

LES FILMS DU WORSO PRÉSENTE

NATHALIE BAYE

LAURA SMET

IRIS BRY

Les Gardiennes

EIN FILM VON
XAVIER BEAUVOIS

Frankreich - 2017 - 132 Min. - Fd

AB 15. MÄRZ IM KINO

VERLEIH

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SYNOPSIS

1915: Die Männer sind an der Front und die Frauen müssen die Höfe irgendwie in Stand halten. Mutter Hortense schuffet unermüdlich. Weil sich ihre Tochter Solange nur schwer unterordnen lässt, stellt sie Francine ein, eine junge Frau vom Fürsorgeamt. Hortense und Francine respektieren und schätzen sich von Anfang an. Doch damit ihre Familie nicht auseinanderfällt, muss Hortense die junge Frau entlassen, was sie schliesslich teuer zu stehen kommt.



AN INTERVIEW WITH XAVIER BEAUVOIS

How did THE GUARDIANS project come about?

Sylvie Pialat had sent me the novel by Ernest Pérochon about five years ago. Les Gardiennes spent quite a while on a corner of my bedside table. I never opened it, but it was there and I often noticed it. Sylvie and I mentioned it each time we

we'd meet. I felt that she had an affectionate as well as a literary relationship with the book, that there was a whole story behind it... Then I finally read it, and found it very compelling. What I liked most about it is that its heroes are women.

Who was Ernest Pérochon?

Pérochon was a schoolteacher in the Deux-Sèvres. He was a soldier during the First World War on the front, but had a heart attack and was demobilized. In 1920, he won the Prix Goncourt for *Nêne*, another story about a farm and women. That made it possible for him to give up teaching and concentrate on writing. *Les Gardiennes* was published in 1924. Then, during the Occupation, Pérochon refused to collaborate with the Germans, which got him into trouble that he preferred to hide from his family. In 1942, he had a second heart attack and died at the age of 57.

In *THE GUARDIANS*, we again find subjects that you are fond of, to begin with, a community – a peasant one here – committed to ensure the survival of an ideal against hell and high water. But this here is an adaptation, for the first time in your career.

That is true... That did raise some difficulties. I liked Pérochon's book, but some things were not right for me. I thought there was too much misery, disease and death... I changed some of that. And then Pérochon uses many children. How do you do that in a movie, when you plan on telling a story that takes place over three or four years? It's impossible, unless you use a family with lots of kids to have their children play the different ages. That is the superiority of the novel over film. There are things that are easy to write, but that you cannot film. In short, I can say that



when appropriating the novel, I never once hesitated to betray it completely! I had to: that was the only way I could remain faithful to it. And I think that, ultimately, the essence of the novel comes through in the film.

You worked with a co-writer...

Yes, I worked with Frédérique Moreau. As I said, very many things changed between the book and screenplay. And again between the screenplay and film. All my films are like that. I see to it that the screenplay is as good as it can be. But that is not where I invest myself most. A screenplay is just a point of departure. Everything is again up for grabs

once I set foot on location. That is where the excitement begins, where the film comes to life.

The farm, run by Hortense (Nathalie Baye) in the absence of all its men, gone to war, is obviously very important. And it is your main location. How did you find it?

The farm is actually the main character in *THE GUARDIANS*. We looked at an unbelievable number of houses before deciding. And first of all, in what region should we shoot? I would have liked to film in the Pas de Calais, a region I love. But that was the site of the front, and the front is not the subject of *THE GUARDIANS*. On the contrary: the film is about the women behind the lines, taking care of

everything in the absence of their men, until they return home. I then thought of La Rochelle and the Limousin. That is where the Americans landed during the First World War. Things went rather quickly then: the region looks like nothing has changed in the last century! There are still many farms left in the bocage. Something that hardly exists any more anywhere else, since the phenomenon of land consolidation. The set did not have to be only historically correct, it also had to make me believe in it, to feel it. There are locations that look perfect on paper, but all you have to do is set foot there to realize that something is off... But here I immediately felt the right vibes: it was the right farm, the farm I wanted.

It was in pathetic shape when we discovered it. We arrived just in time to tell its owner: don't touch a thing, we'll restore everything for you! He thought we were going to do it "for show", but our production designer, Yann Mégard, told him that it is often cheaper to restore things "for real".

Shooting a film on more or less one single set doesn't bother you?

On the contrary. Working on a set like this gives you much the same configuration as a studio, but for real. When you shoot on a different set every day – think The Young Lieutenant, the bar, then the landlady's, then in court... – you must imperatively respect a precise schedule. You cannot move a thing, or almost.

Whereas with a film like THE GUARDIANS, or OF GODS AND MEN, I am entirely free to choose, depending on my desires and inspiration. What if today I don't feel like shooting the letter scene, and would rather shoot the cows being led out to drink? You do it. And what if I suddenly feel that the scene with the American soldiers, written to take place in the kitchen, would work better in the barn? No problem. And what if I suddenly feel like shooting a scene in the vestibule, simply because we've never yet used that location? Same thing. Working on just one location lets you constantly change things. I keep coming back to Truffaut's belief: the shoot is a critique of the screenplay, and the edit is a critique of the shoot. Things need to shift constantly. A film is living matter. When I'm shooting, I do and redo scenes. I think about them in my sleep. I rewrite them, I re-imagine them. If it is important for a film to inhabit a space, it also has to permanently inhabit you. There was also another reason for those modifications: my screenplay was too talky. I know country people. I live in the country. They're taciturn, they don't speak much. And so I ripped out entire pages of dialogue.

For this film you brought together an impressive cast, made up of famous actors, some of whom have already worked with you – Nathalie Baye, but also Olivier Rabourdin, Xavier Maly – and some newcomers. The revelation is incontestably Iris Bry, who plays Francine, Hortense's

hired help. THE GUARDIANS is Iris Bry's first role in the movies. Not only is she extraordinary, the audience only gradually understands that Francine is the main character. And even though THE GUARDIANS has certain points in common with OF GODS AND MEN, this is the first time that one of your characters escapes from the community, not to sacrifice herself, but to emancipate herself! How did you choose Iris Bry? And how did you work with her?

No doubt it's true that Francine only becomes important little by little... That has to do with what I was just saying: it was more the choice of the director than the screenwriter.

There are screenplay directors, shooting directors, and editing directors. I am a shooting director. If you believe that a movie has a soul, you have to wait for that soul to speak, for it to say things. And you have to be ready to listen and, consequently, adapt...

When I saw Iris, I realized that I was standing in front of a bomb. All I did was to give her the room she deserved. She was able to turn Francine into the embodiment of women at the beginning of the twentieth century...

To find her, we began to do casting sessions with unknowns, beginners... I was looking for someone to play a peasant in the 1910s. I did not want a smarmy little actress with a tattoo on her forearm... One day our casting director, Karen Hottois, ran into Iris, as luck would have it, at the door of a bookshop. She stopped her and asked her if she would come in for some tests. It was all a matter of a few seconds: a little

earlier, a little later, and the encounter would never have taken place, and Iris, that miracle, would have never been in the movies!

Who is she?

She is 23 years old, and she's just got her diploma in library science. Until now, she never ever thought she would be in the movies. For her screen test, we asked her to play the scene where she says that she has decided to keep her child, that the child will bear her name, that he will protect her... it lasts barely twelve seconds, and I was stunned. I called Sylvie Pialat. She immediately agreed with me.

Even though Iris was not planning on a career as an actress, I could tell that she very much wanted this role. Then she came to my place in Normandy. She was tense. I showed her Truffaut's *DAY FOR NIGHT*, to give her an idea of how a film set works. I told her that it was nothing like that, and that at the same time it was exactly like that! Iris was perfect as of her very first scene, when she arrives at the farm in a horse and buggy. She immediately found the way to sound like people of the time. She quickly understood how to behave with a crew, with others, at the canteen... Since it was the first time that I shot a movie digitally, it was also the first time that I got video feedback that corresponds to real lighting. There were

several times I had to tell Caroline Champetier: but she's all you see! And Caroline said that there was nothing she could do about it. Iris ate up all the light!

The other particularity of the film, with respect to actors, is that you used Nathalie Baye and her daughter, Laura Smet.

I think they were very happy not only to work together, but simply to spend some time together. This is the third time I've worked with Nathalie Baye, after *TO MATTHIEU* and *THE YOUNG LIEUTENANT*, but the first time with Laura Smet. The idea had been floating around for some time, but it took a while for it to take shape... Laura has the same capacity for concentration as her mother. She gets into a character very quickly. It's a delight to shoot with her. I call her Miss Finesse.

Opposite them, brothers, sons... how did you find the Sandrail family, and especially the actor who plays Henri, Hortense's brother, whose weathered hands provide the film with one of its most overwhelming shots?

I was looking for someone older to play Hortense's father. Then I met Gilbert Bonneau. I liked him so much that I decided to change the character from Hortense's father into her brother. In all his life, Gilbert has hardly ever traveled more than 25 kilometers from his farm. He once went to Paris for a farmers' demonstration. The second time was for



insurance purposes related to our film!

As for Cyril Descours, Nicolas Giraud and Olivier Rabourdin, one of the novel's flaws is that there are no returns home on leave, and I was determined to have one. So their characters were drawn up very quickly. Their own challenge was to immediately find a place in this tangle of women that had developed!

You have always been interested in war films. But this is something different: here you show the background, with only a few spurts of warfare, most often in dreams...

I have always felt that *THE UMBRELLAS OF CHERBOURG* is a genuine war film: not showing the war itself, but its effect on those who do not participate directly. I also wanted to show some corpses. When we filmed Georges' dream, in which he finally realizes that he is fighting against himself, I asked Caroline Champetier to shoot some images of corpses on the ground. And that is how Marie-Julie Maille – my editor, who is also my wife – and I decided to open the film. The scene is silent, there is something gentle about it, but at the same time it says what it has to say very clearly. That is one of Jean Douchet's lessons: the subject of a movie should appear in its very first frames.

Your last film, *THE PRICE OF FAME*, was about two stooges, two deadbeats... This one is devoted to work, and not the easiest kind of work either: working the soil.

Relations with the earth are an essential part of your cinema – we only need to think of the slow exhumation of Charlie Chaplin's coffin in *THE PRICE*– but this is the first time you talk about it so directly.

My grandfather was a railway worker. He had his vegetable patch, his pig and his chickens. As for my father, he wanted to become a schoolteacher. In the end, he became a pharmaceutical assistant, as I depicted him in *North*. The same routine every day, the same ride to work and back, the same hours, the same gestures, day after day... a life of numbing boredom that my family tried to pass off as being upwardly mobile. My grandfather, in comparison, was considered a buffoon, with his pig and chickens... In a certain way, I was forbidden to respect him, forbidden to love him. I wanted to make this film to pay homage to him... if not to him directly, to that class of peasants and their own particular nobility. It took me time to see my grandfather differently. But I do remember that for *North* we shot a few scenes at his place, and that Bernard Verley said to me: "Your grandfather is a prince".

How were you able to reconstitute authentic gestures that have practically disappeared today, plowing, sowing...? The shots of mother and daughter sowing, one behind the other, are magnificent.

We did research, we worked with historians... Nathalie Baye and Laura Smet did an internship in

the country to learn. But they weren't supposed to learn too much, because they are meant to be performing some of those chores for the first time.

When the men return, Hortense says to her daughter, who complains about seeing them argue, that she prefers that to war. And she adds: "They're back to being as they were". One might believe that she's happy to see that things are back to normal, but on the other hand, it's a terrible line. Nothing has changed, they are each back in their former places, and women's lot has not evolved...

Exactly. That may be the most important line in the film. And it is in fact very harsh. But the peasant's world is like that, harsh. Women did everything during the war. They ran trains, they worked the factories, they fed the country... Then the men came home and everything went back to the way it was... Nevertheless, the damage has been done...

***THE GUARDIANS* is a kind of western... Which films inspired you?**

Whatever the project, people are always advising me to see many films, or to see them again. I generally prefer not to. I want to remain free and able to follow my own instincts. In this case, it's true, I did think a lot about westerns. *THE GUARDIANS* is a western, it's just that instead of a ranch, we have a farm. And there aren't any cowboys, just cowgirls.

I also looked at a lot of paintings... by Van Gogh, for example, from the period when he was still very much influenced by Millet. but I wanted to avoid making a film that was too overtly pictorial. You may spot some references, but not that many.

Why did you decide on digital cinematography?

Generally speaking, I'm not the type to experiment with new technologies. I prefer to concentrate on the film. I had the impression, however, that things were now technologically settled enough for me to try my hand at it in turn. That allowed me, for the first time, to shoot two takes one after the other without any breaks. With film, there is always some little thing that forces you to start all over again, the clapperboard, etc. Digitally, you can shoot as long as you like beyond the time of the take, and that can provide some very stunning results. Francine's smile at the camera at the very end of the film is nothing more than Iris' smile at the crew at the end of the shoot. I wouldn't have been able to catch that on film.

After THE PRICE OF FAME, THE GUARDIANS is your second collaboration with Michel Legrand.

For me it was an extraordinary stroke of luck to be able to work with Michel, who has also become a friend ... For this film, I waited to see him to decide if we needed any music. Very soon, it struck me that the



character of Francine could be supported by music. We searched for a theme for her, and especially for the love scene at the dolmen.

You seem pleased with your experience with THE GUARDIANS, and especially with your collaboration with Sylvie Pialat.

On this film, I had my own Guardians. Sylvie is one of them. Each time Sylvie came to the edit, her observations helped me to progress, to bounce back and get back

to work. She rarely intervened on the shoot, but each time she did, she was right. At the end, we were looking for a way to eliminate one day of shooting for budgetary reasons. I didn't know that Iris sang... When I found out, I wanted to end the film with a song, sung by her. And so I asked for an additional day for the ball. Sylvie immediately agreed. We found the sets, the costumes, the orchestra ... All my assistants appear onscreen. The movie begins with corpses, so it had to end on a little bit of joy.

INTERVIEW BY EMMANUEL BURDEAU.



CAST

HORTENSE Nathalie BAYE
SOLANGE Laura SMET
FRANCINE Iris BRY
GEORGES Cyril DESCOURS

HENRI Gilbert BONNEAU
CLOVIS Olivier RABOURDIN
CONSTANT Nicolas GIRAUD
MARGUERITE Mathilde VISEUX-ELY

CREW

Directed by Xavier BEAUVOIS
Screenplay Xavier BEAUVOIS
Frédérique MOREAU
and Marie-Julie MAILLE
Adapted from the eponymous novel by d'Ernest PEROCHON

Original music Michel LEGRAND

Producers Sylvie PIALAT
Benoît QUAINON

Coproducers Pauline GYGAX, Max KARLI
et Michel MERKT
Romain LE GRAND et Vivien ASLANIAN

Associate producers Gilles SITBON
Jonathan BLUMENTAL

Director of Photography Caroline CHAMPETIER (A.F.C.)
Assistant director Alain ARTUR
Production designer Yann MEGARD
Sound Christophe GIOVANONNI
Loïc PRIAN
Damien BOITEL
and Éric BONNARD

Costumes Anaïs ROMAND
Editor Marie-Julie MAILLE
Casting Karen HOTTOIS (A.R.D.A.)
Continuity Agathe GRAU
Location manager David LEMENAN (A.F.R.)
Production manager Patrice MARCHAND
Post-production manager Toufik AYADI

Coproduced by Les films du Worso - Rita Productions - Pathé -
Orange Studio - France 3 Cinéma - KNM
- Versus production - RTS Radio Télévision
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Government, Inver Tax Shelter, Cinéforum
and the Loterie Romande