

LAETITIA DOSCH SERGEI POLUNIN

# PASSION SIMPLE

A FILM BY DANIELLE ARBID



FESTIVAL DE CANNES  
OFFICIAL SELECTION  
2020



SSIFF  
OFFICIAL SELECTION

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film festival



## SYNOPSIS

“Since last September I have done nothing but wait for a man : for him to call me and come to my place... Everything about him was so precious to me, his eyes, his mouth, his penis, his childhood memories, his voice...”



## INTERVIEW WITH **DIRECTOR DANIELLE ARBID**

### ***Do you remember the first time you read Annie Ernaux's « Passion simple »?***

I kept this book in my pocket for a long time. I felt like it belonged to me, and I offered copies to all the people I knew who had just fallen in love. It established a perfect, precise and wonderful picture of passionate love.

### ***Therefore, you tackled the book head-on, imagined intimate scenes, gave a voice to the silent Russian man and a face to the woman who keeps waiting?***

Yes. I wanted to tell a story about how lucky you are when you fall in love. About the emotional rollercoaster it actually is. The absolute loss of control when you meet someone, when you idealize that person. I wanted to find again the feeling I had when I read the book, the radiant memory of it...

I just adapted the story to our time a bit, because it is timeless. I wanted the protagonist to wait for her lover anywhere, not only at home, thanks to today's new technologies, to cell phones. So that she can wait for him anywhere in the world, even though the world is shrinking around her because all she ever does is wait for him.

**Yet she is always active and wanting, even if she submits herself to that man's desire. What was your view of this relationship?**

The character of H el ene seems to be astonished by this state of siege, at once sweet and insidious. Pure dopamine. A drug, really. Ultimately, she is a woman who submits herself out of love. But it is her decision. This is how I see the story of *Passion Simple*: from a voluntary, not a victim's viewpoint.

**How did you address the intimate scenes?**

I wanted to make a sexual film. To me, filming bodies is a way to glamorize actors. I need to make them look stunning. I write sex scenes as precisely as possible, so that the actors know what to expect on set. I also choose actors who are comfortable with their own bodies, I don't want to steal from them something that they are not ready to give. These decisions are taken way before the shooting. They put their trust in me and I try to give it back through images... In the film, the evolution of their passion follows that of the choreography of their bodies.

**In order to do that, you needed actors who were capable of experiencing this sexual passion before your camera, like Laetitia Dosch and Russian dancer Sergei Polunin?**

Yes, I needed Laetitia and Sergei to be willing to completely go with the flow. Laetitia is an unfettered, free-spirited, smart actress. I enjoyed transforming her, having her go blonde, making her look somehow like Annie Ernaux, but also like Catherine Deneuve when she made *La Chamade* (Heartbeat), Gena Rowlands or Bunuel's heroines. I envisioned her as a *femme fatale*. A mature, self-assured woman.

As for Sergei, I think that fate was responsible for our meeting, somehow. I hadn't found a Russian actor and was about to hire a German one. Then I thought about a photo of Sergei that I had cut out of the cover of a British magazine a long time ago. When I tried to meet him, my casting director in Russia told me: "But he is God, I cannot reach him!" The ultimate star, who at the peak of his career, when he was twenty, chose to quit the London Royal Ballet to lose himself... Working with Sergei helped me a lot to direct the fantasy that the character of A. represents, because Sergei is a free man, with a complex and elusive personality. He is the objectified man in the film.

**In the post #MeToo era, aren't you worried that the film might be misinterpreted?**

I was raised in an oriental, Lebanese society, with all its upsides and downsides. I learnt to drive when I was twelve, I went to nightclubs at an early age too. I was harassed by several older men, my parents were not around, there was a civil war going on. I have experienced sex and violence. And like almost every woman, I am still bearing the scars. I am instinctively an independent woman.

But the ultimate power of the book is that it doesn't try to explain things. Passion probably involves a will to submit yourself to the other person, either a man or a woman, and to put your whole self into it. Moral judgement has nothing to do with it, as Annie Ernaux said when her book was released, which attracted me even more, given that she calls herself a feminist. I respected this standpoint when I wrote the script.

But of course, I love challenges. I'd rather take a risk than meet general approval. The film could be criticized. The book was when it first appeared. We'll see. But I won't explain to anyone how to avoid the risks of passionate love.

**Has Annie Ernaux watched your film?**

She has, and I was moved and relieved when she told me: "*I was submerged by the scenes, I was completely in the film*". I couldn't have wished for a nicer compliment, that she forgot herself and felt like she was "*in the film*", even though the book is so closely linked to her own life.



## INTERVIEW WITH LAETITIA DOSCH

### ***Had you read *Passion Simple* before *Danielle Arbid* offered you the part?***

I had read all of Annie Ernaux's books, and this one had left a lasting impression on me. I thought it was really brave to explore so meticulously female desire, passion, that place where there is freedom but at the same time a total dependence on the other person. I remember that reading it had caused me both pain and envy. It was beautiful and scary. Danielle and I really bonded over this book. I enjoyed the fact that she wanted to film me like a glamorous, sophisticated object. I had been waiting for someone to look at me this way.

### ***To be an object of desire, to desire, to wait, to fantasise, isn't it the antithesis of an independent woman?***

I really enjoyed playing and defending this woman who discovers her body, the pleasure to dress up, whose time is only hers through the act of waiting. It is a complex vision of woman: true, my character is not a model of independence, because she is completely addicted to this man. And she is a bright woman, on top of that, who raises her son alone, who teaches literature at the Sorbonne... and yet she says that for a whole year, the only thing that mattered to her was this man. But I understand where it's coming from. I don't judge her. I find the situation interesting because it is vertiginous. Beyond morality, neither black nor white...

***Do you think that the film will spark off a debate around the issue of feminism?***

With today's #MeToo climate, of course, Danielle, Annie Ernaux and I have thought a lot about it. But I think it is a precious thing that there are so many different visions of woman in films, that some might arouse controversy, or bring out tensions. In my opinion, the worse thing would be to have women who are all similar, to have everybody agreeing, it would mean that we had left a norm only to confine ourselves to another. I would hate to see only models of flawless independent women.

***Is it scary or stimulating to play Annie Ernaux on screen?***

It inspires you with a lot of courage. Her words make you want to be honest without being ashamed. They give you the energy to be precise, sincere, not sappy, just like her writing. You have to dig really deep into your own neuroses to play Annie Ernaux to the full extent. And when these neuroses are looked at by a filmmaker who infuses passion with some radiant energy, then it is pure bliss.



## BIOGRAPHY DANIELLE ARBID

Born in Beirut, Danielle Arbid has directed films since 1997. Interested in different forms of storytelling, she alternates fiction films, first-person documentaries and essays. Selected by numerous festivals in France and around the world, her films have received many awards, including the Silver Leopard Video at Locarno Festival and the Albert London Prize for the documentary *Alone with war* in 2001, the Golden Leopard for the *Conversation de salon 1-2-3* essay serie in 2004 and the Villa Médicis Hors les Murs Award for *Aux frontières* the same year. Her first two fiction feature films, *In the battlefields* and *A lost man*, were selected at Directors' Fortnight in Cannes 2004 and 2007. The third one, *Parisiennne*, was presented at Toronto Film Festival and won the Lumière Academy Award of the foreign press in France in 2016. *Passion Simple* is her fourth fiction feature film.



## CAST

**Hélène** Laetitia Dosch  
**Alexandre** Sergei Polunin  
**Paul** Lou-Teymour Thion  
**Anita** Caroline Ducey  
**With the participation of**  
Grégoire Colin & Slimane Dazi

## CREW

**Director** Danielle Arbid  
**Script** Danielle Arbid

*Based on "PASSION SIMPLE" by Annie Ernaux  
(© Gallimard, 1992)*

**Image** Pascale Granel  
**Art Direction** Charlotte de Cadeville  
**Editing** Thomas Marchand  
**Assistant Director** Camille Fleury  
**Production Manager** Damien Saussol, Diane Weber  
**Sound Engineering** Paul Maernoudt  
**Sound Editing** Marc Bastien  
**Sound Mixing** Thomas Gauder  
**Costumes** Oriol Nogues  
**Co-Producer** Jacques-Henri Bronckart  
**Producers** David Thion & Philippe Martin

**FRANCE, BELGIUM | 2020 | 1H39 | DCP**  
**FRENCH, ENGLISH | 5.1 | 1.85 | COLOR**

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