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Toronto International
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Other People's Children

A FILM BY

REBECCA ZLOTOWSKI

STARRING

**VIRGINIE EFIRA, ROSCHDY ZEM, CHIARA MASTROIANNI
AND CALLIE FERREIRA-GONCALVES**

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Synopsis

Rachel is 40 years old and childless. She loves her life: her high school students, her friends, her ex, her guitar lessons. When she falls in love with Ali, she becomes attached to Leila, his 4-year-old daughter. She tucks her into bed, cares for her, loves her like her own. But loving other people's children is risky.

Director's note

I began by adapting Romain Gary's novel *Your Ticket Is No Longer Valid*, a novel that confronts a man's impotence head on. But something resisted. Not because I couldn't project myself into this man who was unable to get hard, or who feared no longer being able to, but perhaps because I could identify too well. Gradually I recognized my own impotence, that of a 40-year-old woman without children, who wants one, and in part raises those of another woman. A stepmother without being a mother herself. As painfully commonplace as male impotence, this situation was nevertheless the starting point of a story worthy of being told, having hardly been told before.

It seemed to me that the bond which can link us to the child of another, a man we love, whose life and therefore family we share, not only has no name – we speak of motherhood, of fatherhood, not 'step-motherhood' or 'step-fatherhood' – but is also rarely depicted.

There was a kind of gap between comic book representations on one hand – the evil 'Disney' stepmother from a world in which women died in childbirth and were replaced by young women unwilling and ill-equipped to love children who weren't their own, burdens that came with marriage, and on the other hand overwhelmed stepmothers in reconstituted families in unevenly successful romantic comedies.

Where was the woman who nurtured an intimate and precious connection with the child or

children, she was raising for years without having any herself, while accepting the risk of being erased from the equation once her relationship with the father ended? What is to be done with this relationship when it weighs heavily on decisions of the heart? How can you still live in the same city with people you have been with, loved, cared for, but who are already sharing their lives with others?

I wanted to write this film about this secondary character using the tools of cinema. But a cinema of secondary characters, as opposed to the cinema of protagonists experiencing passion and excess in conflict. To have a new matrix of emotions prevail: friendship between men and women, tenderness between women, frustration rather than betrayal, the melancholy of missed rendez-vous with life but also the joy of successful encounters with desire, eroticism, the consolations of happiness. To focus on those transitory loves we experience between great romances... what the Americans call "on the rebound". Rebound girl, rebound boy.

I imagined *Other People's Children* in its literary and melodic dimension. Each fade out and in, every iris in and out, the skies that show the passing seasons, all should be read as chapters in a countdown in the life of a woman, of a couple and their desire.

I thought a lot about those studies of human nature from the early 1980s at which American

cinema excelled: Alan Parker's *Shoot the Moon*, *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *An Unmarried Woman*... definitive films about ordinary, collective experiences, with a sort of musical generosity and classical simplicity in their structures, a modesty in their depiction of these relationships that develop and disintegrate, that struggle and break apart.

Other People's Children owes almost everything to its cast, which isn't the case with every film. Roschdy Zem, my great ally since *Savages*, and Chiara Mastroianni, who agreed to join us for several scenes and who during the shoot agreed that we were breaking the rule that dictates that there is room for only one great female role in a film, not two. The film above all compensated for – I was going to say avenged! – my missed appointment over the years with Virginie Efira, who contributed with her "erotic brain", to use the phrase coined by Anne Berest (who also acts in the film). The intelligence of her acting, her generosity, her dignity renders her the heir to

the stars of those studies of human nature whose guiding spirit hovered over the film: Jill Clayburgh, Meryl Streep, Diane Keaton... Women who touched me and in whom I recognized myself, for whom femininity is not a given, but something of their own making. Action, diction, reaction, seduction: there is nothing 'in itself' about Virginie's femininity, but a fierce and stubborn will to be. To construct the person you want to be. And I loved her.

In a sort of ironic twist of fate, having no longer hoped for it, I discovered during prep that I was pregnant, and I shot the film while expecting a child who was born several days after we finished mixing. I felt that I was filming this love letter in solidarity with childless women – nulliparous, as the doctors say – while no longer belonging to their community without having yet joined the other.

With *Other People's Children* I wanted to simply make the film I needed to see.

Rebecca Zlotowski.

Paris, June 8th, 2022

Interview with Virginie Efira

What did the title *Other People's Children* evoke when you read the screenplay?

The idea of a character rarely seen in cinema. The stepmother, the one who looks after other people's children, is usually a minor character, rather utilitarian. Rebecca decided to bring her to the forefront and examine the bond between a peripheral character and an "adopted" family as focal point. At the same time, she tackles a classic character, but one never before seen in this way, and the question of femininity. She places Rachel at the heart of this utterly contemporary story. She manages to do what Flaubert said: "All you have to do to make something interesting is to look at it long enough." That's really the case with my character who is neither crazy nor an eccentric nonconformist. She's quite normal, discreet, and Rebecca looks at her at length as such. She reveals her from all points of views: her libido, her family relations, her friends, her relationship with this other person's child as well, because when I evoke Rachel's very moving reserve, it's not only about motherhood, it's also about her femininity.

Did you feel this when reading the screenplay?

What moved me when I read it is what was implicit, what I call the small place, when it comes quite naturally to be reserved, behind others, and in this case behind someone, this man she loves and to whom she says while doing this: "take the space". Rachel is interesting in that she doesn't want to take the first place, that of *the* mother at any cost, that she seeks to stay in the background in relation to herself and sometimes in her romantic relationships too.

Did you discuss all this with Rebecca Zlotowski?

Often when you meet a character, you feel that the director might be talking about him or herself, and then suddenly you realise that he or she is also talking about you, and everything gets intertwined. Rebecca and I discussed what brought us together, what we wanted to do and why. We talked about all this rather than trying to define a character. We also discussed the bond we were going to share on and for this film, how we envisaged things, our love of working together and with Roschdy Zem too, a love we could predict, which sometimes happens on set, and which did here! Something special manifested on this shoot, something quite symbiotic, an understanding that didn't need to be spoken or named.

Tell us about your co-star, Roschdy Zem.

He's amazing, this Roschdy Zem who keeps on reinventing himself! He does things in the film that he would have never done before. I've loved his work for a very long time. He has a real curiosity that puts him beyond any trend, beyond the certainty of a well framed moment. He's seeking, he doesn't know exactly who he is, and that's marvellous, especially when you see the pure quality of his career. He's in a state of perpetual astonishment, of wonder. We didn't really know each other, even though I felt through his roles the incredible strength that emanates from him. We got along very well. I believed in our on-screen couple. I also see a way of being a man, he exudes something tangible. It fitted with Rebecca's cinema, the way she wanted to tell her story. He and I are quite concrete, which places the story somewhere less ethereal, more organic, and perhaps this allowed us to interact in a fluid way. There's no egocentric waste, he's completely free. He wanted to dive into this story, hence the nakedness, in every sense of the word.

Rachel is also a character who lays herself bare, in every sense of the word.

On-screen nudity isn't exactly new for me! But this is the first time I've done a funny nude scene, because the body has some soft parts and when you're moving in all directions, it's funny! The nude scene with no sexual aspect was great fun to shoot but also very intimidating. I was naked outside, some people could see me, I couldn't for example cover myself with the body of my partner or with eroticism like the type of scene I've done on other films. Here we were just there, like naked worms, wriggling around in all directions. Yes, it was comical. Nudity is difficult to film, it's interesting to me only if it is of great interest to the director, finding the language of the body, the precise way of moving, feeling that we are all together, in the same film, in an almost religious, transcendent way, and telling ourselves we are accomplishing something higher than us.

Is that down to Rebecca's Zlotowski's direction of actors?

It is driven by Rebecca's character and determination. There is an assertiveness in what she wants to see, where she wants to take us. She has a form of energy that makes you want to follow her, to deliver more. Her gaze is eager, a systematic encouragement to look further, to see that things are progressing. She never pushes the actor in the idea of wanting to do well, it is more a matter of doing! She's good at that. She also gives cinematic clues, which are not psychological. For example, the scene where my character and Ali, played by Roschdy Zem, meet, I wanted to add a bunch of little things and she summed it up with an image devoid of everything, telling me: "I want it to be like a conveyor belt." Rebecca is very gentle but with a real authority. She also stops any sacralisation of the moment. And when you share the same tastes, your thoughts are obvious. Roschdy, Rebecca and I worked through osmosis.

How did you work on Rachel's appearance?

Regarding her wardrobe, at first Rebecca and I were looking in opposite directions, before finally agreeing on a look for her. When we talked about Rachel we were able, for example, to define a gesture of my hand in my hair, as an actress like Julia Roberts often does, that's to say a mane of long curly hair that has to be held back to keep her face free.

And next?

We had to find a style that helped me understand Rachel, who teaches French in high school. First, we loaded her with lots of meaning before removing many, many things. More than her clothes, Rachel is the way she moves, in constant correlation with her way of thinking. We had to find her energy levels. You always steal things from your director, I took from Rebecca small physical elements that reveal her quickness of thought. On set, she has this very strong, marked assurance, which I share in a way, even if I also talk about my complexes. There's no evidence of fragility, neither for her nor for me... well, not much. All this is above all a question of gestures betraying a sensory, affective and not necessarily intellectual language.

And films too?

Yes, Rebecca showed me Diane Keaton films, which were very inspiring, again for Rachel's body language. Keaton has a facial mobility, a certain politeness in her smile, which is also in my character: the polite smile, the importance of laughter too. I was particularly impressed by Alan Parker's *Shoot the Moon*. It's mainstream American cinema, accessible, demanding and profound, which maintains its aim at a certain level. Films were, for Rebecca and me, additional ways to be in accord and share a vision. She gave me the freedom to take, to

use or not, whatever I wanted from what I had seen, for example in Diane Keaton's work. Then there are films you have in mind, and clearly for me it was Claude Sautet and Romy Schneider. I'm thinking of *Une Histoire Simple*, where Schneider looks at men with an amused and distant understanding, not at all "Men are all bastards, but we forgive them everything," no, in Sautet's films, as in *Other People's Children*, it's more the gaze of a woman who doesn't seek or ask anything from men, but who observes without judging.

And feminist as well?

In a way, yes. What is a feminist film? It is a film that really looks at a woman at length and grants her a complex position. This film is absolutely that, and in a way that is both extremely contemporary and aimed at everyone. It's a mainstream film about a rare and accessible subject, motherhood, about this possibility for women to belong to this great shared place – that of being a mother. We also discuss a period, the idea that, if I want to be a mother, I can't decide when I'm 68. It's a reality no woman escapes, which you must resolve, so what do we do with that?

Is this what mattered most to you, to address this countdown, which means that after a certain age a woman can no longer be a mother?

Not only. To me, more than the relationship to motherhood, the film strikes me in a more universal way with this question: what passes and what remains, in this long and short life? In the film, not only must Rachel find her place and understand who she is, which is complex, but also find a place beside a child who is not hers, and that is something else. Do you dive in headfirst or not? You're constantly unbalanced because you worry all the time about respecting the child. You have no choice but to wait until a place is offered to you, and then it's hard to dare to take it. Rachel tries to find a place in the life of this child, and clearly without any rivalry between her and the mother of the child. This is not the subject.

What *is* the subject?

There is this great biological desire to be a mother that Rebecca succeeds wonderfully in dealing with. This moment where there is very little time left is very complex. And again, there is this bond with a child that is not yours, which is miraculous and inevitably fragile because you never know when it might break. This bond is always up in the air. How do you manage to be yourself fully in this situation? What are your rights, afterwards? How do you say goodbye? How do you enter the intimacy of a family that isn't yours to start with? Rebecca manages to render this state of permanent high alert, of always

trying to do well, to establish a bond. On a personal note, this bond with a child who is not yours is something I loved very much. I even wonder if sometimes I didn't choose men because they had children. I loved to watch the man in this situation, maybe because I thought I could be useful, perhaps also because it put me in that so-called situation of standing "behind" that bond.

Is this a film that leaves a bigger mark than others?

Totally! Making it and watching it. Rebecca goes to the end of what she wants to do and does it by giving you real freedom to make creative propositions. When I watched the film, I saw this politeness of the smile that I hadn't been fully aware of. I laugh all the time! It's beautiful. The film is also about courage seen in a very simple way. Rachel isn't someone who saves lives; she has the courage to live her life with a clear form of dignity which I find beautiful and which the man she loves doesn't always see. He doesn't fully understand Rachel's investment in this child, the significance of her commitment.

And to conclude?

I like the relationship my character has with life. I like the way she moves around in the city, the way it belongs to her. How do you cross a road? Do you run or not? Do you wait at the red light? How do you launch yourself into life? I like her friends who arrive for dinner, I like her on the phone... Everything is fluid, extremely sensory.

Interview with Roschdy Zem

How do you see your character, Ali?

My vision was quite close to that of Rebecca Zlotowski, the director. Ali is a man of his time. He's at an age when he is asking himself existential questions about his future: carry on and continue the family line or, on the contrary, stop and enjoy life? I'm familiar with these questions. I've been through this. We live in a time today where to be a man is no longer to belong to a classic model. Anything is possible now, even if it can be disturbing to the mind of a male spirit like Ali. He asks himself a lot of questions about what makes his reality, his desires, his goals, unlike his parents' generation for which everything was clearly mapped out. Ali is the embodiment of all that, a 40-year-old man of the 21st century.

Is it only this that makes him modern?

Not only. He is also modern because of his feminine side. He's the most feminine character I have ever played. And this is the modernity of Rebecca's thinking. In the film you get the feeling that the roles have been reversed from what we have grown used to seeing in cinema. Here, it's the man who is alone with the child. He prepares dinner for his young daughter, he puts her to bed... This is usually reserved for female characters, in film and in life. The film breaks that pattern. The character who comes in to fit into this couple is the woman. It's she who must adapt to his family situation.

The feminine side of your character is reflected in the way he dresses.

Yes, it came through the choice of clothes. They had to be carefully chosen so they wouldn't make me look taller, or accentuate my build, they even had to soften me. That's what we were looking for, something soft, sensitive, delicate, a bit awkward even. Rebecca immediately had the idea of refining everything a little in my appearance, above all that I should not wear boots that looked too heavy, too manly, or a big coat... only things that revealed something infinitely vulnerable in Ali. Rebecca also wanted his socio-professional category – Ali is an engineer – to be tangible through his clothes, so we could really feel my character. It was important to Rebecca that I'd wear a tie at work. I haven't often been seen in a tie...

How did Rebecca Zlotowski draw inspiration from you to build your character?

Rebecca and I know each other well, we did the series *Savages* together. After that she started writing the film adaptation of Romain Gary's novel, *Your Ticket Is No Longer Valid*, in which I was to play the lead. Curiously, the story turned into a more feminine, first-person self-portrait and became *Other People's Children*, for which she wrote the part of Ali with me in mind. She managed to create a mix of the man I am and men she met. In Ali I was able to detect several personalities embodied in one single character. Nothing she asked me to do seemed incoherent or implausible. Again, the role of Ali made me question myself the most. I understand everything he does, even if I don't necessarily share all his choices. And I also like this kind of paradox of meeting the ideal woman yet questioning the viability of their existence as a couple.

The couple's intimacy is filmed in a very modern way too, especially in their most naked moments. How did you play this?

We talked about nudity very early on. I have rarely been confronted with it in films in the past. I didn't feel ready. Today it's easier, mostly because of the gaze of Rebecca, who confronts me with all the aspects of my character. I felt confident. Again, nudity questions this idea of the character's femininity, his abandon. The scene where I'm naked in the shower, it's he who takes a shower, he who is watched by the woman who loves him and whom he loves. Here too the roles are reversed in relation to what cinema generally gives us. I was happy to be the active witness of that. I feel I'm a part of a renaissance, a change of vision in cinema. I was at the service of that. It delighted me, considering my past experience. Women take the place they must occupy in society. In cinema, as directors, they bring something else. I'm happy to be solicited by them and to be a part of that. They take me somewhere I've never confronted before. I am no longer this marmoreal character for example. There are even sequences in Rebecca's film where I felt emotionally dominated.

What does his being a musician bring to the character of Ali?

Ali is an amateur musician; his profession is senior executive. It's a hobby. His part of solitude shared with others. Music... that wasn't easy for me. I like the guitar, I play a lot, but I am very, very bad. Virginie Efira and I had to learn a complicated piece. We practised a lot and the sequence ended up being cut. But this relationship with music quietly brought us a little closer to our characters, it allowed us to move closer together, and that's essential, especially when you're dealing with an actress you don't know at all.

How was working with Virginie Efira?

Ours is a near perfect partnership. Being with her feels good. She's there to work, but also to interact, with generosity and humour, while always remaining anchored in reality. It's quite beautiful to see. On set, she maintains a strong link with real life, which is very reassuring to me. She had her daughter there at the end of each day of filming to help her with homework in her dressing room. That really affected me. I feel something about her that I'm very attached to, this feeling, this awareness of living in privileged conditions related to our work, I love that. She is an exceptional partner. I really understand her success. She has the talent, and the behaviour that goes with it. There is a girl next door quality to her. She is like all the women of her generation.

She puts herself at the service of the film. And her strength is that she doesn't suffer. She gives a lot when she acts, she doesn't spare herself, and that is something I am very keen on too, but she sets her limits, and this limit – not to suffer – is essential in order to go on. I'm not one of those who thinks you need to suffer to play a role.

What did you discover when you watched the film?

The result of the work we did with the child who plays my daughter. When Rebecca chose little Callie Ferreira-Goncalves, she was a very reserved, shy kid. I was disconcerted. How was she going to thrive on a film set? Rebecca was very efficient, and her patience worked like magic. Between takes Callie huddled in her mother's arms but as soon as we were shooting, she opened up. In the end, she brought something magical too. She arrived with her fragility and each moment she gave was like a gift.

Did the fact that you are a father yourself help you?

Being a father, I live it. I know I have it in me: to talk to a child, to love her, put her to bed... and to be annoyed with a kid too... I know all this, so I don't theorise about it. I don't need to. It's ingrained. My memory does the rest.

What do you think of the film's subject around these women in the 40s in search of motherhood, whose suffering society rarely acknowledges?

I was an indirect witness to that. I'm very close to Rebecca. It is very delicate, very difficult, what is asked of women. They must be professionally involved in society, and start a family, have children. It's not that simple when you're a woman to build an accomplished career and know that personal and maternal fulfilment is only possible up to a certain age. We men don't think about it. We are not conscious of it at all because we are never confronted with that situation. This film is important because it allows us to talk about all this. We realise, when we talk about it, how real the subject is and the extent to which women have to confront it. We couldn't have told this story twenty years ago because no one took this subject into account. I am and I was a witness of that, and I must admit I would have never thought I'd see such a story told in cinema. It is a subject that, as men, eludes us entirely. We are not generous enough.

Is there a sentence or a phrase you've retained from the film?

A sentence? I don't know but there's something I found very disturbing, it's the decision my character makes, not for him, but "for the little one." That's a terrible phrase: "for the little one." You can't inflict that on a child. It places an incredibly heavy load, the whole responsibility of the father's situation, on her shoulders. It's a massive and inappropriate burden for a child. What will she do with that when she herself becomes an adult? How can a father, when he tells a child such a thing, say: "See what I am doing for you?"

Finally, Ali?

To me, as an actor and as a man, to play Ali is ten times more interesting than anything else that is offered to me today. It says that men today are not stronger than women, that it's no longer a question of counting on them with eyes closed, because yes, we can screw up, and not measure up, like anyone else. It's always been the case, but this film finally shows it.

Rebecca Zlotowski

Rebecca Zlotowski is a French director and screenwriter born in 1980 in Paris. A graduate of the Ecole Normale Supérieure and the Femis, and a former academic in French literature, her films as director are *Dear Prudence* (Critics' Week Grand Prize Nominee, Cannes, Winner Prix Louis Delluc for First Film, Critics' Award for Best First Film) *Grand Central* (Official Selection, Cannes), *Planetarium*, starring Natalie Portman, presented at the Venice Film Festival, and *An Easy Girl* (SACD Award, Directors' Fortnight, Cannes). Her mini-series for Canal Plus, *Savages*, adapted from a novel by Sabri Louatah, won the award for Best Series at the French Syndicate of Cinema Critics. She lives and works in Paris. *Other People's Children* is her fifth film.

Cast

Rachel	Virginie EFIRA
Ali	Roschdy ZEM
Alice	Chiara MASTROIANNI
Leila	Callie FERREIRA GONCALVES
Louana	Yamée COUTURE
Vincent	Henri-Noël TABARY
Dylan	Victor LEFEBVRE
Paul	Sébastien POUDEROUX of the Comédie Française
Father	Michel ZLOTOWSKI
Mme. ROUCHERAY	Mireille PERRIER
Dr. WISEMAN	Frederick WISEMAN
Mia	Antonia BURESI
Soraya	Marlène SALDANA
Jeanne	Anne BEREST
Tarik	Marwen OKBI

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2nd assistant Director
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Casting Director
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Extras Casting (Région SUD)
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Costume Designer
Make-up
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Unit Manager
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Sound Editors
Mixing
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