



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2026 OFFICIAL SELECTION
CANNES PREMIÈRE

Marie Madeleine

A FILM BY
GESSICA GÉNÉUS



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HAITI, FRANCE | 2026 | 104 MIN | DCP | 5.1 | 1.66 | COLOR

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In Jacmel, Haiti, the sea, the churches, and the spirits shape daily life. Marie Madeleine is a free woman. She makes a living as a prostitute and navigates the nights without submitting to the rules of those who save souls. Her path crosses Joseph's, a young evangelist. A relationship blossoms between these two opposite beings. As Joseph's faith wavers, Marie Madeleine draws him into a world where desire and the quest for freedom open up a space where everything can be reinvented.



INTERVIEW WITH GESSICA GÉNÉUS

Conducted by Anne-Claire Cieutat

Marie Madeleine rests on forces in tension: two worlds clash head-on; the violence of reality coexists with fleeting moments of escape. Even as tragedy takes root, something in this film resists it...

This film is built on raw, primal, and complex emotions. Jacques, the pastor, holds a hardened view of the world. He is a man dominated by what he feels; trapped inside himself. Many people like him are prisoners of their own fears. Jacques seems to absorb all the rage that surrounds him and project it onto the sex workers operating across from his temple. It is an extreme, irrational kind of behaviour, and one that is all too familiar in Haiti. I remember, for instance, the lynching of a man accused of stealing a banana, as if, suddenly, the accumulated fury of certain people was unleashed at random on a single person. I witnessed this killing when I was a little girl, and it has lived inside me ever since. I needed to make this film, because I cannot make peace with the contradictions of my country.

Marie Madeleine is a woman roughed up by life. She uses her body as an instrument, drowns herself in alcohol, and offers pleasure with a razor blade between her teeth. She is capable of both self-destruction and sudden surges of vitality; she can lose faith in herself, then rise again and find faith in another. In this way she mirrors Haiti, whose people manage to survive levels of injustice that defy description.

Joseph, for his part, lives in a straitjacket. He suffers from being the scapegoat onto whom Jacques, his father, pours his rage. Through him, I wanted to interrogate the idea of freedom; a freedom that is constantly called into question. It is the most universal of quests, yet we have every right to wonder whether it

truly exists. Is it an abstract concept or a lived reality? What does it feel like to be free? Could one sacrifice everything simply to experience that freedom, if only for a brief moment?

Your film opens with a helping hand, Joseph's, as he comes to Marie Madeleine's rescue. Your direction emphasises its almost providential quality.

Joseph acts on instinct; he is a naturally good man. It mattered to me that we enter this film through a gesture of altruism, an act of basic humanity. The disturbing moments must coexist with moments of grace, and light must live alongside chaos. Together they form a whole that reflects reality, and it is precisely that complexity I find compelling. I also wanted Joseph, having spontaneously helped Marie Madeleine, not to dwell on her afterwards. It is she who comes back to him.

You set two spaces against each other: that of the sex workers and that of the pastor. Between the two, Marie Madeleine and Joseph move back and forth, sparking interactions.

Between the temple and the brothel, a battlefield takes shape. On one side, the pursuit of salvation through faith; on the other, the pursuit of daily bread through sex. The missionary fervour of this fanatical pastor, who deliberately set up across from the sex workers, is precisely what made the encounter between Joseph and Marie Madeleine possible.

An attraction develops between this man and this woman, but it is not sexual in nature. This unsettles Marie Madeleine at first. She struggles to understand what Joseph is looking for when he

comes to her room. By crossing that simple street, by taking that one step sideways, the man who saved her as she collapsed discovers her true face, her real beauty, and tastes freedom.

If Marie Madeleine is a privileged witness in the Bible, in your film it is Joseph who watches and sees. Why make him a photographer? And why these biblical names?

I was inspired by photographer friends, and by the way they hide behind their cameras. Photography was a way of giving Joseph the freedom to move, to enter spaces, whether the brothel or the cave. The camera forms a screen between him and the world, a screen that reassures him.

I wanted my characters to carry these names, no doubt because I myself am steeped in spirituality, in the most syncretic sense of the word. I grew up in a religious melting pot, between Voodoo culture and Catholicism. As a child, attending church, I was often bored. When the verses were read aloud, my imagination would stir, and I would extend the priest's stories in my mind, wondering, for instance, what became of Mary Magdalene after she washed the feet of Christ. This culture so thoroughly permeated our conscious and unconscious minds that it was impossible to shed. I therefore allowed myself to see things differently and imagined that these biblical figures had managed to carve out their own space of freedom.

In both *Freda* and *Marie Madeleine*, you film fervent proselytism in Haiti. The character of Jacques embodies it in its most concentrated form.

Protestantism pervades this country, and so many others, to such a degree that I will never be done exploring how it operates. Radio is an enormously important medium in Haiti. Protestant churches, even more than Catholic ones, maintain a close relationship with it. Through radio, Jacques communicates and spreads his ideas as far and wide as he can, with the deep conviction that he has been entrusted with a mission. Religion is

his entire life; it animates him and anchors him in society. Within his structure of thought, shared by many Haitians, one must do good in order to reach heaven. Since it is widely accepted that nothing in this life will improve, one might as well secure a better one in the next. And if anyone stands in the way of that vision, they must be eliminated at any cost.

Why Jacmel as the setting for this story?

It is a coastal city in the south-east of the country, where the presence of the sea is palpable. There, people worship Agoué, the sea god. I have been coming to the Hôtel Florida in Jacmel for nearly twenty years, a century-old establishment where I feel at home. I had long dreamed of immortalising that place and making it the stage for a story: so, I imagined the brothel “La Belle Epoque”; within its walls.

Jacmel also housed a film school for many years, the Ciné Institute. It is the artistic city of the country, and people there are accustomed to film shoots. The entire crew was able to stay on the Rue du Commerce, where we created something of a bubble of possibility. That collective creativity, that sense of communion, from the chief electrician to the art department, and everyone in between, carried me forward.

I am deeply grateful to my team, as I am to my producer Jean-Marie Gigon. I wanted to explore the feeling of freedom in *Marie Madeleine*, and I had the immense privilege of having at my side someone capable of understanding that necessity, and who did everything in his power to help me achieve it. Each step, however difficult the path, we took in keeping with who we are. I hope that every filmmaker faced with adversity and striving to remain true to their art will find a guardian angel like him.



Within “La Belle Epoque” Marie Madeleine's room evokes a sanctuary-cave, of which walls her family history is drawn on and, by extension, that of her country...

In Haiti, having a private space is a luxury. It is hard to find solitude in a society where one is constantly watched. Precarity also prevents people from having “a room of one’s own” as Virginia Woolf put it. Marie Madeleine seeks to isolate herself as much as possible to bear reality. In this room, which is like a refuge, her memory comes alive. She lives between two worlds: one foot in the concrete present, the other in memory and imagination.

On several occasions, bodies appear to defy gravity. Through aerial sequences, sung or danced passages, and the presence of elements such as water and fire, Marie Madeleine takes on a powerfully sensory quality...

I believe we become invincible the moment we inhabit worlds other than our own. However does the afterlife manifest itself in the real world. The Haitian people live in several dimensions at once, and I wanted the film to convey that. One can be simultaneously crushed by terrible things and floating above them. I wanted to show this particular way Haitians have of managing their helplessness in the face of hardship.

It also mattered to me that we feel the physical presence of my characters, their energy, their vitality, despite everything that weighs on them; that we hear the vibration of their voices, which carry within them echoes of their ancestors, each person connected to a family memory, to a history.

You also show the widespread chaos in the city, where institutions, medical, judicial have broken down...

All of this intensifies the sense of powerlessness people feel; a feeling of being utterly overwhelmed, forced to live from one day to the next. There is even an eloquent Haitian saying: “Our life is twenty-four renewable hours.” That is something I wanted to capture in my film. The recognition of this human fragility, here and elsewhere, weighs heavily on me. The contemporary world prizes strength and resilience, but it seems important to me to make room for fragility, because it is very real.

Mothers hold a central place in your films, whether present or absent.

In order not to be destroyed by the ghosts of our mothers, we must be able to do something with them. Freda managed to stay centred, but most of the time that is not what happens. For Marie Madeleine, it did not work. In the one surviving photograph of her mother, the two are separated by a tear. That mark on the paper suggests the wound in the flesh that keeps them apart in life and in death.

Your images, with their warm tones, are saturated with vitality. How did you work with your director of photography, Nicolas Canniccioni, on the lighting and staging?

Nicolas and I began preparing this film a full year before shooting. I have a particular fondness for the warmth of 1980s cinema, films that almost make you want to reach out and touch the characters, thereby drawing the viewer intimately into what is happening. We opted for the Sony Venice 2 camera, which is extraordinary for filming dark skin tones and night scenes. The choice of framing then happened very naturally, as if the shots presented themselves of their own accord: no doubt because I know the locations where we filmed so well.

You appear as an actor in this film, alongside actor, slam poet and writer **Béonard Monteau**; actor, visual artist and poet **Édouard Baptiste**; and **Gaëlle Bien-Aimé**, who appeared in *Freda*...

After much reflection, I felt I had to take on Marie Madeleine's ambiguity myself, to allow the ambiguity of the other characters to emerge more naturally. I also wanted to feel free to really go for it, as in the scene where Marie Madeleine falls with her full weight in the middle of the street. I would never have dared ask an actress to do what I did. Playing Marie Madeleine brought me a great deal of fluidity and gave me the freedom I was so intent on finding.

For the other characters, I wanted actors who speak Creole and know Haitian culture well, which means a relatively small pool of performers. I have known **Béonard Monteau** for a long time. He seemed to me capable of expressing Joseph's inner turmoil.

Édouard Baptiste, known as Youyou, is a revered figure in Haiti. His personality is the polar opposite of Jacques'. And I knew he would be extraordinary in the role. He has that remarkable presence and voice, capable of commanding authority and inspiring fear.

Gaëlle Bien-Aimé is one of Haiti's few professional actresses, working across theatre, cinema, and stand-up comedy. She seemed the obvious choice for the role of Natacha.

Alongside these professional actors and actresses, you find women who had never acted before, real sex workers, and even my sister, **Mélissa Mildort**, who inspired the character of **Mélody** and plays her in the film. I was very attached to this mix, which recreates the sense you get in Haiti that everyone is always on a stage, so performative is daily life there. When you are in survival mode, you compose a great deal.

Marie Madeleine is a film in which music and sound design occupy a central place. After the closing credits, we hear the sound of waves...

It is a film as sonic as it is visual. The seventeen musical sequences woven through the film were extremely important to me. I wrote the cave scene, for instance, while visualising a cello player.

My sound engineer also contributed to the sound edit and knows Haiti well. The sounds of the country; motorbikes, the noise of the city are essential to recreating the atmosphere of Jacmel.

The sea, water, the crossing, the Atlantic, all of this is fundamental to the history of Black consciousness. And then, I grew up on an island. When I cannot see the sea, I feel disoriented; when I can, everything is right with the world.

NB. Gessica Généus wishes to thank Jean-Marie Théodat for his words, which enriched and nourished this conversation.





GESSICA GÉNÉS

Gessica Génés is a Haitian actress, author, director, and producer. After the 2010 earthquake, she became involved in her country's reconstruction efforts by working with the United Nations. In 2011 and 2012, she studied at Acting International in Paris, then returned to Haiti where she founded Ayizan Production, with the goal of fostering a film industry written and produced in Haiti. Starting in 2014, she developed her work as a director rooted in Haitian reality, directing the series *Vizaj Nou*, followed by *Douvan jou ka leve* in 2017, an intimate documentary drawn from her personal history, exploring the "disease of the soul." In 2021, she directed her first feature-length fiction film, *Freda*, which was presented in the official selection at the Cannes Film Festival in the Un Certain Regard section. The film, driven by precise and embodied direction, focuses on the daily lives of young women in Port-au-Prince and captures, with great accuracy, the tensions of a country torn by impossible choices. Acclaimed by international critics, *Freda* won 25 festival awards and confirmed the uniqueness of her vision. With *Marie Madeleine*, her new feature film, she reaches a new milestone. Shot in Haiti under increasingly constrained conditions, the film extends and intensifies her cinematic vision. In it, she affirms a cinema of presence, where bodies, faces, and individual trajectories become the setting for a collective story. In a country that is today largely inaccessible to cinema, her work is driven as much by artistic rigor as by necessity.

CREW

Director & Screenplay

Image

Editing

Sound

Art director

Costumes

Casting

Production

Gessica GÉNÉUS
Nicolas CANNICIONI
Martial SALOMON
Thomas VAN POTTELBERGE
Nathania PERICLÈS, David CHARLIER
Myrielle PIERRE CHARLIER, Naïke LAFLEUR
Keziah JEAN

Jean-Marie GIGON (SaNoSi Productions, France), Gessica GÉNÉUS (Ayizan Productions, Haiti), Anton IFFLAND STETTNER (Stenola Productions, Belgique), Lilian ECHE et Christel HENON (Bidibul, Luxembourg), Sylvain CORBEIL (Metafilms, Canada)

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CAST

Gessica GÉNÉUS	MARIE MADELEINE
Béonard MONTEAU	JOSEPH
Edouard BAPTISTE	JACQUES
Mélissa MILDORT	MÉLODY
Ginou JULES	SEXY
Eder ROMEUS	DIEUDONNÉ
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