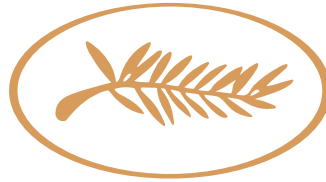




FESTIVAL DE CANNES  
COMPETITION  
2022 OFFICIAL SELECTION

# ***STARS AT NOON***

A FILM BY  
**Claire Denis**



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# ***STARS AT NOON***

A FILM BY  
**Claire Denis**

WITH **Margaret Qualley** AND **Joe Alwyn**

2022 | France | Color | 2h17

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# ***SYNOPSIS***

*A young American journalist stranded in present-day Nicaragua (Margaret Qualley) falls for an enigmatic Englishman (Joe Alwyn) who seems like her best chance of escape. She soon realizes, though, that he may be in even greater danger than she is.*

*Adapted from the novel by Denis Johnson*

# INTERVIEW WITH *CLAIRE DENIS*

## How did *Stars at Noon* come to be?

I discovered the poet and novelist Denis Johnson, relatively late, about 15 years ago.

His writing shocked me, and so I read all his work. *Stars At Noon* was the novel that struck me most. The way he sets his fiction amid a civil war, the tone – raw, ironic, and tender – pierces me.

His ability to describe the permanent disillusionment of his characters astounds.

Trish (Margaret Qualley) rushes into the street shouting: "Sin Esperanza, sin esperanza".

Daniel (Joe Alwyn), before saying "I love you", bemoans: "I'm caught, I'm caught".

So, all is a love unreturned.

I didn't think I'd find the courage to take on an adaptation of such a book.

Ten years ago, I spoke to Denis on the phone. He suggested we meet at La Haye, where he was attending a string of concerts.

We were both shy, and I didn't dare mention my

desire to adapt his novel.

In any case, he made it clear he would in no way participate in a script. He had undergone too many ordeals.

*Stars At Noon* tells his story: as a young man, he went to Nicaragua to "cover" the civil war.

He wanted to become a journalist, but all his articles were rejected.

It seemed he went through hell there, without money and without hope.

Back in the United States, he decided to write this novel, employing his notes and articles.

I'm not sure he trusted adaptation. But the film Jesus' Son pleased him, and I did not displease him.

I learned of Denis' passing while shooting "*High Life*" in Cologne. That's when I said to myself: "I'll give it a try".

**Written in 1986, Denis Johnson's novel takes place in 1984 Nicaragua, during the Sandinista revolution. How did you treat this historical backdrop?**

The film is not a period piece. It effectively takes place in present-day Nicaragua.

When we began shooting, Nicaragua was inaccessible. The November 2021 elections led to much social unrest.

The film opens on a towering red tree, studded with lightbulbs. Next to it, another one, leveled and burnt. The President's wife conceived these trees to symbolize Managua, Nicaragua's capital. They each cost a fortune, money that would have been better spent on the people. Now, they've taken on a new meaning: the people's anger.

The country of Panama was welcoming and permitted us to shoot on locations reminiscent of Nicaragua.

As in the book, I wanted to describe a fortuitous encounter that becomes love, a sexual attraction that devours and blinds. And, as in the book, the violence rocking the country is seen from afar.

Trish is a young American who wants only one thing: to return to the United States. Penniless, she has abandoned her journalistic aspirations.

Daniel, a young English businessman, appears reassuring and sincere, but in fact navigates between lies and obfuscation.

**Their first encounter is transactional: Trish offers herself in exchange for money. Isn't this far from love?**

It's straight to the point. She prostitutes herself to survive, and he is not averse to paying for a fling. But this "conventional deal" dissipates once they go up to Daniel's room. Skin to skin, few words, irony to conceal the confusion of what they feel.





### The “sex scenes” are very present in the film.

And in the book as well.

I hope they don't seem trivial. I wanted to film them frankly.

Eric Gautier chose “old-school” lenses. They were heavy and cumbersome, but they let us shoot Margaret and Joe as close as possible, with a mutual confidence. And I'd like to say: with love.

### How did you choose your two leads, Margaret Qualley and Joe Alwyn?

I saw Margaret in Quentin Tarantino's Once Upon a Time in Hollywood.

I contacted her. She said yes straight away.

Then the pandemic hit, and Margaret waited almost three years for us.

Her confidence never wavered, and when she sensed I was overwhelmed, she would call me from Vancouver, where she was shooting “Maid” – a cheer up call.

I thought Robert Pattinson would play the Englishman, but the pandemic locked him into The Bat-

man for over two years.

I met Joe Alwyn over Zoom. I was in Panama and it was a few days before we were slated to shoot.

I liked him a lot in Ang Lee's Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk. Ang Lee is incredible at observing actors, at loving them, at revealing themselves to themselves.

It happened very fast. We spoke on Friday. Him from London, me from Panama. And without hesitation, we felt the desire to work together.

On Monday, he flew to Panama.

With Margaret and Joe, all was simple.

Their talent, their engagement, their comprehension of the characters, and above all, the way they complement each other. She is a resurrection of Paulette Goddard in Chaplin's “Modern Times”. He is so blond, so tender, so sweet, his white skin like a cloud suspended above his body.

### It wasn't a simple shoot, was it?

No, but the excellent, mostly Panamanian crew, cohered easily with the French crew, and all the problems became solutions. It's raining? Well,

we'll shoot the rain. Not the set we'd hoped for? No big deal, we'll find a better one, etc... A crew of fellow travelers.

### The film hinges on the passion of the two protagonists, but it regularly opens onto landscapes, both urban and rural.

For me, they are two lenses in one pair of glasses. Eric Gautier, the cinematographer, and I agreed on everything. We were on exactly the same wavelength.

We traveled all over Panama with Arnaud (the set designer), Tello (the location manager), and Olivier Helie (the line producer). The landscapes became ingrained in our minds. Locations just struck us as obvious. It was an esthetics of obviousness.

**“ With Margaret and Joe, all was simple. Their talent, their engagement, their comprehension of the characters, and above all, the way they complement each other. ”**

**Stars at Noon** oscillates between Jean-Pierre Melville's *Les Enfants Terribles* and Nicolas Ray's *They Live by Night*.

The boy and the girl fall madly in love, like children for the first time. And to save their skin, they try to make it to the Nicaraguan and Costa Rican border. Loving and fleeing are a nice pair, and in both cases, it's a similar suspense. Their desire stays unfulfilled because they know they lack the time to wear each other out. They race forward, sometimes at full speed, sometimes in slow motion, in an absolute present, wanting to shout "Just a little more!" because they sense the finish line spells their end. Inevitably.

The characters' psychology and backstories are barely alluded to because everything happens

between them so quickly. Their nascent love is so rushed, so caught up in the moment, that they fear unmasking themselves fully to each other.

Trish says she is from here and there. Daniel says he's married. But we can imagine that they lie blithely to purge any questions about their past, or worse, their future.

Their love is not a pretext to tell a story, to defend a cause, to explain a situation, or to save a world in decline. Their passion is a coat of arms, an ode to love, thuggish and undocumented.

#### **Tell us about the other actors?**

Working with Benny Safdie was my dream. He worked around his schedule and came to Panama for a few days. He brought a disarming intel-

ligence to the part of the CIA agent. I met Danny Ramirez at a casting session in LA just before the pandemic. Thankfully, we stayed in touch. During pre-production in Panama, we chose actors (professional and non-professional) with the help of a local casting director—the type of person who moves heaven and earth for you.

I will never forget meeting with Nick Romano, who plays the Subteniente. For a while, he could not believe that it was him, only him, that I wanted for the role.

Interview by Gérard Lefort



# STUART STAPLES

LEAD SINGER OF THE GROUP **TINDERSTICKS**

DISCUSSES HIS WORK WITH **CLAIRE DENIS** ON **STARS AT NOON**

"When working for Claire I try to understand what drives her or what she is really interested in within each individual film. This can be worth so much more than the images, it helps create a viewpoint of the music itself. When writing the script for *Trouble Every Day* she would speak about the ideas in the film in such a romantic way, this set the tone of the score and when this romance collided with the horror of the images the relationship between image and music became so alive. Our work is peppered with these collisions where ideas are formed separately but resonate or explode when they come together. For me, this can bring so much more than just responding to images with music.

"As with working with Claire on so many other films, the experience of *Stars at Noon* was a new one – the first time one of her films is adapted from a novel. It has had a long gestation, Claire even spent time with Denis Johnson before his passing in 2017. So after such a long time when she was finally approaching the filming, our conversation was short – a call as I was standing in CDG and she was on her way to Panama.

"And of course I need the music to film the dance scene."

"What dance scene?"

"The one in the night club."

"Is it in the script?"

"It's in the new version of the script."

"What kind of music do you want?"

"Your music – slow and sexy."

"I understand that I'm in a privileged position as a film composer. I have never been given a film, a scene even, with a temporary score. Never "I want music like this." There is a trust involved and an unsaid motivation to challenge and explore. I would never describe our relationship as comfortable, there is always a creative tension and that keeps the conversation alive. But like with the song "Stars at Noon", a collision of image and music, a moment of bliss."





# CLAIRE DENIS

## SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

### DIRECTOR - CINEMA

- 2022 **STARS AT NOON**  
*Official Selection - Cannes FF*
- 2021 **BOTH SIDES OF THE BLADE**  
*Official Competition - Berlin FF*
- 2018 **HIGH LIFE**  
*FIPRESCI Prize - San Sebastian FF Official Selection - Toronto FF Official Selection - New York FF*
- 2017 **LET THE SUNSHINE IN**  
*SACD Prize at Directors' Fortnight - Cannes FF*
- 2013 **BASTARDS**  
*Un Certain Regard - Cannes FF*
- 2010 **WHITE MATERIAL**  
*Official Competition - Venice FF*
- 2008 **35 SHOTS OF RUM**  
*Out of Competition - Venice FF*
- 2005 **THE INTRUDER**
- 2002 **FRIDAY NIGHT**
- 2001 **TROUBLE EVERY DAY**  
*Out of Competition - Cannes FF*
- 1999 **BEAU TRAVAIL**  
*Best Cinematography - César Awards*
- 1996 **NENETTE AND BONI**  
*Golden Leopard, Prize of the Ecumenical Jury, Special Prize - Locarno FF*
- 1995 **A PROPOS DE NICE**
- 1993 **I CAN'T SLEEP**  
*Un Certain Regard - Cannes FF*

- 1990 **NO FEAR, NO DIE**
- 1989 **MAN NO RUN**
- 1988 **CHOCOLAT**  
*Official Selection - Cannes FF*  
*Nominee Best First Feature Film - César Awards*

### DIRECTOR - TELEVISION

- 1994 **U.S. GO HOME**
- 1992 **LA ROBE À CERCEAU**  
*Arte*
- 1990 **JACQUES RIVETTE, LE VEILLEUR**  
*Cinéma de notre temps*



# CAST

Trish

Daniel

Costa Rican Policeman

CIA Man

Second Lieutenant

Vice President

La Señora

Taxi Driver Mercado

Taxi Driver 1

Travel Agent

Costa Rican Border Chief

Night Watchman

American Boss

**Margaret QUALLEY**

**Joe ALWYN**

**Danny RAMIREZ**

**Benny SAFDIE**

**Nick ROMANO**

**Stephan PROAÑO**

**Monica BARTHOLOMEW**

**Carlos BENNETT**

**Sebastián DONOSO**

**Hector MORENO**

**Robin DURAN**

**Jose Leonel HERNANDEZ**

**John C. REILLY**



# CREW

Directed by  
Screenplay  
Producer  
Line Producers

Associate Producers  
Production Manager  
DP  
Production Designer  
Editor  
Wardrobe Designer  
Make-up Artist  
Hairdresser  
Original Music  
Sound  
Location Manager  
Casting

1st Assistant Director  
Production  
Coproduction  
In association with  
French Distribution  
International Sales  
Running time  
Formats

Claire DENIS  
Claire DENIS, Léa MYSIUS, Andrew LITVACK  
Olivier DELBOSC  
Pituka ORTEGA HEILBRON, Marcela HEILBRON (Panama),  
Olivier GAURIAT (U.S)  
Emilien BIGNON, Jacqueline DE CROÏ  
Olivier HELIE  
Eric GAUTIER  
Arnaud DE MOLERON  
Guy LECORNE  
Judy SHREWSBURY  
Turid FOLLVIK  
Sylvine PICARD  
Tindersticks  
Jean-Paul MUGEL, Thomas DESJONQUÈRES, Nathalie VIDAL  
Mark "Tello" HEADLEY, Tomás CORTÉS  
Des HAMILTON, Carmen CUBA (U.S), Carla HOOL (U.S),  
Dilva BARRIGA (Panama)  
Martin PROAÑO  
Curiosa Films  
Hypatia Films and Barnstormer  
CANAL+, Ciné+, Arte France  
Ad Vitam  
Wild Bunch International  
2H17  
2.39 / 5.1

