

Curiosa Films presents

Catherine Frot

Catherine Deneuve

SAGE FEMME

Een film van Martin Provost

met Olivier Gourmet

1h57 – France / Belgium – 1.85 – 5.1

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SYNOPSIS

Béatrice, een glansrol van filmdiva Catherine Deneuve, leeft er ondanks haar leeftijd nog lustig op los. Claire (Catherine Frot) is de eerlijkheid zelve. Als vroedvrouw heeft ze haar hele leven gewijd aan anderen. Naast de onzekerheid over haar werk wordt haar leven nog meer overhoop gehaald door de plotselinge terugkeer van Béatrice, de voormalige maîtresse van Claire's overleden vader. Béatrice is haar tegenpool; luid, kleurrijk en egocentrisch. De vrouwen hebben elkaar decennia lang niet gezien. Claire vraagt zich dan ook af waarom Beatrice na jaren van afwezigheid nu weer in haar leven opduikt.

INTERVIEW WITH MARTIN PROVOST

Where did the idea of telling the story of a midwife come from?

I myself was saved at birth by a midwife. She gave me her blood and so allowed me to live. She did it with incredible discretion and humility. When my mother told me the truth about my birth, a little over two years ago, I immediately went to look for her, without even knowing her name. The hospital archives where I was born are destroyed every twenty years, there was no remaining trace. My mother remembers that she was not in the first flush of youth. I am convinced she is dead.

I therefore decided to pay tribute to her, in my own way, by dedicating this film to her and through her, to all those women who work in the shadows, dedicating their lives to others, without expecting anything in return.

The most extraordinary thing is that I needed a birth certificate (and not the usual copy) a few months ago, for my marriage. I had practically just finished the film editing and to my astonishment I discovered that it was this midwife, and not my father, who had declared my birth at the town hall. Not only had she spent all night with me, she had saved me, but she had also gone to declare my birth, as if to certify that I was alive and well. I think this is a beautiful gesture, and I repeat her name, Yvonne André, endlessly. I owe her a lot.

However, *THE MIDWIFE* is not an autobiographical film. I did not want to tell my story, because it was only a pretext to go further, to become better acquainted with a profession, which has always fascinated me. I therefore met with quite a few midwives, at first to fully understand what had happened to me the night of my birth, and it is from their answers that the story of Claire gradually emerged. I wanted to portray a midwife in touch with the reality of her time but also a woman at a defining moment in her life.

Claire is both a complex and inflexible character...

She is a committed woman who lives for others. She has principles and values that she refuses to give up, all to her credit. Professionally, she does not accept what society wants to impose on her. The small maternity ward where she has always worked is about to close in favour of a 'baby factory', these establishments, which are growing in number and where performance is considered more important than human care. Claire refuses the job she is offered, she refuses the compromise. That is who she is. A woman with integrity who knows what her experience is worth. Money is not her priority even if unemployment is a cause for concern. She would rather sell her apartment than contribute to the policy of setting targets. She acts with the same conviction in her personal life: her son has left home, she has no partner, but she remains upright, almost stiff-necked.

The eruption of Béatrice into her life will change everything.

Béatrice is the exact opposite of Claire, to the extent that it is hard not to be reminded of La Fontaine's *The Ant and the Grasshopper* when we see them together. Is this reference intentional?

Yes. I totally assume this reference. For me, this film is a fable, but gentler than La Fontaine's, which I find terrifying, a fable in which I try to say that we are all duty-bound to be both a little bit ant and a little bit grasshopper. Claire and Béatrice are fundamentally opposed, but little by little, this contrast becomes a source of complementarity, of reciprocity, of wisdom. Conflict frightens me and yet, it cannot always be avoided, it allows

us to appreciate our differences. It is what will happen to the two women. Claire lives in the shadows too much and Béatrice comes back to bring some light into her world. And for Béatrice, who has always lived like a free spirit, it is perhaps the opportunity for her to come to a better understanding of her own life, to finally stop and appreciate that without others, we are nothing.

In this sense, the film raises the question: what is freedom?

Exactly. For me, freedom is a concept that I frequently question. Freedom does not reside in the absence of boundaries or rules as Béatrice appears to think. The illness that strikes her will undermine her way of life and her way of thinking. What she calls 'freedom' has always been akin to a form of escape, but suddenly she cannot, she needs Claire, she is fragile. Claire, who embodies what Béatrice has always rejected, choosing to take life lightly, to the extent of superficiality, this sort of extreme compassion for powerless and vulnerable human beings. There could be nothing more vulnerable than a baby who has just been born or an elderly person who is going to die.

Béatrice, a woman but also a child, lovely, wonderful and funny, cruel through her casualness, finally realises that she holding herself prisoner. It is too late, but she has a chance. To make the memories that Claire will have of her good ones. Because the dead live in us, they keep living in the minds of those they loved and of those who loved them. For Béatrice, it is the last possible freedom. One of the worst things in the world, is to die alone, with no-one to hold your hand.

THE MIDWIFE is also a story of transmission and of transformation...

Both women fill the void in one another. Claire rediscovers her second mother, the one she chose previously in a time when she was becoming a young girl, and Béatrice the daughter she never had.

This relationship is at the heart of the story. Moreover, Béatrice does not hesitate to introduce Claire as her daughter to the doctors who are treating her and as a result Claire, cornered, accepts. And when Béatrice has no longer anywhere else to go, it is Claire who opens the door to her little apartment and thus to her life. Hence, the two-bedroomed flat becomes the arena where all that life had not thus far permitted will be enacted, a chance to make up for lost time, to make peace.

Together they bring back to life the man they both adored, each in their own way. For Claire, a father who vanished too suddenly and too soon and for Béatrice, the only true love of her life. To leave the past behind is to accept the future, the beginning of a new life for Claire, a more soothing end for Béatrice.

This is the first time Catherine Frot and Catherine Deneuve have met on screen. How did you imagine that meeting to be?

An obvious success. I wrote this film for them both and for Olivier Gourmet. I had already asked Catherine Frot to play Simone de Beauvoir in 'Violette' but she turned down the role. She came back to me after having seen the film to tell me she regretted it. Her frankness moved me, I kept her in mind.

And when the film came to life, I saw her, just as I see you, leaning over me in her pink blouse, as if she was bringing me into the world. From there, everything naturally fell into place.

Who other than Catherine Deneuve could portray Béatrice? Her mere existence makes me happy. She seems above the law.

As far as Olivier Gourmet is concerned I had already worked with him in 'Violette' and I was sure he and Catherine Frot would make a perfect couple. And we were each eager to work together again.

So, I wrote the script with those three in mind. I come from the theatre and it is important for me to see the actors whose roles I am writing. I hear their voices. It is almost tailor-made. My only worry was that they would say no. But there again everything fell into place.

At the time, the film was just an idea in my head when I was invited to a festival in Prague. I ran into Catherine Frot on the street. She was filming 'Marguerite'. We spoke. I told her that I thought about her a great deal. The next day, as fate would have it, I met Olivier Delbosc, also in Prague producing 'Marguerite'. I told him about my idea of a film about a midwife, and he said, goodness, my father is an obstetrician. Count me in!

He hadn't read a word.

From that day on I really felt like destiny was at work.

How did you work with them?

I met Catherine Deneuve at almost the same time as Catherine Frot. A few days apart.

Catherine Frot said yes first, from the outset. She was troubled. Claire referred to what she was going through in her own life, which almost belonged to the past. Claire therefore arrived at the right time, as if to close the loop. We came to understand one another very quickly, she also comes from the theatre, we share the same passion for scripts, of what always hides in the shadows. She reminds me of those English actresses who are capable of everything, as much in theatre as in cinema.

Catherine Deneuve asked to meet me. I was a nervous wreck, I trembled to think that, if she said no, the film was doomed. But she said yes too, just like that, throwing it effortlessly into the conversation. I know that she sensed my concern and that she wanted to discreetly reassure me. I felt myself melt from gratitude and relief.

Olivier Gourmet called me to say that he could not refuse such a story. I knew that he would charm my two Catherines, he has such depth as an actor, such staggering pertinence. He is a delight to behold.

The casting in a film is almost more important than the technique.

Next, I did readings with each of them, then with them both together. Catherine Frot is very structured, everything must be clear in her head, while Catherine Deneuve is like an equilibrist, she lives in the moment, the truth of the moment.

We were at the heart of the story, and I too had to let go, like Claire, or risk wanting to control everything. I learned a great deal making this film.

You cast Quentin Dolmaire, discovered in Arnaud Desplechin's 'My Golden Days', in the role of Claire's son. Why?

He came to mind in a conversation I had with Catherine Deneuve. We were talking about the film by Arnaud Desplechin that I had really liked and Quentin Dolmaire's performance, which reminded me of a young Jean-Louis Trintignant, with this strange voice and such unusual wording. I was looking for a strapping, swimming champion for the role, Quentin is rather slender and slim. Catherine Deneuve really pushed me, for her, what mattered most was

that I wanted it to be him. And it is true, I wanted it to be him. Even if Quentin was not what I had in mind for the character, he could become it. And he did.

Catherine Frot participates in real-life births in the film. Was this authenticity in terms of the acting indispensable for you?

Yes. Olivier Delbosc and I agreed on one point, in films, too often, new-born babies are enormous and look too healthy, which is completely unrealistic! I wanted to film real life, the very fabric of life, what we have all gone through and not a watered-down version of it.

To do so, we had to film these scenes in Belgium because French law prohibits the filming of babies under three months old. It was a long and complex job: we had to find women who had just fallen pregnant and who accepted to have their birth filmed six months later, find the maternity wards who would authorise us to do it.

Catherine Frot underwent training. She attended births prior to filming, she took part in these births.

The relationship between ourselves and the future mothers, but also with their husbands, proved to be effortless and very natural. And luck was on our side. In the end, we were able to film six live deliveries. There was only a small team: Catherine Frot, the sound recordist and the boom operator. I was in the room next door, behind my screen with my script.

When Catherine Frot brings her first baby into the world, never have I wept so hard.

You also decided to be very realistic in your filming of the illegal gaming rooms where Béatrice earns her living at cards...

I knew from close acquaintances that there were still places in Paris where one plays what is called *La Marseillaise*, (invented in the dungeons of Marseille); it is totally illegal. It is a relatively simple card game that involves gambling large stakes as much in terms of the players as in terms of the spectators who attend the game. It is clearly used for money laundering. We reconstructed the gaming rooms and the judicial police introduced us to genuine gamblers who taught Catherine Deneuve to play. I remember they called her '*Madame Catherine*' and they had real difficulty finally calling her 'Béatrice'. They look and sound the part.

THE MIDWIFE is a true dramatic comedy bringing both tears and laughter. After your last three films, which were clearly dramas, did you feel the need to introduce some levity into your cinema?

Firstly, in contrast to my other films, I wrote the script alone. I needed to engulf myself in my own universe, which is perhaps more whimsical than I cared to admit. Perhaps '*The Long Falling*' and '*Violette*' relate to areas of darkness and pain that I have sufficiently explored. Truly, I believe that THE MIDWIFE relates to who I really am. I am both overly cheerful and given to despair.

Music also has an important place in the film in the sense that it brings a Romanesque dimension to the narrative...

I wanted to make a Romanesque film, even if it is in tune with reality. I asked Grégoire Hetzel, whose work with Arnaud Desplechin I have always liked, to compose a simple, melancholic theme tune, something that sounds like the notes from a music box that one might play to a new-born baby. He sent me this first composition, which became the theme

tune to the film. I was charmed. It was Claire's theme tune and we produced another one for Béatrice, that I wanted to be more baroque. In fact, there is a tune for each character, like in 'Peter and the Wolf'.

INTERVIEW WITH CATHERINE FROT

You play the lead role in THE MIDWIFE. What attracted you to the role of Claire?

I was instantly excited about this role. I knew that Martin Provost had written it for me, that he had even dreamt of me as a midwife leaning over him. He is an extremely sensitive writer, I very much appreciated his world, the way he talked to me about the character, his ability to be both funny and emotional. I also found Béatrice's character very beautiful but I knew it was for Catherine Deneuve. I did not hesitate for a second. I loved the idea of two such different women: Béatrice is a grasshopper while Claire is an ant. They are two great figures of tragicomedy.

Claire's story is one of transformation...

That is what drew me to this character. Claire is at a pivotal moment of her life: the clinic where she has always worked is about to close, her son has left home, she is about to embark on a love affair with Paul and Béatrice reappears in her life like a ghost from the past. Her everyday life is all the more disrupted as Claire is a very disciplined woman, she has put her life on hold to better dedicate herself to others, with incredible kindness and devotion. Béatrice's reappearance makes her question her way of living. That is what is beautiful about Claire's character: by accepting to forgive Béatrice, she accepts to change and hence to return to the light, to fully take advantage of the joys and pleasures that life can offer her. In my opinion, the forgiveness Claire grants Béatrice is intrinsic to her transformation.

At what point does Claire truly accept the changes in her life?

When she goes to see Béatrice in her hospital bed: the latter introduces her to the doctors as her daughter and Claire does not deny it. De facto, she implicitly accepts to take care of her. It is the beginning of the process of forgiveness. From that point on, she begins to live. She goes on to give herself to Paul, to give him, also, a place in her everyday life. Everything occurs unconsciously, but ultimately it is natural.

She is a committed woman...

Claire is not a follower. She is not the kind to betray her principles at the first hurdle. She is very committed in the sense that she has unequivocal and straightforward views, notably with respect to her profession. She disagrees with targets, she rejects the 'baby factories'. She is a humanist and she is driven.

There is something so obvious about the relationship between Claire and Béatrice. How did you approach your collaboration with Catherine Deneuve?

Everything fell into place easily. Catherine Deneuve had the same effect on me as Béatrice does on Claire. She is a very instinctive, very elegant actress. She lives in the moment.

Martin Provost wanted to film real births. How did you approach these scenes?

I confess that I was a bit apprehensive when I read the script for the first time. The idea of assisting a live birth, as moving as it may be, was by no means insignificant. I finally accepted, as I knew it was an integral part of the project that Martin was offering me. I

therefore proceeded in stages. Firstly, I asked to attend deliveries to find out if I would eventually be able to perform the appropriate gestures. I realised that it was all actually very natural, very normal. I then took lessons with a former midwife who made me rehearse on models. I was a bit worried for the first shot on set, but everything worked out wonderfully. Usually, my job as an actress requires me to be an illusion, I played a virtuoso pianist in *'La tourneuse de pages'*, a distinguished chef in *'Les saveurs du palais'*, this time I was compelled to go beyond the illusion, without hesitating.

Did you meet the future mothers who you were going to assist in labour?

I met them at the clinic only one or two hours before filming. I told each of them that they should not be embarrassed and not to hesitate if they felt compelled to tell me to leave, I was there to assist the real midwives.

Martin Provost says that he had to let go to make this film. Was it the same for you?

Yes. He urged me towards a form of abandon, which was all the more significant as the film touched on something very personal. We agreed on putting the emphasis on Claire's journey, her transformation through her connection with Béatrice and Paul. This character had to be constantly tangible.

INTERVIEW WITH CATHERINE DENEUVE

Martin Provost wrote the role of Béatrice for you. How did you react to this proposal?

The first time I read the script, I instantly loved this character. I then met Martin Provost who spoke very well of his film. There is a kindness about him that I instantly liked. Béatrice's character is one of comedy but she also experiences moments of drama. She is a reflection of the film. Martin Provost succeeds in casually portraying serious issues without it ever being oppressive. The comedy constantly diffuses the drama without affecting the emotion.

How would you define Béatrice?

She is a woman who has lived with as much intensity as superficiality. She is all at once very generous and very selfish. She loves gambling, but she is destitute, which does not prevent her from having flair and elegance. She lives from day to day without planning ahead, moreover she would be incapable of doing so. She moves along by groping in the dark, relying one day on one person, the next on another.

Precisely, Béatrice appears to be an extremely free woman, however she is very dependent on others...

She thought she could live freely without any ties, but it is an illusion. However, she chose to look on the bright side of life, and continued to do so until the end. Béatrice is as much a lover, and her affair with Claire's father is proof of that, as a player who makes the most of what life has to offer her. There is a kind of carelessness about her that those around her find sometimes hard to bear. That does not mean that she is irresponsible. Béatrice is actually a cheerful adventurer. If she arranges things to suit her, it is not with the intention of harming others, but rather to live a better life.

Béatrice will disrupt Claire's everyday life to the point of transforming it...

Claire cannot resist Béatrice for long. At first she is reticent to let her back into her life, she is willing to help her but she keeps her distance, and then she quickly accepts this presence, she rediscovers Béatrice who brings a little fantasy into her life and makes her discover a world far removed from her own. In that sense, Béatrice is capable of making others accept highly unlikely situations.

And yet she chooses to slip away...

She wants Claire to be happy, to be able to enjoy her new life with Paul. That is why she leaves. There is sensitivity in this decision. Béatrice was able to establish an intimate relationship with Claire, they were like mother and daughter for a few weeks. She wanted to help Claire, to ask forgiveness for past mistakes, and she knows when to bow out.

Are you close to Béatrice?

As an actress, I find her to be a very positive character, very funny, a little out of the ordinary, which is extremely pleasant to play. As a woman, I can understand her carelessness, I do not judge her, but she is very different from the person I am.

You have never acted opposite Catherine Frot until THE MIDWIFE. How did you work together?

We were a bit like Claire and Béatrice in the film. Catherine Frot is a very sensitive actress. I got the feeling that she felt confident and that worked to our advantage as a duo. I think, moreover, that this is portrayed on-screen. The bond that unites Claire and Béatrice is obvious.

And Olivier Gourmet?

I had never worked with him. I like him enormously as an actor. We do not have a lot of scenes together, but I think that the complicity between our two characters is genuine. Paul has a sense of adventure, like Béatrice, he is admittedly more composed than her, but he is a genuine traveller, he says himself that he needs to be on the road. He also possesses that little hint of fantasy that illuminates Claire's everyday life. Furthermore, at the beginning Claire is annoyed by the complicity between Paul and Béatrice, she does not hesitate for a moment to throw him out when she finds them singing Serge Reggiani in her kitchen at breakfast.

What kind of director is Martin Provost?

He is very open, very gentle, constantly ready to listen to others. The pleasure he derives from seeing his characters come to life on the set is obvious. He is warm and friendly. Above all, he loves the actors, he knows how to write really wonderful roles for them. He is a man who relates to women. He was able to strike the right note to tell this story, a perfect balance of emotions.

You learned to play a game of cards called 'la Marseillaise'...

I confess I had not heard of it before making the film. The game goes very fast. Martin Provost wanted me to be surrounded by real gamblers who lend real authenticity to the scenes, but I would be incapable of playing a game today.

BEHIND THE CAMERA

MARTIN PROVOST, Director and Screenwriter

Martin Provost was born in Brest in 1959. He began his career very young as both a theatre and cinema actor, in Nelly Kaplan's *NEA*, in 1976, and Jean-Louis Bauer's *LA DYNASTIE DES MALPROPRES*. At the beginning of the 1980s, he staged his first play entitled *LE VOYAGE IMMOBILE* at the Ivry theatre. He then joined the *Comédie Française* where he became a member.

Three years later, he stopped acting to dedicate himself entirely to writing and production. His play, *LES POUPÉES*, was presented at the Avignon festival then staged in Paris at the TEP (*Théâtre de l'Est Parisien*). During this time, he published his first novel, *AIME-MOI VITE*, with Flammarion. Followed by three other books: *LÉGER*, *HUMAIN*, *PARDONNABLE* by Seuil in 2007, *LA ROUSSE PÉTEUSE* by Gallimard Jeunesse in 2009 and *BIFTECK* published by Phébus in 2010.

At the same time, he made two short films performed by Artus de Penguern: *J'AI PEUR DU NOIR* and *COCON*. In 1997, he produced his first feature film, *TORTILLA Y CINEMA*, in which he directed Carmen Maura. Six years later, he produced *LE VENTRE DE JULIETTE* with Julie-Marie Parmentier.

In 2008, *SÉRAPHINE* reaped both critical acclaim and commercial success. It attracted nearly 850,000 cinema-goers and received seven César awards, among which that of Best original screenplay and Best actress for Yolande Moreau. Martin Provost was also nominated in the category for Best director.

He reunited with Yolande Moreau three years later for *THE LONG FALLING* adapted from the eponymous novel by Keith Ridgway, Prix Femina (French literary prize) in 2001. In 2013, he brought to the screen the life of Violette Leduc, Simone de Beauvoir's contemporary and protégé, with Emmanuelle Devos and Sandrine Kiberlain. *VIOLETTE* was selected at the Toronto festival.

In 2017, Catherine Frot and Catherine Deneuve are brought to the screen together, for the first time, in Martin Provost's *THE MIDWIFE*.

Filmography

- 2017 **THE MIDWIFE**
Screenplay and direction
- 2013 **VIOLETTE**
Screenplay, with Marc Abdelnour and René de Ceccatty, and direction
- 2011 **THE LONG FALLING**
Screenplay, with Marc Abdelnour, and direction
- 2008 **SÉRAPHINE**
Screenplay, with Marc Abdelnour, and direction
2009 Cesar Awards - Best actress (Yolande Moreau), Best film, Best original screenplay, Best original music, Best cinematography, Best costume design, Best production design.

- 2003 **LE VENTRE DE JULIETTE**
Screenplay, with Philippe Lasry and Marc Abdelnour, and direction
- 1997 **TORTILLA Y CINEMA**
Screenplay and direction
- 1992 **COCON** (short film)
Screenplay and direction
- 1990 **J'AI PEUR DU NOIR** (short film)
Screenplay and direction

CAST

Claire
Béatrice
Paul
Simon
Rolande
Cécile, patient
Head of modern hospital department

Catherine Frot
Catherine Deneuve
Olivier Gourmet
Quentin Dolmaire
Mylène Demongeot
Pauline Etienne
Audrey Dana

CREW

Production
Screenplay
Cinematography
Production design
Costume design
Editing
Music
Casting
Sound
Sound editing
Mixing
1st assistant director
Stage director
Script
Still photographer
Production manager
Executive producer
Producer
Associate producer
Co-produced by

A coproduction

In association with

With the participation of

With the support of
International sales
Distribution

Martin Provost
Martin Provost
Yves Cape – AFC SBC
Thierry François
Bethsabée Dreyfus
Albertine Lastera
Grégoire Hetzel
Brigitte Moidon
Brigitte Taillandier
Ingrid Ralet
Emmanuel Croset
Juliette Maillard
Kim Nguyen
Céline Breuil-Japy
Michaël Crotto
Christophe Desenclos
Christine de Jekel
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