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PRÉSENTS**

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BEFORE WE COLLAPSE

A FILM BY

ALICE ZENITER AND BENOÎT VOLNAIS

**Runtime : 100 mn
2023 – France – 2.39 – 5.1**

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SYNOPSIS

In the midst of a Parisian heatwave, Tristan, campaign manager for a candidate during the legislative elections, receives an anonymous letter containing a positive pregnancy test. Because he may have an incurable hereditary disease, Tristan becomes obsessed with the idea of finding the woman who sent him the test. But is he dealing with a morbid joke, a cold revenge, a cry for help, or a political ploy? Tristan decides to investigate, risking his professional and emotional life.



INTERVIEW WITH ALICE ZENITER AND BENOÎT VOLNAIS

Your film centres on a double conflict, at once personal and collective. The genetic disease that plagues Tristan's family echoes the disaster looming over our planet. How and why did you weave together these two dimensions when you wrote the script?

B.V.: The starting point of the film was the current state of the world. We are convinced that one of the crucial aspects of our day and age is the increasingly shared belief that there are dark and dangerous times ahead and that the worst is yet to come. We feel that it completely transforms the way we think, the way we see, the way we love, as well as our perception of time, work, lifestyles, friendship, family, etc. We wanted to talk about all this with the tools of cinema, through characters, emotions, narrative and aesthetic choices that are typical of cinema. And with the character of Tristan, who is going through a personal collapse.

This is one of the reasons why people write stories or direct films in the first place: to express, to show and to describe how difficult it is to be in the world. And thus, to bring about some empathy. Empathy is the only way we can create community. Making a film about existential angst is also a political statement. In more concrete terms, early in the writing process, we wondered how cinema could tackle this present concern and express it with the budget of a first feature film, in the economy of auteur cinema.

Your storyline is divided into chapters, which brings about disruptions in the tone of the film and contrasting settings. How did you work on the structure and progression of the narrative?

A.Z.: The idea was to make changes in the narrative framework to best portray Tristan, to try and understand him and the dire situation he is facing, through different means. For instance, we would go from an omniscient external voice-over to an internal voice-over blurting out scraps of thoughts, or we would switch between one section with many physical, extreme close-ups on him, on his body, and another section with wide shots of landscapes in which Tristan seems lost.

There is a theatrical and literary dimension in the film, as part of a non-naturalist structure, and it creates a kind of distancing effect. Why did you choose such a bold stance?

A.Z.: There is undeniably a theatrical dimension, of course, partly because of my background as a stage director. But I also think that what is often

labelled theatrical or literary may simply have to do with a certain enjoyment of language, a particular work on words or length of lines. On that front, we did not want to limit ourselves, it was a cinematic decision (when we wrote the script, we thought about the audacity in François Truffaut's *Two English Girls* or Peter Watkins' *Edvard Munch*, films that both re-examine the place of language, especially through their use of the voice-over).

B.V.: I, for one, refute this dichotomy naturalism vs non-naturalism." Yet, admittedly, we really chose a distancing approach by setting up a rather naturalist composition. It was also a way for us to find the right balance for the whole film. When we wrote the script, Alice and I were devouring the work of American writer David Foster Wallace, and we particularly appreciated his criticism of irony and off-beat humour. We decided early on to tell our story literally, straightforwardly, and with openly lyrical choices of music and shots (when Tristan lies down below a tree for instance, or when Fanny dances on the beach). Alice's "theatrical" approach to directing actors counterbalanced the non-distancing effect of the film's literal treatment and lyricism.

How did you find the right balance between the multiple tones in the film, which sometimes overlap?

A.Z.: Our objective at first was to show that, tragic as Tristan's journey might be, the rest of the world around him is not caught up in his drama - quite the opposite, actually. People keep on living their lives and have different ways of dealing with the present situation. These differences indeed create multiple tones. Naïma's boundless joy contrasts with the major political crisis; Fanny knows nothing about melancholy; Pablo focuses his mind and efforts on a limited space; Perséphone, who only appears in one scene, has her own concerns, completely at odds with Tristan's. Sometimes, their strength and their jokes manage to bring Tristan back to the bright side of life, or they just help him to connect. But mostly, he just looks at them blankly, as if they were mere figures in the distance.

Your intense narrative reaches its peak at a dinner in the countryside. Pablo and Fanny confront each other in a duel that culminates in a shot/reverse shot sequence built on western-like close-ups. The political statement of the film is skilfully articulated in this sequence.

A.Z.: It seemed obvious to us that the collapse motif developed in the film called for some form of political analysis. We had to look at the bigger picture



somehow. If we dealt with collapse only as an individual or psychological issue (as is the case with the widespread “eco-anxiety” label, for instance), our characters would be cut from all the philosophical, political, sociological analysis that are now prevalent in our society, offering us keys to understand what is going on, as well as potential courses of action.

B.V.: Besides, Alice and I think that long scenes in which characters engage in a well-articulated and increasingly abstract debate offer great moments of tension and shifts in audience identification. What a treat to film such an argument, like a duel, in which emotional and rhetorical elements intertwine. We hope that the audience will enjoy watching this scene as much as we enjoyed filming it.

A.Z.: And to be honest, we both grew up watching films that almost never passed the Bechdel test, therefore creating a scene between two female characters who do not talk about love but about the likelihood of a revolution had a kind of redeeming quality, somehow.

There are very few markers of our time in the film. Is it a way for you to get away from reality a little, and to verge on the fable?

B.V.: The film is cut in half – the first part takes place in the city, and then we leave it for good. The fable-like dimension was always part of the equation. Just like the actors’ acting, it counterbalanced the way we were portraying our characters and their emotions - literally, without irony - and the serious topics in the story.

A.Z.: It also has to do with the various places we visit in the film, which are kind of timeless. The nursing home is haunted by artefacts from a previous life; the fields are outside of time when the land is uncultivated; Naïma’s team works in outdated offices due to the tight budget of the campaign. We do see computers, cell phones, cars, juicers and fans, but they only take up a small part of the settings.

How did you cast your film? And how did you work with the actors?

B.V.: We were very lucky because from the start, we had three actors in mind for the main roles, Niels Schneider, Ariane Labed and Souheila Yacoub, and they all agreed to take part in the film months before the shooting. Consequently, we were able to involve them in the preparation and to cast some other parts in their presence.

A.Z.: As for the rest of the casting process, it reflects my love of theatre actors. We tried as much as possible to have table readings first, and then rehearsals with the cast. There are a lot of dialogues in some scenes, so it felt both necessary and reassuring. It also allowed us to adjust some lines before the shooting. Sometimes, we rehearsed directly on set, like for the kiss scene, for which we took half a day in Pablo’s room to decide on the choreography and the camera work.



You wrote and directed the film together. How did your collaboration work?

B.V.: We wanted to do it together every step of the way, from the early drafts to the final stages of postproduction. So, we just threw ourselves into it, without assigning ourselves tasks. Yet throughout the process, we quite naturally focused on various fields that felt right to us.

A.Z.: For instance, Benoît had very clear ideas about the cutting of scenes, while I was more thinking in terms of the actors' performances and the linkage of lines that could not be cut. So, he proposed things and I worked from there. During the shooting, I was mostly with the actors and Benoît with the director of photography. It only seemed natural.

Do you think that fiction can affect reality?

A.Z.: Yes... Even though we are well aware of its limits. Let's just say that we believe in the power of representation over our imaginations. Fiction may create appealing or terrifying horizons, it may arouse aspirations in ourselves, or self-delusions. But it will never provoke major reversals on its own. People do not make movies to change the world, otherwise they would run the risk of being bitterly disappointed.

B.V.: Alice talks about in her last show and her last book: fiction is a part of us. Working on fiction is also working on reality. I think there is nothing as powerful as cinema... Yet a film is nothing but a more or less conscious addition to what some call "soft power". Anyway, we need to create new stories and to find new ways to tell them, we need to try new things in fiction. And to be morally and politically responsible when we make fiction.







DIRECTORS' BIOGRAPHY

Born in 1986, former student of the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure, Alice Zeniter has written 8 novels (including "The Art of Losing", Le Monde Award and Goncourt des Lycéens Award, 2017) and 4 plays, which she has also staged.

Born in 1980, Benoît Volnais, studied Philosophy before becoming assistant director and production assistant for music videos and television shows, international sales coordinator for cinema, wine merchant, reader/project provider at Flammarion.

They co-wrote and co-directed *BEFORE WE COLLAPSE*, a feature film presented in competition at Rotterdam film festival in 2023.

CAST

Tristan

Niels SCHNEIDER

Fanny

Ariane LABED

Pablo

Souheila YACOUB

Naïma

Myriem AKHEDDIOU

Mati

Séphora PONDI de la Comédie Française

Basile

Younès BOUCIF

Anna

Ana BLAGOJEVIC

CREW

Filmmaking

Alice ZENITER & Benoît VOLNAIS

Script Alice ZENITER & Benoît VOLNAIS

Production Marie MASMONTEIL

Music Sophie TRUDEAU

Image Jean-Louis VIALARD - AFC

Set Design Héléna CISTERNE

Costumes Sarah-Anna DA SILVA

Editing Frédéric BAILLEHAICHE

Sound Marie-Clotilde CHÉRY

Casting Youna DE PERETTI

Assistant Director Anaïs COUETTE

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