

MILLE ET UNE PRODUCTIONS and METAFILMS present

SAVAGE STATE

A FILM BY DAVID PERRAULT



INTERNATIONAL
FILM FESTIVAL
ROTTERDAM

OFFICIAL SELECTION

SYNOPSIS



The American Civil War breaks out... A family of French colonists, settled in Missouri, decides to go back to France. Edmond, Madeleine, and their three daughters have to cross the whole country to reach New-York. They are led by the mysterious and dangerous mercenary, Victor.

INTERVIEW WITH DAVID PERRAULT

What was the starting point of L'Etat sauvage ?

First, I wanted to direct a group of women in an enclosed space, and then suddenly knock down all the walls and propel them out into wide-open spaces... So that we could watch them run away from a constraining standard, in some wide emancipatory move.

But the project also stems from this lifelong dream of mine of making a western film. When I was writing and preparing for the film, I forbade myself to watch a single one of these. Maybe I was naïve, but I wanted to start afresh, in a way, not to reproduce the stereotypical features of the genre, but rather to make it my own, with my own sensitivity and my current concerns.

Right from the start, your characters - French settlers during the American Civil War - give the western genre a particular flavour.

Westerns often deal with the transition from the wild to civilization. Here, it is the opposite. And the characters are not driven by the American Dream, but rather by their dream to go back to Europe.

With its fantasy and gothic feel, the film is also very European. When the stagecoach rides in the fog at the beginning, it looks more like a film by Mario Bava than like an American western. Incidentally, Italian cinema, from Visconti to Dario Argento, really inspired me, especially with its sensual use of costumes, colours and light. American cinema is sharper, straighter, more strictly narrative. My approach was more sensual, the story goes through twists and turns, and the film through various moods.

Within this American mythology, you make space for intimist scenes, with clearly a French feel to them...

This cross-cutting nature was part of the whole project. Intimist, gentle sequences are intertwined with more thundering ones. It might be experienced as a rupture in tone, but to me, it is firstly a form of emotional continuity.

Mixing genres is only interesting to me if the different tones echo one another.

The film is completely built around Esther's point of view...

Esther's strength comes from her relationship to fiction and imagination. When she wakes up on the beach at the end of the film, it is almost as if she had dreamed all this adventure, as if the whole film was just a projection of her character, who is driven by a longing for romance and escape. It is clear from the start that her environment makes her uncomfortable. She is always getting out of a room, out of a scene, or reading. She feels stifled. It is as if her thirst for freedom was dragging everybody out...

The originality of the film lies in the way it shows a young woman with both romantic and feminist aspirations.

I really like Romanticism - Esther gets some of her strength from reading again and again "The Lily of the Valley" by Balzac - but I also know that it hides an illusion. There is a double movement in Esther: her romanticism is liberating, because it makes her want to escape, yet at the same time, it makes her fall into a trap... Victor is above all a fantasy, onto which she projects her own longing for adventure, and not much happens between them, after all. Their relationship is all about desire, it is not a love story, and as long as Esther remains obsessed with Victor, she won't be able to emancipate herself completely. Hence her "love exorcism" with Layla at the end of the film.

Your protagonists go back to the state of nature, but on the contrary, Victor, the man who escorts them, wants to get civilised.

To me, Victor epitomises the classic western genre. He is a mercenary who realises that his days are numbered, because the world he belongs to is about to collapse. The idea of a world coming to an end is probably the subject that interests me the most. The figure of the lonesome

hero that Victor embodies is obsolete. It is an image from ancient times, an illusion. And Esther will see his true colours, eventually.

You often represent Bettie and her gang in a fantastical way.

Indeed, Bettie is a kind of fantastical twin to Esther. She has no superego, she lives passionately and excessively all the time, especially in her relationship with Victor, from whom she cannot seem to free herself. She lives among a group of men, yet I did not want to make them look like individuals by showing their faces. Together they make up a somewhat shapeless, ghostly mass, whom nobody can touch but Bettie. In the final fight, the other girls never make contact with them, they are never in the same frame. These men are a kind of living nightmare over which they have no hold.

Layla, the black housemaid, is at once very much into tradition and more emancipated than any other female character. Such a female figure is even more striking at the time of the American Civil War...

Layla is a role model for Esther. When the family arrives at the shelter, she stops serving them food... And just like that, all the old systems collapse. With that strong gesture, she asserts her freedom. It prompts Esther to emancipate herself as well.

Whether in the confined spaces of a house or in wide-open spaces, your camera is constantly moving.

As a director, I went for a really choreographed feel, with a sense of intoxication and pervasive tension. When I shoot a film, I already have most of the shots in mind, but I also give much freedom to the actors. I don't want to confine them to an overcalculated thing. I watch how they move on set, I value their input, I move with them and that movement influences how I direct the scene. I really believe in the shooting process, and I don't like to alter the image in postproduction. Everything happens on set: the work on colours, light, fire... This way, the actors can dive right into the atmosphere of the scene, and it sets the tone for their performance.

How did the shooting go?

For me it was tough, because I was born and raised in a city, and nature tends to freak me out! But it was important to me to shoot on location, because I really believe that a film also says a lot about the shooting process, and I thought that my film would become something else once we went on an adventure like the family. So much so that, even though we had planned to do all the location shooting first, to avoid filming in the depths of winter, I couldn't imagine not filming chronologically. We shot in Canada, when it was 37°C below zero. Each shot became a challenge. Especially since horses and firearms were involved. But when you are cold and slightly scared, away from civilization, it translates on screen, you can see it in the actors' faces, in their acting, their skin, their tired bodies...

I like this kind of challenges. It makes the journey organic, and it gets everyone out of their comfort zones. You have to bounce back, to reinvent yourself constantly. It also generates solidarity between the crew and the cast. Nature doesn't care about directing, it is by definition uncontrollable, full of good and bad surprises. The film was transformed by it. And it is for the best, I didn't want our journey to look like some package tour.

And what about the film's title?

I like its double meaning: the state, as a territory, and in a more personal way as well. *L'Etat sauvage* is an intimist adventure film, it is more an inner journey than a traditional adventure movie.

After the final fight in darkness and fire, the film ends on a beach, at daybreak...

I am obsessed with fire, I always feel like a story should end in some sort of blaze, so that there can't be a film anymore once it is over. But here, waking up on a beach feels like opening up to something new: the men from the ancient world have all been swept away, one by one. Only the women are left, and now they are free, they don't have to wait for Prince Charming any more. It is like a new horizon.



DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

David PERRAULT (1976, France) studied Screenwriting at la Fémis in Paris. His first short film, *Sophia*, was released in 2006. In 2013, his first feature film, *Nos héros sont morts ce soir*, was nominated for the Critics' Week Grand Prize and the Caméra d'Or at Cannes Film Festival. The film won the Audience Award at the 2013 Oldenburg Film Festival. *L'état sauvage*, his second feature, premiered at Rotterdam International Film Festival.

CAST

Alice ISAAZ
Kevin JANSSENS
Déborah FRANÇOIS
Bruno TODESCHINI
Constance DOLLÉ
Armelle ABIBOU
Maryne BERTIEAUX
Kate MORAN

CREW

Direction David Perrault
Screenplay David Perrault
Editing Maxime Pozzi-Garcia
Photography Christophe Duchange
Sound Régis Boussin
Vincent Mauduit
Christophe Leroy
Produced by Farès Ladjimi & Sylvain Corbeil
A production Mille et une Productions
In Coproduction with Metafilms inc.

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