

WONDER FILMS
presents



Film Francophone
D'ANGOULÊME
SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE 2020

I have been Waiting for you

a film by
STÉPHANIE PILLONCA

Synopsis

« They are couples like no others: couples who cannot bear children in a biological way and decide to go through adoption. From this decision and the actual meeting with the child, we'll experience with them the sufferings, doubts, hopes and finally the joys of this lifechanging journey. With throughout the film, this underlying question: What makes a family? How does this unfailing bond between a child and his/her parent form? »

Stéphanie Pillonca





Interview with *Stéphanie Pillonca*

Tell us about the birth of your new project, C'est toi que j'attendais.

It all started when I met Astrid de Lauzanne, who told me about her adoption journey, and her will to make a film about it. I thought it was a great idea, and one that resonated with me, because adoption has long been an abiding theme in my life. When I became a mother, eighteen years ago, many friends around me, including a dear friend of mine, became mothers through adoption. So, it was a topic I was already familiar with. I was really touched when my friend told me about the visit a social worker had paid to her home; I heard many stories about the assessment process, adoption panels, etc. And I was there to see the adopted children grow up.

Is adoption still a widespread phenomenon in France?

Today, there are far fewer adoptions than during the 1970s or 1980s, simply because there are fewer and fewer children to be adopted - many foreign countries have changed their regulations and less and less children are born to anonymous mothers. At the same time, assisted reproductive technologies (ART) are more widespread, and of course I think they should benefit all women. But adoption remains a beautiful process, based on generosity and sharing, and the only solution for parents when ART treatments failed. I only wish it was not such a long and difficult process.

Why did you choose to intertwine four personal journeys - those of two adopting couples, a woman who gave birth anonymously and a man born to an anonymous mother?

I could not deal with such a sensitive topic in a unilateral way. The woman who gave birth anonymously, the boy who is looking for his mother, and the couple who wants to adopt a child are all equally moving and fascinating to me. I wanted to incorporate all these points of view, in order to do justice to this issue and to show all its aspects.

The credits do not say "a film by..." but "an investigation by..."

Before it was written and shot, the film was indeed an investigation, involving a serious amount of research. I explored many leads to try and find my protagonists, especially on social media. And I travelled all over France to meet prospective adopters, young girls who had given birth anonymously, people born to anonymous mothers... I met about 400 individuals beforehand in order to make this film.

Among them, how did you select the protagonists of the four storylines?

Pain is a common feeling among those who want to know more about their origins, or those who are in the process of adopting, but I searched for people who were composed and who could handle the pain within the framework of a documentary. When you burst into someone's life with a camera, even if you are only a three-people crew, the level of exposure may be quite unsettling. My protagonists were made vulnerable by these highly sensitive issues, so I was really careful not to disrupt their lives even further.

How did you find Sylvian, who is looking for his anonymous birth mother?

All the adoptees who look for their biological families use social networks. It is a major research field, which sometimes leads to spectacular reunions. So, I just typed #anonymous birth on my computer, and then I met about a hundred people, including Sylvian. The courage, modesty, dignity and sensibility he showed just blew me away. I was deeply moved by his search and bids for help on the internet, like so many bottles at sea. His story is so incredible - his mother travelled 500 kilometres on her own in 1971 to give birth anonymously in Chartres, then she stayed at the maternity ward for ten days, because she could not bear leaving her baby behind... What or who was this young woman hiding from? I wanted to help Sylvian learn more about it. And he was willing to talk about anything, including his fear of abandonment, or his inability to be alone. A mixed-race man torn between two worlds, the father of two teenage girls, Sylvian is also an athlete. I filmed him during the Marseille-Cassis marathon, even though I had not secured financing yet! He is the first protagonist I chose.



And what about Alexandra, the English woman who gave birth anonymously as a teenager, thirty years ago?

I met many “secret mothers”, but it was hard finding one who could share her story without impacting her life and immediate environment, without putting herself in danger psychologically. And then, the providential person came to me. It is often the case when you make documentaries, things happen miraculously - a friend of mine told me about a friend of hers who had a secret... It was Alexandra. With Alexandra, I liked the language barrier, which added a small filter between her and me, between her and us, between her and the story she was about to share. Travelling across the Channel to meet her made me feel like I was protecting her a little, that I was not exposing her secret callously. There was England between us, and her maturity. Alexandra is not an open wound, she shares her pain, but always with restraint. It was a godsend for the film.

And the two couples who are trying to adopt?

Again, I posted many messages on social media, I went all over France, organised many meetings around snacks, tea or drinks with couples who wanted to adopt. The Espace Paris Adoption agreed to relay an e-mail I had written to explain that I was preparing a film about adoption and that I wanted to document the journey of a couple who was currently

going through the adoption approval process – like Enora and Gilles – or a couple whose request had been approved and who was now waiting for a child – like Lucile and Franck. When I met Franck and Lucile, I thought that their relationship had been strengthened by the hardships they had gone through. Being filmed like that requires cohesion, and I felt that they were both rock solid, open and receptive.

As for Gilles and Enora, I liked the multifaceted nature of their relationship - a big guy from Marseille with overseas origins, and a woman from Brittany, who had been “ousted” by her ex-boyfriend because she could not bear children. I liked the idea that you can start over at 35, and that this woman still had motherhood to look forward to! It was also a plus that Enora was at first reluctant to take part in the film. I met many couples who seemed to be eager to be filmed, so that they could demonstrate how perfect adopters they were and get their request granted. It had nothing to do with the spirit of the film, nor with Enora, who has a strong and genuine personality. I met 200 couples, and half of them agreed to take part in the film. I had to choose two of them, without knowing if the first would get the approval, or if the second would be called to meet a baby... I did not know either if Alexandra would find her son. Nor Sylvian his mother... I prepared for potentially happy, bountiful and exciting outcomes, but I had no control over how things would turn out, nobody had.





You are obviously very close to all your characters, yet you also know how to stand back and give them space, so that you do not rob them of their emotions

In a documentary feature like this one, you do not have to gather as much information as you can, as fast as you can and at all costs. It is more serene - I meet with people, we appraise each other and take the time to get to know each other. I only start shooting when they are ready. I do not want to extort or collect their words, I want them to open up as they would with a friend or a member of their family – freely and in all good conscience. I need the experience to be as pleasant for them as it is for me. With such a fraternal and kindly approach, when all you want is to share moments and thoughts that matter, that are meaningful and valuable in your lives, then films become great love stories. It is not about information anymore, it is a heart-to-heart.

You never appear on screen, and we do not hear you ask questions.

I remain hidden in the shadows. I work with a small seasoned crew, with whom I made my other films. We are a tightly knit trio, we do not need words to understand each other, and we do our utmost not to be too intrusive. This way the participants can get used to having us around, even when they reveal personal things or go through some major event.

You do not make off-screen comments either...

I only keep sequences that move me. So, there is already a first filter in what I film. Besides, I do not want to force information upon the viewers, or to comment on the situation so that I may control their emotions.

The sea, the trees, the roots... Nature also plays a part in the film.

The characters' journeys are so emotionally-charged that these small breaks allow us to breathe a little. The solidity of the trees, trunks and sprawling roots... It felt only natural in a film that basically deals with people's roots! And when Sylvian visits his mother's grave, it seems like the cypresses swaying in the wind are there to support him, that they are trying to lull him and wail with him.

Lucile and Franck are overjoyed to have a child, yet you also plant seeds of doubts and angst, for instance when Lucile understands that Rosalie will have access to her birth mother's letter and identity whenever she wants...

You can feel Lucile's inner turmoil then. She takes out her notebook and pen, asks them to repeat the question, her facial expression changes. She knew it all along, they were told a thousand times in various meetings. Yet, had she really taken in that their daughter, even as a minor, would have access to this letter, that this moment would come, that questions were bound to arise? This is also part of being a parent, all the more so with this kind of parenthood - you do not spend the rest of your life with a cute babbling baby. Your child is a person who will grow up, meet other people, face some crises, experience the unexpected in life. In my opinion, this is the moment Lucile truly becomes a mother.

You filmed Lucile and Franck's baby daughter before they even met her.

That's right. I saw the baby before they did. They knew about it, they had given me permission to do so, but I didn't tell them anything about this period of time, they discovered it when they first saw the film. Adoptions follow a strict protocol. You do not want to mess with it, because it has been careful thought out by social services - there are meetings with the childminder, the childcare worker, the psychologist... These ten days of wait and discovery are like a fast-track pregnancy. So, I treaded really carefully lest I would become a glitch jeopardizing the whole process. But I was glad to film Rosalie in her life "before", with Rachel, the nursery nurse who gave the child her first bath, who was the first to take care of her. We also see that letting the child go is hardly inconsequential for Rachel.

How did you orchestrate the shooting?

We shot from September to June, three or four days a month, following one character or another, according to their schedules. We filmed Gilles and Enora's holidays for instance, or Enora's visit to her father, and their meetings with social workers. As to Lucile and Franck, we were lucky enough to be there when they were suddenly given a baby, and to document the whole protocol... We made ourselves completely available, all the time, to everyone.



Why did you choose to open the film with a birth scene?

Birth is the very essence of the film. It is the common thread between all these journeys, the reason why all the protagonists take action, get passionate or suffer agonies.

As far as editing is concerned, how did you intertwine these four journeys?

First, I edited each story in its continuity, and then I tried to find the right balance and to instil suspense, a bit like in a thriller - when shall we leave one path to keep the dramatic tension high, and move on to another, to which we are glad to go back, to discover what has happened to the characters? I wanted to edit the film so that we cannot wait to get back to each family. It was also important that the journeys echoed one another. In a way, Alexandra answers Sylvian's questions when she says that she thinks about her son every single day. Finally, I had to decide when to end the film - with one life ending, with life going on, with a reunion, with a man still searching, or a baby coming home?

And how did Aurélie Saada, from the band Brigitte, joined the project?

I worked with my usual composer, Martin Balsan. But when Enora told me that in order to make Gilles understand how she felt, she had sent him the song "Je veux un enfant" [I want a child] by Brigitte, my producer and I asked Aurélie Saada if she could compose songs for specific moments in the film and for each protagonist. Aurélie is a highly feminine poet, with a strong maternal streak and a sacred relationship to life. She wrote the lyrics herself, inspired by how she felt about these people. I did not want to interfere with her creation, and she worked on her own, based on what I had told her, long before she even saw the footage. She really took part in the making of the film.

"Love is the answer". This tag that you filmed during a walk with Lucile and Franck could sum up C'est toi que j'attendais, as the film shows couples who keep loving each other through hard times...

I really wanted to show how human beings give their best when it comes to this thirst for parenthood, this urgent need to create a family unit, to give their lives meaning by protecting and raising a child, by passing on what their own parents gave them, by sharing things with a child and carrying on a lineage... Is this drive - which is shared by all couples, whether adoptive or not - a legacy, a result of education, or a profound urge deeply rooted in all of us? Obviously, it is put to the test more sorely in adoptive couples, who have to fight when others don't... Many women say, and I fully agree with them, that motherhood is not an accomplishment, yet we are all driven by the will to belong to the world, and to find out how we got there - to know where we come from so that we know who we are.

Did making this film change your perspective on anonymous birth and adoption?

A woman has the absolute right to give birth anonymously. I met about a hundred "secret mothers" to make the film, and none of them adamantly said that she will never want to know what happened to her child, that she will never want to be found, that the secret must be kept at all costs. Surely, some might think so, but I never met any. These women just felt the need to entrust their children to families that could take better care of them physically, psychologically and economically at the time. France is behind the times on the

issue of the access to the origins of children born to anonymous mothers... DNA tests are not allowed; some people have even been given fake birthplaces. It is a shame to confuse and mislead people, as was the case for Sylvian. Fortunately, old laws are changing, many intellectuals or philosophers are now calling for the end of secrecy. The child or the adult who is searching for his or her biological mother is rarely aggressive or demanding. They just want to know. In every person born to an anonymous mother that I met beats the heart of a child who loves his or her parents, no matter what.

Interview by Claire Vassé

Stéphanie Pillonca

After working as a journalist and television hostess, Stéphanie Pillonca devoted herself to writing and directing, particularly creative documentaries related to disability and difference for Arte. She also directed "The Poisoning Angel" with Déborah François and Benjamin Biolay. "I have been waiting for you" is her second feature film.

Crew

An investigation by
Stéphanie PILLONCA

With
Inès KALFSBEEK, Stéphane MUNKA, Fabrice BRAULT

Script
Stéphanie PILLONCA, Astrid de LAUZANNE

First assistant director
Gérard BONNET

D.O.P.
Hugues POULAIN with Matthieu-David COURNOT,
Jacques BALLARD, Arthur LAUTERS

Sound operator
Gautier ISERN with Mariette MATHIEU-GOUDIER,
Olivier PELLETIER, Dorian RACINE

Editing
Fabien BOUILLAUD

Color grading
Olivier COHEN

Sound editor
Gautier ISERN

Mixer
Dominique GABORIEAU

Original songs
Aurélié SAADA

Original Music
Martin BALSAN

Producers
Nathanael LA COMBE, Mathilde PETIT

Associate Producer
Edouard de VESINNE

With the participation of
PYRAMIDE and OCS

In partnership with
LA FAMILLE ADOPTIVE FRANÇAISE

In association with
PALATINE ETOILE 16 and SG IMAGE 2017

With the support of
LA PROCIREP

Distribution
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International Sales
PYRAMIDE INTERNATONAL



France | 2020 | 1h27 | DCP | 5.1 | Scope | Color



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