

**GAEL GARCÍA BERNAL**

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**IF YOU  
SAW  
HIS HEART**

A FILM BY  
**JOAN CHEMLA**

**NAHUEL PÉREZ BISCAYART  
KARIM LEKLOU**

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# IF YOU SAW HIS HEART

**A FILM BY JOAN CHEMLA**

2017 / France / Colour / 1.85 / 5.1 / 86' / French, Andalousian Gipsy

## SYNOPSIS

Daniel is cast out of his community after the death of his best friend. He finds refuge in a hotel for castaways and broken souls and drifts into crime. An unexpected ray of light enlivens his existence when he meets Francine.



Joan Chemla

## INTERVIEW WITH JOAN CHEMLA

Director and Screenwriter

**Behind *If You Saw His Heart* is the novel, *Boarding Home* by Cuban writer, Guillermo Rosales.**

It's a very free adaptation. More than anything else, I wanted the film to keep the book's substance, as well as the sensations I felt while reading it. The novel's first sentences immediately set the tone: "The house said 'boarding home' on the outside, but I knew it would be my tomb. It was one of those marginal refuges where the desperate and hopeless go – crazy ones for the most part, with a smattering of old people abandoned by their families to die of loneliness so they won't screw up life for the winners." I was immediately immersed in this atmosphere, which was simultaneously tragic, absurd, romantic, lyrical... all tainted with dark humour. My short films, *Dr. Nazi* and *The Man with the Golden Brain*, were also very loose adaptations of a Charles Bukowski short story, and a tale by Alphonse Daudet. I like using literary texts as a jumping-off point for inspiration and appropriating a pre-existing world.

**What was it like to work with Santiago Amigorena, the co-screenwriter of the film?**

I had written my short films on my own – but a feature is a whole other way of working. There are a lot more opportunities to lose faith in yourself. I wrote a first outline alone, but I felt the need to be accompanied at one point, and a friend introduced me to Santiago Amigorena. Santiago made himself completely available and I was touched by his trust. I'm a rather anxious person, and he brought me the calm one gets with experience. And he has a very different relationship to work. I'm hard-working: I work a lot – and throw a lot away! Santiago is less of a perfectionist and highlights fragility. He doesn't try to control as much... And I was interested in his Latino culture for this project.

**The novel tells the story of a Cuban, who is exiled in Miami. How did you go about transposing the very different social and political contexts?**

In the US, Latinos are scapegoats who are shot at from the border. When looking for an equivalent community in France, I thought of the Romani people, then the Gypsies. I, myself, am the daughter and granddaughter of immigrants, and a part of my family was deported during the Second World War. Choosing this community and the subject of exile spoke to me personally. Another question I asked was: what is the equivalent of a boarding home in France? And the hotel social came to mind. Every year, there are so many stories about these places and the slumlords that run them. I did a lot of research on the subject, met a lot of people, visited squalid apartments with rents that were more or less regulated... Monsieur Ali is one of these slumlords. This very concrete social reality really interested me, but I didn't want to film it frontally.

**The boarding home feels like hell on earth. Daniel himself says, "I was already dead..."**

Yes, this place is his tomb and takes on hellish tones – especially at the end, when Daniel returns for good.... After getting mired in the loss and memory of his friend, Costel, Daniel embraces the dark world of this home for social rejects. It swallows him up, he closes in on himself, loses his humanity, and falls. And when he is at the end of his violent struggle, Francine arrives, a bit like an angel.

**Francine's arrival is all the more surprising since it happens late in the story.**

Yes, she's like an apparition, and we're completely unprepared for her. In the novel, too, Francine creates a rupture: finally, a ray of light! Of all the film's characters, she most resembles her character in the novel. Moreover, her name is the only original character name I kept. Francine is concrete. We know she's mentally fragile and was separated from her little boy. But she remains mysterious, to the point where we sometimes aren't sure if she's real. Is she perhaps a figment of Daniel's imagination? Is he now ready to allow this encounter to take place? Her arrival suggests a border between Daniel's two lives: one that ends with Costel's death – which might drag Daniel down with it, since he cannot bear the weight of his own guilt – and the life Daniel is preparing to live, where he is trying to find a new innocence. This is more than just paying back a mortal debt. Daniel is trying to redeem





himself through extreme self-sacrifice. Francine tells Daniel that he looks like her son... By returning him to his childhood, she brings him back to the idea at the beginning of the film: a certain form of virginity.

**When Strauss' Blue Danube rings out, we are suddenly thrown into a full-on romance.** Yes, it's so romantic it's almost camp! That's absolutely the tone of their relationship – and a deliberate choice. Being able to go from extreme darkness to extreme romanticism... I really like having both coexist. Daniel and Francine's relationship is atypical, but it's still a love story. They both share a certain form of melancholy and modesty, and this connection suddenly allows them to live together in the present. Their love is pure.

**After being immersed in Daniel's psyche for so long, we eventually lose our own bearings in time and space.**

Daniel is doubly exiled: from his community, who has rejected him, but above all, from himself. Therefore, he is less of a political exile than exiled from within. He's an illegal alien from existence. The film is completely anchored in the Gypsy community – but only as a way to better stray from it and look at Daniel as we would any human life. It doesn't matter if he haunts the streets of Havana, Miami, or Marseille... This universal quality, without any real geographic roots, was the starting point for my desire to adapt the novel.

**Clearly, you're more interested in developing and shaping a world than being naturalistic...** Yes, right from the writing process, it's my natural way of approaching things. I also love thinking about the final shooting script on my own. This preparatory period is fundamental for me. I'm going to say something very obvious, since I think it's the case for many directors, but the person who most inspired me and made me most want to do this job is



Stanley Kubrick! He is an absolute master of creating an entire universe. He's one of the rare directors who can make art films that also have a spectacular and lyrical dimension.

**The story being told in the film is dark, but the aesthetic is never gratuitously bleak.**

Whenever you film the margins of society, whenever you explore a political or social topic, there's a tendency to film it with a handheld camera, to emphasize the darkness, the seediness of it all... I don't identify with that approach and find it too self-evident. On the contrary, I wanted a loose aesthetic where I could contrast from very dark to very bright. First of all, I believe in the power of lyricism, in the destabilizing capacity of biting humour, and the emotion of dark romanticism. I wanted to make a film that was political, but also sensory. One that you would feel before understanding.

**Which is also the reason behind the story's structure, blurring the lines of temporality and immersing us in Daniel's inner chaos.**

Yes, especially in the first part of the film, since Daniel is bogged down in mourning, melancholy, dwelling on the past, and intense guilt. His head is like a mixed-up jigsaw puzzle. Once Francine arrives, the narration becomes far more fluid. Francine puts everything into order. The flashbacks are neither stylized nor indicated with subtitles. Time is stamped out through pure sensation: places, colours, atmospheres, Daniel's face – which is happier and more open at the beginning of the film...

**The film opens with a scene foreshadowing what will follow: a wedding scene filmed in bright and vivid sequence shots.**

This long exposition scene allowed me to play with contrasts. It is very generous – just before the film becomes unyielding. That scene was not intended to open the film. But I found it interesting to immediately catapult viewers into a flashback without them realizing it.

**The film also shows certain schemes carried out by the gypsy mafia, for instance, how they empty an entire house. How did you learn about these practices?**

I spoke to a lot of gypsies, and cops. And I met someone I really like: the investigative journalist, Jérôme Pierrat, who became a consultant on the script. I shadowed him in Marseille, diving deep into cases that sometimes had nothing to do with my film, but which was really informative. Jérôme is passionate and fascinating. He has billions of stories to tell. He specializes in every kind of mafia: from yakuza to drug dealers. He introduced me to a lot of people from the underworld.

**What about shooting in Marseille?**

Instead of being inspired by the city, my idea was to bend it to my perception, to what I had in mind when writing the script. I prefer to shape and model rather than capture a pre-existing life. For the halfway house, I wanted it to be shot in a single set in order to guarantee the unity and energy of the shoot. We found an abandoned spot on the port where travelling sailors would sometimes stay. But I didn't want spectators to feel the presence of the sea, so we had to block out every possible view. With production designer, Alain Frenzel, we sort of worked as we would in a studio, and I think that participates in the atmosphere of the film, which is both real and surreal. And even fantastic.

**Daniel is eaten up by guilt but, strangely, you allow the circumstances surrounding Costel's death to remain hazy, resulting in us questioning Daniel's responsibility.**

The circumstances matter little. Daniel feels guilty simply because he was there. And especially because Lucho, Costel's older brother, takes advantage of it to make Daniel pay for his very strong friendship to Costel. Lucho hates Daniel and sees him as his rival. All the more so, since Daniel is an orphan and Lucho's parents consider him to be their adopted son. At the wedding, his mother says she loves Daniel like her third son. When the accident on the pylon happens, Lucho jumps at the opportunity to make Daniel pay his "debt." And Daniel accepts. There is this great rivalry between Daniel and Lucho but they're both very sensitive and, through the hate, you can feel there's love. "If you pay your debt, maybe you can return to the camp one day," Lucho tells him. In a certain way, Daniel embodies a part of his dead brother.

**How did you come to choose Gael García Bernal for the role of Daniel?**

Before even writing the first lines of the script, I needed to cling to a face for Daniel's character. The more I thought about this story, the more I wanted a familiar face to embody the leading role. I wanted the film to tear spectators out of their everyday reality and take them to a rawer, more threatening world that would be completely foreign to them. I figured the journey would be easier if their guide was... Gael García Bernal. His face is radiant, gentle, almost childlike. It's in his DNA! No matter what he does! He was therefore the perfect counterpoint to the film's darkness. So I wrote the script for two years with Gael in mind, taking the risk that he might ultimately turn it down. I didn't know him, it was my first film, and it took place in France...

Moreover, my producer told me I should think of other actors, just in case. But as long as Gael had not turned it down, it was impossible! We sent him the script once it was finished. He really liked it, and I went to Argentina to meet him. I was very intimidated, and the stakes were very high. I had to come back with a yes from him.

**How did he prepare for the role?**

He already spoke a little French, but he worked very hard for the film. I didn't want him to learn his text phonetically. I find you can always hear that, and it has a negative impact on the acting when an actor doesn't understand what he's saying! Before the shoot, he spent a fortnight in Marseille, where I introduced him to all the contacts I'd personally made with the members of the gypsy community. He listened, soaked up their way of speaking – which is a different kind of Spanish than his native tongue, with another accent, another intonation, and another way of behaving. It's really a unique culture with its own codes. Gael loves this sort of work. He's very political and I think, as a Mexican, he saw connections between himself and them. Seeing him interact with them guided me in my decision to use non-professional actors to play the other gypsies. Without meaning to, he revealed them to me.

**And Marine Vaeth?**

I met her during my short film, *The Man with the Golden Brain*. This first collaboration went really well. But it was after the shoot that, little by little, we became very close. She immediately joined the project. She trusts me completely. It's rare to have an actor's complete trust. Marine is obviously a magnificent woman. But, what interested me was to use her beauty as little as possible. Marine has something very dark and fragile in her. I wanted to film that intensity, the depth of her soul.

**And Karim Leklou as the halfway house receptionist?**

For the role of Michel, I met many actors. But when I saw Karim, it was clear. I'm never impulsive, but I certainly was here! Karim is a great actor, and very talented. With the physique of an oversized baby, he was the perfect embodiment of this extremely unlikeable and violent character – but one you can nevertheless feel is extremely sensitive and fragile.

**How did you discover the Argentinian actor, Nahuel Pérez Biscayart, who plays the role of Costel?**

He's also an excellent actor, and very well-known in his country. Gael and he had never worked together, but they knew each other through their reputations. Nahuel has an incredible gift for languages. He learned French a few years ago to act in Benoit Jacquot's *Deep in the Woods*, and he speaks as well as you and I. As for the character of Maria, Costel's wife, I chose Alba Galocha – a young Spanish actress who is relatively known in her country, and who had never acted in France before. On the other hand, all the gypsy actors are non-professionals.

**Why did you decide to take the risk of using non-professionals for the rest of the cast?**

Interweaving professionals and non-professionals wasn't easy to put into place, but I wanted to take that risk. Gael is a very experienced actor, and almost American in his way of acting and the control he exerts over his image. Placing him face to face with non-professionals was destabilizing and most likely very hard for him, but I immediately thought it would be enriching for everyone. These non-professionals reflected the image of what a gypsy could be and, vice versa, he could share his experience and acting technique.





### **The soundtrack helps to pull us deep inside Daniel's psychological universe.**

Ever since my first short film, I've worked with the same sound engineer, Damien Tronchot, who is also in charge of sound editing this film. I like this way of working because he's really responsible, as a result, and invested in the entire film's sound design, from recording to editing. I insisted that Damien meet Gabriel Yared, the composer for the soundtrack. That isn't really common, but Gabriel appreciated this approach. He could feel I'd been thinking about the film and building it ahead of time.

### **Why did you ask Gabriel Yared to compose the music?**

I like his eclecticism. He can write a very classical piece, and just as easily compose the music for Xavier Dolan's *Tom at the Farm*. In light of his career, the fact that he could work on a more experimental film is proof he's a free spirit. Despite winning an Oscar, Gabriel remains just as passionate and available. I thought of him well before I began shooting the film. Yet again, my obsession with anticipating and leaving nothing to chance...! It was all the more important since I knew I'd need a tailor-made original score that would participate in the film's aesthetic universe.

### **How was the editing process?**

It was very intricate! Daniel is very silent and his story hangs on a fragile and delicate narrative thread. I'm most interested in what happens between major events: those latent moments that rest at the edge of expectation, favouring internal and underground conflicts invisible to the naked eye. It was also essential to find a balance between Daniel's trajectory and the supporting characters – who are great in number, and each of whom I love. I didn't want to lose a single one. I also had to manage the deconstruction of time, and balance the different tones – especially the shift that occurs with the incongruous, nearly absurd arrival of Monsieur Ali. How can he be introduced at the height of the film's dramatic conflict, and Francine's extreme romanticism? I worked with Béatrice Herminie, who had edited my short film, *Dr Nazi*. She's also the strong silent type!

### **And the title of the film?**

This phrase concerns every character, since I have compassion for each and everyone of them. My gaze is never distanced or cynical, not even for Michel or Monsieur Ali. I understand all of them, despite their dysfunction or particular brand of madness.

Interview with Claire Vassé



## **INTERVIEW WITH GABRIEL YARED**

Composer

### **It's quite surprising to see your name associated with IF YOU SAW HIS HEART, a first feature film by the young director, Joan Chemla...**

Not at all! I'm quite interested in young directors. I don't think in terms of a "career." Besides I don't like that word. If I did, I would've stayed in the US after my Oscar, accepted to do five films a year, and most likely have been depressed! I'm always looking for a true marriage with a film. And this marriage is what makes me want to outdo myself every time. When Joan wrote to ask if she could send me a project, I immediately felt she had a personality and was captivated by her well-written and well-structured script. Its apparent simplicity hid a complexity that resurfaces in the film. And I loved all the silences in it – they made me dream! I imagined all kinds of music before even starting to work.

### **Did you work a lot on the film in advance?**

I generally like to work ahead of time and compose the music before the shoot. For IF YOU SAW HIS HEART, I preferred to wait until I saw the first images of the film. That didn't stop me from getting involved very early. Joan sent me photos of the first locations they found in Marseille, and also asked for advice on what Gypsy music to use for the marriage scene. After that, I did not want to use the same colours in my own composition. Film music is a quasi-silent, almost solemn character who pops up from time to time without ever mixing with the musical world of the characters. They are two different entities, one that belongs to reality, and the other to dreams.

**Music is not very present in quantity, but it permeates the entire film.**

For a composer, coming into a project with many silences does not necessarily mean there will be a lot of music. For that matter, as you said, it's quite rare in the film. On the other hand, that means thinking carefully about every note being used.

I like music to have a quasi-subliminal force. People often say music is a character in a film. Of course it is, but they often forget that a character isn't always talking, and doesn't take over the film. The music isn't there to fill space or underline. Especially a film like Joan's, where the images are already so inhabited. I didn't want to be redundant. And certain passages of her film are already so musical, they can remain perfectly silent.

**What were your guidelines when composing?**

Joan wanted the music to "light up the darkest and most mysterious aspects of the characters." The script and film were built in concentric circles: we turn around, and around, and around... The road is long before we reach the heart of the film. I love that the film is very structured, and yet that foggy feeling throughout never fully dissipates. The first time you watch the film, you feel like you've seen a mirage float past. That's what I wanted to communicate through the music.

I was also looking for a certain starkness to blend with the film's complexity. I therefore looked for a tight, eight-person orchestra to respect the very pure spirit of the film, be it in terms of the image, direction of actors, or the sound. Joan was present for the recordings. She was happy to see the music being made with the musicians, all of whom added their own humanity and warmth.

**Joan Chemla's cinema deals with the senses...**

Like the hero of the film – for whom every day is a renewal – the spectators don't know where they're going. They have to let themselves be taken by the hand and enter the film, like in any unclassifiable work of art. One that tells not so much a story as it does a journey – a personal reverie, and a stroll that has no beginning and no end.

In a rich and diverse French film industry, Joan is one of the true originals, who is outside the system. I'm sure that, as she matures, her personality will sharpen, and her style will be even more chiselled. I hope she will continue to go towards the public without ever compromising her ideal. I see much talent in her and the promise of other beautiful films to come.

Interview by Claire Vassé

## JOAN CHEMLA / FILMOGRAPHY

- 2017 IF YOU SAW HIS HEART (TIFF / PLATFORM)
- 2012 THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN BRAIN (SHORT)
- 2011 DR NAZI (SHORT)
- 2008 WRONG ROAD (SHORT)





## CAST

DANIEL  
FRANCINE  
COSTEL  
MICHEL  
LUCHO  
PEPE  
SYLVIE  
FRANCK  
ALI  
LOUIS  
MARIA  
WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF

Gael García Bernal  
Marine Vacth  
Nahuel Pérez Biscayart  
Karim Leklou  
Mariano Santiago  
Manuel «Manole» Munoz  
Antonia Malinova  
Patrick de Valette  
Abbes Zahmani  
Théophile Sowié  
Alba Galocha  
Wojtek Pszoniak

## CREW

A FILM BY  
WRITTEN BY  
INSPIRED BY THE NOVEL *BOARDING HOME* BY  
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER  
ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS  
ORIGINAL SCORE  
SET DECORATOR  
CINEMATOGRAPHER  
EDITOR  
CASTING  
COSTUME DESIGNER  
STUNT SUPERVISOR  
SOUND / SOUND EDITOR  
RE-RECORDING MIXER  
COLOURIST  
FIRST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR  
PRODUCTION MANAGER  
POST PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR

Joan Chemla  
Joan Chemla and Santiago Amigorena  
Guillermo Rosales  
Pierre Guyard  
Christophe Rossignon, Philip Boëffard  
Gabriel Yared  
Alain Frentzel  
André Chemetoff  
Béatrice Herminie  
Alexandre Nazarian, Cendrine Lapuyade  
Elfie Carlier  
Laurent Demianoff  
Damien Tronchot  
Cyril Holtz  
Isabelle Julien  
Luis Bertolo  
Jérôme Pétament  
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