

AURORA FILMS
PRESENTS



Locarno Film Festival
Official Selection

PETITE SOLANGE

A FILM BY AXELLE ROPERT

2021 – FRANCE – DRAMA – 16MM – 1.66 – 5.1 – FRENCH – 86'

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SYNOPSIS

Solange is a typical 13-year-old curious and full of life, with perhaps the peculiarity of being overly sentimental and adoring her parents. But when her parents begin to argue, fight and slowly drift apart, the threat of divorce looms near and Solange's world begins to splinter. To keep her family together, she will worry, act out, suffer. It's the story of a young and overly tender teen who wants the impossible: for love to never end.

INTERVIEW WITH AXELLE ROPERT

Why make a melodrama nowadays?

I go to the cinema a lot, and it seems to me that films “with great heart-rending feelings” are somewhat neglected by directors, as if feelings were proof of “naivety”, whereas there were many such films in the 50s, say... I love to cry at the cinema. I’d go so far as to say I have a feeling of “gratitude” when it happens to me, as if the melodrama genre made us rediscover ourselves as “sensitive souls”... So I set out with this ambition: to scrape away, layer by layer, the adult shell and expose the helpless, fragile, child inside... And to make a film that is as tender as it is cruel, as vibrant as it is tenacious in its way of delving into forgotten wounds...

There is also a subject which is at the origin of the film...

Yes, a subject that is very close to my heart: divorce, but told from the child’s point of view, and not the parents’. I belong to a generation, those who were teens in the 1980s whose parents started to divorce *en masse*. It was a real sociological phenomenon. Our grandparents stayed together for life, our parents separated... I am part of this generation to whom this real break happened, a break that makes family histories very different from those of the previous model. I am a child of divorcees (even though *Petite Solange* is not at all autobiographical), and I was keen to tell this story, which has hardly been shown on film: the effects of divorce on a child... It is a rich subject which I feel is little-known, neglected even.

How did you come to identify these consequences outside your personal experience?

I wasn’t at all interested in telling my story. I like fiction! When I was writing the film, I discovered the existence of many forums in which the children of divorced parents, now adults, shared their experiences. It was very moving to realize that, whatever the social class, the same traumas of abandonment, of a world being torn asunder, of destruction, and sadness, persist, even in adulthood. Strangely, this is not well-known and yet the end of family love is a huge theme which is tricky to tackle because one of the challenges was to avoid making a film that would make parents feel guilty...

It seems impossible to film a separation without filming the violence between the parents. What were your directorial choices so that the intensity of the parents’ relationship did not take precedence over the intensity of Solange’s grief?

I chose to never film head-on any arguments between the parents in the foreground, much less the shouting matches. This violence is always, both in the images and in the sound, seen sideways on, through mirrors, doorways... Similarly, everything is heard from a distance, in snatches. This also corresponds to the world of children. When children sense that there is trouble brewing, they behave like little spies, on the alert to information that reaches them indirectly. The world becomes full of signs that need interpreting. Visually, it is very interesting and rich to film. But generally speaking, the directing of every scene required great attention to detail...

Solange is a very unusual teenager: candid, tender, defenseless, never angry. Is she really a modern girl?

Of course she is totally “2021”! We have a slightly distorted vision of teenagers because in recent years, films have focused on naturalistic, silent, aggressive, bristling teenagers... I wanted to portray a young girl who loves to the point of losing her mind... Nothing tears me

up more in life than very gentle people who you feel are going to be crushed by the implacable wall of reality. And I think Solange has a great trajectory in the film: from the luminous candour of the start to the final darkness... I wanted to tell that story: the brutal loss of innocence, the entry into adulthood which inevitably involves learning about hardness. I don't know if *Petite Solange* is a tender film. In the end, I think it's a rather violent film which wears a mask – it's up to us to decide what's behind the mask. And audiences all have their own take on the final scene in the back garden: some find it tender and bright, others very hard and dark... And I find that fascinating.

The music also totally embraces Solange's character. Can we say that this is your most musical film?

The melodrama is intrinsically linked to music. That's probably why I wanted to make one as I listen to a lot of pop and rock music. I wrote *Petite Solange*, listening to a lot of tunes, looking for that quality unique to music: to bring tears to your eyes in a very short time, which isn't possible in literature or even poetry. I created a playlist of model songs by the Beach Boys, Danny Kaye, Procol Harum, Daniel Johnston, Mark Hollis, Townes Van Zandt: elegiac, heart-rending songs that are the film's hidden soundtrack. And I worked very early on with composer Benjamin Esdraffo who was an essential partner. With one model in particular: *White Dog* by Samuel Fuller (1981). I am passionate about this film. Although the soundtrack is by Ennio Morricone, it isn't well-known, but it is extraordinary, with poignant, deliberately monotonous sounds which rise in power before strangely slowing down. It's unique, painful, anguished music.

How did you cast Jade Springer, who plays the role of *Petite Solange*?

The casting director Joanna Grudzinska and I gave ourselves references, models. We wanted to find the uncompromising, melancholic energies of Jean-Pierre Léaud in François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* and of Charlotte Gainsbourg in Claude Miller's *L'Effrontée*, which I discovered when it came out and which I loved. I remember seeing Charlotte Gainsbourg by chance shortly after the film's release in the metro, and I was struck by her long, pensive, hunched figure. It was a complicated casting, because so-called "natural" acting doesn't interest me at all, I like actors who really act, who take a roll of the dice and surprise us with ideas, be they good or bad. Would a 14-year-old be capable of that? I won't say too much about how we chose Jade, because that's between her and us, but I will say that she got the part with a musical test: singing *a capella* "Mon Amie la Rose" by Françoise Hardy. She did it, we didn't comment and we just told her it was good! Jade in the film is like an open book, but one that remains partly indecipherable. I think she's a very unique girl and actress.

How did you come up with the idea of creating this Léa Drucker/Philippe Katherine couple? What harmonies did you see in them, physically and morally?

Solange's family is an almost standard, universal family. The parents are a couple with deliberately ordinary, rather classic ways of thinking when it comes to their life with their children and have appealing but not very glamorous jobs. It's certainly not a chic or special environment! So we needed actors who would embody this everyday feel yet be slightly edgy. Léa Drucker has this finesse, this humour, this intelligent whimsy. Philippe Katherine has a naturally very loving way with the children, and filming a father's love for his daughter seemed obvious with him. And yet he introduced a form of harshness into his character which was unexpected, but which makes the situations more tense...

***Petite Solange* is set in Nantes. Why choose such a cinematically resonant city?**

Despite what one might think, it is not at all because of Jacques Demy's films! The main cinematic reference for *Petite Solange* is François Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*. So it's not Demy's marvellous world, but rather the paradoxically fantastic harshness of Truffaut's story, that of a child left to his own devices in the big city, a character who crosses his neighbourhood as if he were crossing the whole world. Nantes has the perfect geography for this. This city gives air and scope to my story, which is very psychological and intimate, without being a closed-door story. It's a fairly large, modern city where you can take refuge, be anonymous, get lost, and walk alone in the middle of the crowd. It is also an open territory thanks to the sea which makes everything possible and clear. *Petite Solange* is a story that breathes and has a luminous side to it, with an unfolding narrative. The outside world has its part to play, constantly influencing their destinies.

There is also another geographical reference: Italy. Why is that?

Because Italy is the natural home of melodrama! The other source film for *Petite Solange* is Luigi Comencini's *Incompreso*, a poster of which is seen in the film. There is something about the light, the cruelty, the lyricism of a certain kind of Italian music, and also the sweetness of the implacable course of things. The Italian thread let me create a connection and bring an explosion of colour, something that carries you away on a wave of feelings. Something intense, too, which again can convey the idea of what makes an introverted fourteen-year-old girl dream.

A word of conclusion?

A few days ago, I saw a school choir's performance. As the children were singing joyfully, a little girl started to cry silently, tears running down her cheeks. She was crying uncontrollably as she sang, very calm and professional. I didn't understand why. I turned around and saw her mother coming (she was very late). A big smile appeared on the little girl's face; the mother's face was hard and cold. Pain, tenderness, and harshness. This scene is not in *Petite Solange*, but it could be. I will put it in another film, no matter what.

ABOUT AXELLE ROPERT

Axelle Ropert directed three features: *The Wolberg Family* (2009) which was nominated for The Golden Camera Award at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival, *Miss and the Doctors* (2013) which won the Best New Director Award at the 2014 Vancouver International Film Festival, and *The Apple of my Eye* (2016) which competed at the 2016 Locarno Film Festival. She is also screenwriter for other directors such as Serge Bozon, Patric Chiha or Blandine Lenoir. Since 2018, her films and other works have been the subject of retrospectives at prestigious international festivals in Argentina, Sweden and Spain.

FILMOGRAPHY

2016	THE APPLE OF MY EYE (La Prunelle de mes yeux) Drama, 84'
2014	MISS AND THE DOCTORS (Tirez la Langue Mademoiselle) Drama, 102'
2009	THE WOLBERG FAMILY (La Famille Wolberg) Drama, 95'
2005	ÉTOILE VIOLETTE Short, 45'

CAST & CREW

CAST

SOLANGE	Jade Springer
AURELIA	Léa Drucker
ANTOINE	Philippe Katerine
ROMAIN	Grégoire Montana-Haroche
GINA	Chloé Astor

CREW

Writer-Director	Axelle Ropert
DOP	Sébastien Buchmann
Sound & Mixing	Laurent Gabiot
Production Designer	Valentine Gauthier Fell
Costume Designer	Delphine Capossela
Image Editing	Héloïse Pelloquet
Sound Editing	Claire-Anne Largeron and Rosalie Revoyre
Colorgrading	Mathilde Delacroix
Music	Benjamin Esdraffo
1st AD	Julie Gouet
Head of Production	Julia Maraval
Postproduction	Katia Khazak
Produced by	Charlotte Vincent – Aurora Films
With the participation of	CINE +
In association with	CINECAP 4 Cinémage 15
With the support of	Région Île de France Région des Pays de la Loire Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée CINECAP 3 Development CINEAXE Development
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