIRE

Choreography
FABRICE RAMALINGOM

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