

SAADET
IŞIL AKSOY

Confidante

A FILM BY
ÇAĞLA ZENCİRCİ &
GUILLAUME GIOVANETTI

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Saadet Işıl Aksoy

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Ankara, 1999. Arzu works in an erotic call centre. When a sudden earthquake hits Istanbul, a young man she's been on the phone with is trapped under rubble and begs her to save him. Arzu knows who to call... but at the risk of her own life.



INTERVIEW WITH ÇAĞLA ZENCİRCİ & GUILLAUME GIOVANETTI

BY ANNE-CLAIRE CIEUTAT

How did you come up with the idea for this chamber-piece psychological thriller?

We tend to make genre-oriented films: *Noor* is a road movie, *Ningen* leans towards the supernatural, and *Sibel*, in a way, is a wild western.

In 2023, southeastern Türkiye was hit by a terrible earthquake. We were shocked to witness the same catastrophe as during the 1999 earthquake in Istanbul. As if history were repeating itself, the same mistakes were made in the wake of the disaster.

So we felt the urge to tackle this subject, but also to change gears. After *Sibel*, a contemplative, outdoor, almost silent film in a whistled language, we felt the need to make a tighter, more talkative film, shot indoors. This naturally led us to the chamber piece, thriller genre.

How did you go about writing this screenplay, which keeps the viewers on the edge of their seats, goes from one register to another, and gradually turns into a film manifesto?

Dealing with an earthquake is a delicate matter, because it is a traumatic experience for many people around the world. Ethically speaking, it seemed impossible to us to show archive footage, out of respect for the victims and survivors, nor to re-create fictional images of the kind of terror such an event can cause. So we had to come up with a setup that would allow us to make our point, and we embraced the off-screen concept for the film. The chamber piece format allowed for off-screen visuals, and the concept of phone calls provided off-screen sound.

Once we had chosen this setup, we knew that the narrative had to be fast-paced and tense. In order to keep the viewer's attention, changing registers frequently was crucial: some calls make you smile, while others may move or terrorize you. In this respect, and since we work a lot with languages in our films, the Turkish language of Ankara in the 1990s, as well as the Turkish culture in general, with its mix of self-mockery and sincerity, really helped us to be spontaneous with these sudden variations.

Through the character of Arzu, the nature of speech in your film evolves from lies to the truth, while being in turn comforting, fragile, commanding...

Arzu allows this evolution to unfold. Like all the protagonists in our films, she is a somewhat marginalized figure: her disability has kept her at home since childhood, it has held her back in her studies and has accustomed her to building relationships from a distance. As a result, she has developed a strong ability to express herself over the phone. In Türkiye in the 1990s, erotic call centers were booming. As many other women, Arzu has taken up a job in an erotic call center, and she is very good at it because she has a strong command of language and of her voice, which inevitably arouses jealousy among her colleagues. Yet, working at this call center is her only way to earn enough money to pay a lawyer to gain custody of her son. Above all, she must keep this job a secret, because societal judgment matters in Türkiye, as it does in many other countries. As the story unfolds, the nature of Arzu's speech changes, as circumstances force her to reveal herself and to become increasingly vocal.

Arzu means “desire” in Turkish, and Sabiha means “happy.” *Confidante* raises the question of desire in the Turkish society and, as in your previous films, of the difficulty of being oneself...

We keep going back to this question. In the West, culture and society urge us to come to terms with ourselves as individuals. Whereas Eastern culture encourages us to be part of the community. The desires of each individual must conform to the norms. We try to explore various ways of being oneself in spite of external pressure, without disrupting the balance of society. Strong personalities can help bring about change, provided that they accept themselves for who they are.

Even though Türkiye is a progressive country in some respects – Turkish women were granted the right to vote in 1934, and the right to have an abortion in 1984 –, it may also be more conservative in other aspects. This reflects the great contradictions of a land that has always been caught between Western and Eastern customs. Ankara, the administrative capital where decrees are always enforced first, is no exception: the city boasts a relatively homogeneous population, the people are quick to adapt to political and social changes, but their desires are often kept under wraps. Home to the army and the government, Ankara is also known for its legendary culture of nighttime entertainment, and the name “Arzu” is quite common there, as erotic chat lines were widespread in the 1990s.

At that time, moral and economic liberalization, industrialization and overall modernity led us to believe that Türkiye was ready to embrace its European heritage. But times have changed and, paradoxically, the Internet today is more controlled than the erotic chat lines in the 1990s. We wanted to highlight these loops of evolution observed from one era to the next. Sometimes, setting a situation in the past may help shed light on the present.

Arzu’s manifesto at the end of the film was inspired by a speech I [*Çağla*] heard at the university, from a student representative, in 1992. With great eloquence and charisma, this young woman highlighted Türkiye’s contradictions, and it made a lasting impression on me, so much so that it inspired Arzu’s words.

Desire and a taste for fiction merge at the heart of your filmic device through one of Arzu’s clients, who claims to be a screenwriter...

Erotic call center also perform a kind of psychoanalysis on the men who call them, through their ability to listen and their predisposition to channel or tell stories.

For instance, one of Arzu’s regulars dreams of becoming a screenwriter and needs a confidante to help him achieve this. Even though Arzu is supposed to keep a distance from her clients, she is touched by this man’s sincerity. She shows her true colors when she talks to him. Together, they create a bubble where they can see themselves in each other.

And the taste for fiction keeps permeating the film, as the situation forces Arzu to turn into a kind of Scheherazade of the Arabian Nights: caught up in a spiral, she is forced to tell stories without really finishing them, hoping that fiction will help her save her life...

Where does your taste for brave and stubborn heroines come from?

We just find them fascinating! Personally, I [*Çağla*] lacked inspirational female figures to take on as role models when I grew up in Türkiye. Men got to take center stage in fiction. Things have changed since then, but we definitely think there should be more and more of these heroines.



How did you go about imagining the characters that surround Arzu, all of whom live up to Jean Renoir's maxim that "everyone has their reasons"?

As viewers, we prefer characters who are not one-dimensional. We cannot imagine a character who is devoid of intelligence or who does not evolve over the course of the story. We believe that anyone can change when faced with various situations, and that everyone is trying to get by in this world as best they can. We always try to work on the complexity of our characters, to show the dark and the lighter sides in all of them. It is this type of portrayal that brings catharsis to the viewer.

How did you create the off-screen sound of the film, all these faceless yet very present characters, including a canary?!

Having developed our love of cinema by watching the work of the great masters of Iranian cinema in the 1990s, we pay close attention to what happens off-screen, both in terms of image or sound. As for *Sibel*, the sound design for *Confidante* was one of the biggest challenges of the film, and we tackled it head-on, right from the writing phase. Each voice, each sound space had to be immediately distinguishable from the others.

On set, with our sound engineer, Olivier Pelletier, we established a setup with a special room for the callers, where we recreated their sound environment to enhance everyone's performance (including the canary's!).

And in post-production, we worked with a wonderful team. Film editing was carried out by our really skillful and talented editor, Guericc Catala, who managed to create a taut narrative while laying the foundations for the sound environment. Then sound design was done in turn by Jocelyn Robert and Nicolas Tran Trong, and by our mixer, Loïc Collignon; together, they took on the challenge of perfecting the sound universe of the film, bringing images to life, just as it is done for radio dramas.

How did you cast the film, starting with Saadet Işıl Aksoy in the role of Arzu?

We'd wanted to work with Saadet Işıl Aksoy for so long. As soon as we heard that she was up for it, we developed the part for her. We needed not only a great actress to play Arzu, but also someone with a magnetic presence. And you just cannot take your eyes off of Saadet. She is also such a generous actress. She took on the part wholeheartedly. She got personally involved, she met with several women who work for this type of hotlines, and for instance she even researched S&M practices to find the right tone for the dominatrix at the beginning of the film. It was important to us to portray a woman in her forties, an age group less represented in films. Saadet is proud and thriving in that part, regardless of the often surreal youth criteria that the film industry imposes on actresses.

As for the part of the boss, we wrote it specifically for Erkan Kolçak Köstendil, with whom we were delighted to work again after *Sibel*. He is an outstanding performer and, as usual, he lent depth to his character with his exceptional sense of timing.

To play the callers, we searched for actors with particular tones of voices that would match the characters and be easily recognizable by viewers. Luckily, Muhammet Uzuner, with whom we had always dreamed of working, agreed to play the prosecutor. His support was invaluable, and we learnt a lot from

him. The same goes for Osman Alkaş, who plays Mr. Erden, with a voice that either lulls us or pierces our hearts depending on his character's mood, and all the other actors who joined the project. They all impressed us with their talent, commitment and generosity.

As for the women playing the other operators, they were all non-professionals. They included a teacher, an architect, a civil servant and several musicians. It was their first time in front of the camera, and they brought much freshness and humor to the shooting. Some brought their children on set, so we took turns looking after them. Our production stills look more like photos of a family gathered in a country house than of a crew hard at work!

How did you shoot the film?

Right from the start, Éric Devin, our director of photography for *Sibel*, encouraged us to keep things simple. We owe him the existence of *Confidante* as it is today. We could say that we handcrafted this political chamber piece in the old-fashioned way, as a family. For the film's main jobs (production, crew, part of the cast), we called on people we knew, who accepted our desire for simplicity, and everybody committed to the project, including the newcomers.

But unlike our previous films, which were set in natural settings and in contemporary times, we had to build a 1990s set. Once we had assembled the cast, a production company in Istanbul suggested we shoot in a big film studio. But that did not feel right. We wanted to keep things light, discreet and flexible.

As it happens, Çağla's family owns a country house on the outskirts of Ankara, which had been unoccupied since the death of her father. So we asked the family's permission to turn it into a film location. We recreated the call center there, and the isolated nature of the place emphasized the family aspect

of the project. Several of Çağla's relatives even acted as operators. This family feel also enhanced the chamber piece atmosphere we were looking for.

How did you design the layout of the film, with the open space downstairs, the passageway upstairs and the red room?

The architecture of the house allowed us to divide it into several distinct spaces, which we thought of as the different parts of a maze. We created them together with our production designer Osman Özcan, who had worked with us on *Sibel*, and who did a terrific job. We wanted the first and the upper floors to be connected, in order to move the action forward and create rhythm. Arzu had to feel more and more trapped, until her back is against the wall in that red room. It was the indispensable condition for her character to be able to liberate herself.

Your cinematic compositions feature frames within frames, and vertical lines that create a kind of visual prison, in which Arzu seems trapped...

We like frames within frames in general, and our director of photography Éric Devin always comes up with creative ideas in that respect. We can rely on him completely, which is really comfortable. His work on this, and also on the lighting, has been nothing short of exceptional.

We also had in mind the situation of the young man trapped under the rubble. The camera had to convey both the boy's sense of oppression and that of Arzu, also trapped in her situation.

How did you go about creating the lighting and the warm-toned color palette?

The film is set in the 1990s, and we wanted to pay tribute to the films made back then, before the digital era. The call center has warm, oversaturated yellow tones, and then we move to the red room, with lower contrast. We worked on that aspect with our director of photography during the shooting and afterwards, in the color grading phase. The red lights were typical of these erotic call centers, where they emphasized the competition between the operators. Those lights had to be both a significant and an aesthetic landmark on screen.

Your film ends with Clara Ysé's song, *Douce*...

We don't really use music in our films, especially when the narrative is as tense as this one, but as a conclusion, we like to have it intervene and accompany the viewers towards the end of the story, so that the film can continue in their minds. For *Sibel*, we chose an energetic rap finale. For *Confidante*, while we were shooting the film, we considered using a track by a 1990's female metal band from Ankara, to convey our character's rage. But during post-production, we happened to hear *Douce* by chance on the radio, and we were enthralled. While the song was musically ever so delicate, the very rage we needed happened to be in the meaning of Clara Ysé's lyrics, which echoed our message uncommonly. Thus this oxymoron of a song naturally found its place in the film to end our story. And we thank Clara Ysé wholeheartedly for entrusting it to us.

***Sibel* ended with a shot of a woman with her chin up; *Confidante* closes with a woman looking straight at the camera. What are your wishes for this film?**

We make films to open up conversations. This direct gaze at the camera is a way to invite the viewers to take part in the debate.

We did a dozen takes for this shot, in order to have several variations on the feeling conveyed at the end of the film. These takes are real acting masterclasses, as Saadet Işıl Aksoy managed to convey incredibly subtle nuances in her gaze. We thought it would be interesting to choose a take blending the pride and defiance that radiate from the character of Sabiha like a flash of lightning.

We hope that the film will help people speak openly about their feelings of entrapment. The concept of communication has evolved significantly over the years, but today's tools don't seem to encourage patient listening. This film is an invitation to confide in other people, and we hope that viewers across the world will relate to that message.





ÇAĞLA ZENCİRCİ & GUILLAUME GIOVANETTI

A Turkish-French couple, Çağla Zencirci & Guillaume Giovanetti have been co-directing films and life since 2004. After several shorts (Berlin, Locarno, Clermont-Ferrand), and two feature films, *Noor* (Pakistan, 2012 / Cannes Acid) and *Ningen* (Japan, 2013 / Toronto), their 3rd feature *Sibel* (Türkiye, 2018 / Locarno) was invited to 100 festivals, awarded 40 times, made 200,000 admissions worldwide, was finalist of the Golden Globes and the European Film Awards, and purchased by HBO, Canal +, Arte, and OCS. The duo's 4th feature film, *Confidante*, will premiere in the Berlinale Panorama 2025.

CAST

ARZU / SABIHA	Saadet Işıl Aksoy
HAYAL	Nilgün Türksever
THE OPERATORS	Nesrin Yatman Nevin Zencirci Sibel Oral Tulya Yılmaz Derya Yatman Meriç Kılıç
THE BOSS	Erkan Kolçak Köstendil
THE PROSECUTOR	Muhammet Uzuner
M. ERDEN / SEZA	Osman Alkaş
TÜLAY	Elit Andaç Çam
THE YOUNG MAN	İlber Uygur Kaboğlu
FARUK	Kıvanç Kılınç

CREW

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
LINE PRODUCER
PRODUCTION DESIGNER
PRODUCTION MANAGER
SOUND ENGINEER
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR
ART DIRECTOR
CASTING
POST-PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR
EDITING
SOUND EDITING
SOUND MIXING
COLORIST
TITLE DESIGN & SFX

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Görkem Canbolat & Alper Eraydın
Fehmi Öztürk
Cédric Ettouati
Guerric Catala, Guillaume Giovanetti
Nicolas Tran Trong, Jocelyn Robert
Loïc Collignon
Franck Ravel
Raoul Nadalet

Çağla Zencirci & Guillaume Giovanetti, Rani Massalha & Marie Legrand,
Muriel Merlin, Lilian Eche & Christel Henon

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