

FRÉDÉRIC BRILLION AND GILLES LEGRAND
PRESENT

SARA
GIRAUDEAU

BENJAMIN
LAVERNHE
OF THE COMÉDIE FRANÇAISE

the

DAMIEN
BONNARD

JUDITH
CHEMLA

sixth
child

A FILM BY
LÉOPOLD LEGRAND

LEOPOLD LEGRAND FILMS / 2018 / 100% COMÉDIE FRANÇAISE

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INTERNATIONAL SALES

PYRAMIDE INTERNATIONAL

32 rue de l'Echiquier, 75010 Paris

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Franck is a scrap dealer who lives with Mériem in the outskirts of Paris. They have five children, a sixth on the way, and serious money problems. Julien and Anna are lawyers and can't have children. This is the story of an unthinkable arrangement.



How did you come across Alain Jaspard's novel, *Pleurer des rivières*, and why were you moved by this story about a woman's yearning need to become a mother?

I lost my mother when I was six years old, and my father remarried a woman who legally adopted me. She became my second mother. So, I grew up with a double mother figure. The story of these two women brought together by the same child intrigued me. When I finished the novel, I was deeply moved by Meriem and Anna's journeys. In fact, I am really interested in the topics of filiation, motherhood and abandonment. I already tackled them in the two short films I made when I was studying at INSAS film school. *Angelika* was a documentary portrait of a Polish child in care, and *Les Yeux fermés* was a fiction film about a young freediver who cares for his dying mother.

The script of *Sixième Enfant* revolves around an exchange that qualifies as human trafficking according to law. Anna was a children's book illustrator in the novel, but you chose to make her a lawyer, perfectly aware of what she is doing.

I didn't want people to think that she is somewhat oblivious. I thought it would be more impactful if she acted with full knowledge of the facts, fully aware of the law she is breaking and the risks she is taking. By making her a lawyer, her longing seemed even more intense to me. It also allowed me to establish a common language with Julien, who is a lawyer as well, who also wants a child, but who isn't ready to infringe the law.

You never judge your characters.

No, I don't. I wanted to remain at their level and to directly engage in their problematics, that was my motto as a filmmaker. The film obviously deals with moral and legal issues, but I wanted to focus on the personal, more intimate side of things instead. Franck and Meriem cannot afford to raise a sixth child, and decide to entrust the baby to Julien and Anna, who cannot conceive despite all their efforts. I have tried to tell of their secrets, doubts and hopes, without being opinionated nor judgemental. My goal was simply to understand them, and to love them.

Have you met with travelling communities during the writing of the script?

Yes, I have. First, I went to the pilgrimage at Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, where I met Nathalie Meyer, a Yenish woman from Alsace. I spent some time with her at the camping where she was staying with her family, I told her about my film project, and we stayed in touch throughout the shooting. Incidentally, I gave her surname to the characters of Meriem and Franck, as a reminder of our first meeting. I also worked with members of the Essonne Travellers Association, who showed me various family campsites and traveller sites, and introduced me to several families, either sedentary or not, so that I could put my story to the test, discover more about their lives and see how it could enrich or give more credibility to the script, especially in the details. While we were preparing the shooting, I visited these sites again with our crew and cast. We made some casting and location scouting there. All the while I kept in mind that I was not making



a documentary about those communities. I only focus on Meriem, Franck and their children. Just as I don't talk about "the bourgeoisie", but about Anna and Julien.

Your story is fast-paced and includes many ellipses. There is definitely a sense of urgency about it. How did you work on that particular pace?

I wanted to tell a private story but in a gripping way. Since the characters act in a rush, it only seemed necessary that the film should share that same urgency as far as its rhythm and storytelling were concerned. With co-writer Catherine Paillé, and then with editor Catherine Schwartz, we built the film like a "social thriller". We designed a narrative filled with ellipses, and thought about what would remain off-camera. Everything that isn't said nor shown only adds to the tension of the story, it makes the audience more involved and active, and generates more empathy for the characters. It was our main concern in terms of storytelling. In the childbirth sequence, the film slows down, as if time were standing still. I tried to film the birth of this child like a moment out of time, whereas everything that happens

before is built like a spiral. Everything leads to that scene, but I opted for a soft climax, seen through the eyes of the four main characters. In the end, the sequence is more about portraits than about childbirth, strictly speaking, even if the shots of the baby's delivery are genuine: we filmed them like a documentary before the film's shooting.

Your epilogue is less cruel than the novel's.

The film is loosely based on the novel. I wanted the two women to meet again around the child at the end of the story. I wanted to say something about the meeting of their two worlds, because it is also what this is all about. There is now a bond between Anna and Meriem. Their connection is complex, because it is at once needed and imposed, sincere and self-serving, mercantile and friendly.

The diner sequence with Anna, Julien and their friends is a defining moment in the film.

It is a tipping point for them, because Anna's lie is finally meeting the world. As she pretends to be pregnant and wears a fake baby bump, she publicly challenges Julien to go along or not. Their eyes betray their disagreement. Anna puts on an act in front of their friends and Julien is trapped, compelled to play along. A pregnancy announcement is usually a joyful occasion, but here, it turns into a masquerade.

Le Sixième Enfant is also a film about secrets, about what we say and what we keep quiet, what we see, what we show and what we hide. I think that the idea of secrets is really cinematic, in that it lets the audience into the secret

of the characters, against the rest of the world.

Some shots in the film appear to be imbued with a sacred quality: for instance, that of Anna and the baby in the bath, which is evocative of a painting of the Virgin and child, or when Anna finds herself in a cell, a shot wherein light is coming from above in a slightly surreal fashion.

These two shots were conceived as paintings. The first tells of the meeting between a mother and her child, a child she hasn't carried. The second one is about a woman who has just lost everything, when the law caught up with her. I don't believe in God, but as a child, I was told about Solomon's judgement, and I recall being moved. Not so much by the moral of the story, but rather by the courage of a woman who is ready to give her child to somebody else so that it may survive. Meriem's sacrifices, the way she entrusts her baby to another woman hoping that it will have a better future, and then Anna's sacrifice before the judge, when she confesses to having acted only according to her own wish, all this reminds me of that story from the Bible.

I was also really impressed by the sense of the sacred emanating from Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Dekalog*, especially in *Thou Shalt Have No Other God But Me*. I really admire the way Kieślowski manages to transcend questions around morality. To me, he is par excellence the director of the freedom of thought. I tried to draw my inspiration from his freedom, his modesty, and his tenderness, in order to go beyond the moral issues pertaining to my character's deeds.



Sara Giraudeau, Judith Chemla, Benjamin Lavernhe and Damien Bonnard make up a powerful quartet...

I wanted to work with actors and actresses that move me and that I love seeing on screen, performers who are able to navigate the nuances, the intricacies of characters, in order to bring to the fore their humanity.

I really like Benjamin and Sara's youth, I think it brings power to the narrative by casting aside the question of until what age you can bear a child. Sara's sylphic appearance also emphasizes the strong determination of her character. For Meriem and Frank, I wanted to find weather-beaten faces, because life outdoors does no favour to the skin. Damien had that. As for Judith, it was more about building a character, a process we both found really exciting.

How did you direct them?

First, we came to an agreement on the text during a reading that deeply moved me. I am very sensitive to voices, and to discover my characters' voices was a quite intense moment for me. All of a sudden, it all seemed very real and alive. Then we decided upon

hairstyles, costumes, and everything related in some way to the shaping of characters' identities. Damien and Judith went to some travellers' sites to observe a world they were not familiar with. I talked a lot with all of them, not so much about their characters than about the story we would tell together. It was both very exciting and stressful, for we knew that with such a topic we would be walking on a tightrope. Of course, it is not easy to tell the story of a woman who decides to abandon her child, or the story of a woman ready to buy one. All the more so when it involves a social dimension. Oftentimes, I told myself we had to be "modestly daring". Indeed, this was my mantra. The preparation phase was pivotal, for it was then that confidence grew between the cast and myself. In my view, most of my directing took place during this phase. On set, I mostly dealt with movements, variations in intensity, rhythm, and also silences.

How did you work on the settings and on the carefully gauged contrasts between the various lifestyles of your characters?

Well, contrasts were simply there. On the one hand, you have a couple of bohemian bourgeois lawyers living in their fancy Paris apartment. On the other hand, you have a scrap dealer and his wife living in a trailer on some vacant lot in Aubervilliers, in the Parisian suburbs. With this as a starting point, I endeavoured to paint these two worlds accurately, in a story geared in the real world, and I tried to be as credible as can be. The film is really about the meeting of two very distinct worlds, but with director of photography Julien Ramirez Hernan, set designer Florian Sanson, costume designer Elsa

Bourdin, make-up artist Bilytis Barabas and hairstylist Jane Brizard, we strove to tell this one story without ever giving in to caricature, miserabilism or pathos.

Your images are for the most part in warm tones, and you shot several sequences at night. How did you decide on the colour palette of the film?

I love night in films. I just love the mood, and here, it matched the theme of secrets. I wanted the photography of the film to lean towards fiction rather than social realism. Thus, with the director of photography, we opted for a stylized image that would clash with the ultrarealistic settings in an interesting fashion. I also enjoy having things exist off-camera, hence the choice of the 1.5 format, a photograph format that narrows the frame around characters, like in a portrait, and lets the sound tell us about the world around.

By the way, how did you work on the sound of the film?

With sound editor Simon Poupard and mixer Pierre-Jean Labrusse, we searched for the right balance between realism and dream, first by making the most of the real sounds imposed by the settings and situations. Then we worked on exogenous sounds, sometimes audacious ones, that give greater substance to the sequences and try to guide the audience towards the emotion we aspire to. I pictured the film like a tunnel that brings us progressively to drama. The soundtrack pertains to that movement. As the noose is tightening, as we get closer to the conclusion, everything gets more stripped-down. The dialogues get scarcer by the minute, and the loud



atmospheres we had at the start eventually give way to silence.

And what about the music?

The music goes the other way around. It is barely present at first, and then it gradually sets in. At the end of the film, the music and the actors' voices are the only thing left. I worked with Louis Sclavis, who is first and foremost a jazz composer and a clarinet player. I like his sensibility, the presence of his breathing in his pieces, the sound of his fingers on the instrument, so many things he insists on keeping in the final mix. His sound is really personal. Besides, he is a great composer of melodies. Since the film is like a dialogue between two worlds, two states, two pains, the music needed to convey that contrast. Louis' music does so perfectly, between his rough, organic performance and his unapologetically lyrical melodies. Working with him and his musicians in a studio was one of the highlights of my experience as a first-time filmmaker. The piano, the double bass, the violin, the cello, the clarinet... It was as if new characters were bursting into the story.

Interview by Anne-Claire Cieutat



LÉOPOLD LEGRAND

After literature studies in Paris and an exchange program at NYU Tisch School of the Arts, Léopold Legrand studied film directing at INSAS, a Belgian public film school. As part of his studies, he wrote and directed several short films, including the documentary *Angelika*, shot in Poland in 2016, which received numerous awards, including the Grand Prix at the 2016 Namur FIFF and the Jury's Grand Prize at the Poitiers Film Festival in 2017. After graduation from INSAS in 2018, Léopold directed the short film, *Mort aux Codes*, adapted from a short story by Patrick Pelloux. The film met with great success in festivals and won the public prize in Villeurbanne, Brest, Seoul, Saint Petersburg, Nice and a special mention of the jury in Clermont-Ferrand. *The Sixth Child* is his first feature film.



CAST

SARA GIRAUDEAU

Anna

BENJAMIN LAVERNHE de la Comédie-Française

Julien

JUDITH CHEMLA

Meriem

DAMIEN BONNARD

Franck

MARIE-CHRISTINE ORRY

Meriem's mother

OLIVIER RABOURDIN

Martin

NAIDRA AYADI

The judge

CREW

Direction : LÉOPOLD LEGRAND

Script : LÉOPOLD LEGRAND and CATHERINE PAILLÉ

Based on the novel *PLEURER DES RIVIÈRES*

by ALAIN JASPARD (HÉLOÏSE D'ORMESSON Édition)

Image : JULIEN RAMIREZ HERNAN

Editing : CATHERINE SCHWARTZ

Music : LOUIS SCLAVIS

Sound : PIERRE ANDRÉ, SIMON POUPARD, MAXIM SALEIX,

PIERRE-JEAN LABRUSSE

Set Design : FLORIAN SANSON

Costumes : ELSA BOURDIN

Make-up : BILYTIS BARABAS

Hair make-up : JANE BRIZARD

Production Manager : OLIVIER LAGNY

Produced by FRÉDÉRIC BRILLION and GILLES LEGRAND

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