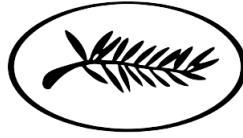


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FESTIVAL DE CANNES
COMPETITION
2022 OFFICIAL SELECTION

MOTHER AND SON

A FILM BY LÉONOR SERRAILLE

2022 – FRANCE – DRAMA – FRENCH – 116'

mk2
FILMS

SYNOPSIS

In the late 1980s, Rose moves to the Paris suburbs with her two young sons, Ernest and Jean.

Spanning 20 years from their arrival in France to the present day, the film is the moving chronicle of the construction and deconstruction of a family.

INTERVIEW WITH LÉONOR SERRAILLE

Where did you get the idea for *Mother and Son*?

I think the idea for the film arose from a feeling that something was missing. I was amazed this story had never been brought to the cinema, even though it was so much a part of my country and my life.

The idea of making a “family saga” was also connected to a need I felt to tell my children a part of their history, or at least an *interpretation* of it.

After *Jeune Femme*, I wanted to do something very different, more like a novel. I talked to my children’s father about it because the plan was suddenly taking shape in my mind. I suppose I was looking for some kind of “validation” from him, but he just said that what mattered was that I tell the story in my own way.

It took me a few months to realise that it would be freely inspired by *his* story, and it would be *my* film. I found myself in a place that corresponded to the questions I was asking myself at the time. What does it mean to be a family? To be a mother or a son? To come from somewhere else and be French? The film was the result of the complete *carte blanche* I’d been given. I approached it with a mixed sense of freedom and responsibility.

You have partly answered one of the questions posed by this film, but I still want to ask one question: How is it possible to film and feel the story of a French African family from the inside when you are not yourself of French African descent?

I think that in one way or another I was already immersed in this story.

I would have felt more lost if I’d been interested in an 18th century French peasant family. This story touched me deeply and I could see a rich array of subjects running through it.

I tried to understand the characters, to let them win me over emotionally. The core of the writing was to sketch them as singular, complex individuals. That’s how I like to be approached myself in life, like someone with many facets. For example, I’m a woman but I don’t want to be permanently brought back to that, because it doesn’t explain the whole of my identity.

It’s a bit the same for this family. They were born elsewhere, they arrive in France, and of course that shapes them. But society, the media and, over the past few months in particular, politicians, have taken it upon themselves to apply labels, words and definitions to people. In film, you can look for something else. It’s an exploration. You search for what is behind the things projected onto us. In any case, that’s what I tried to do. To bring in other elements to change how I saw them.

I tried to observe them as heroes, like the heroes of a novel, because that’s how I saw them. I had to be discreet, make space for them, and show their complexity and their sensitivity as well. The actors are all very tall. I may have had an unconscious desire to make them look big on the screen too, so they would assert themselves as substantial characters, role models and points of reference.

How did you go about writing the film?

Pretty quickly, I focused on the central trio to create a portrait that could “move” over time. A mother and her two sons. I gave them all fairly equal parts. This simple type of structure, in three blocks, has always interested me. It’s dialectical and allows for resonance, progression and sharp breaks. I’d just come out of editing my first full length feature film and my writing had changed a little. It was a good time to try new things. I stuck to concrete elements and

points of reference close to real life: Arriving in France at the end of the eighties, with precise stop off points. I was free to invent, add or remove.

The structure of the film is quite unusual, linear, but branching out in other directions from certain points.

It developed naturally, really. All three characters interested me. I liked the fact that the different time periods slid easily into one another via them. Within each part, I used a narrative thread, like brackets inside a structure, authorised breathing spaces for each character. Each of the characters has moments outside the main storyline which apparently "serve no purpose", but which are nevertheless essential, like escape points, windows which open to let the film breathe. The core of the editing was finding this tenuous balance by cutting the story to the bone, while embracing the more impressionistic touches...

You show a single-parent family where the father is absent. Rose also belongs to the category of frontline workers. Was it important politically and socially, to show this?

Yes and no. "Yes" because from the moment you want to film life, you inevitably take a position. It's always political to show a single woman managing her life on all fronts.

And "no" because if politics must be included, I hope it's done in the most invisible way possible, subtly "instilled". I have no militant rhetoric or message in the film. As a spectator, I am often resistant to that myself - it sends me running.

That said, I have always lacked political commitment in my life. Maybe I'm trying to make up for it in a different way. When I mentioned the idea of the film to my mother-in-law, she was surprised, almost disappointed: "But no one is interested in us, no one will be interested in this". How could I not feel sadness and anger? It made me ten times more determined to write it.

They are also heroes of the *invisible and silent integration* that Stéphane Beaud describes so well in *La France des Belhoumi*. The kind that doesn't interest the media, who focus on success models like Rachida Dati, or on drug dealers, when it's not jihadists. We have to fix this, that's for sure. When I see Rose's life, I say to myself, "What courage! And would I be as brave and progressive as she is?"

Most people don't complain much, they work or hope to work, they love each other, they have children or not, they live as best they can. They play the game, they pay their taxes, they lead their lives. There is a shortage of these stories in the cinema.

When we were auditioning, I was struck by the number of actors or actresses who said, "Oh, yes, that's my sister's, my brother's, my aunt's... life".

I like it when films recount the ordinary lives of people I find extraordinary. It consoles me a little. These stories are very internalised.

Another striking feature is that Rose never self-victimises.

That's right, she moves on. She takes action, she dares, she doesn't talk about things very much. She expects a lot from her children because she sets the bar relatively high for herself. There is a certain kind of toughness in her, but it is also a driving force to get through the ordeals of life.

Let's talk about the sons. The oldest, Jean, very gifted at school, then he falls into a form of depression at 20. How did you conceive his evolution?

Jean is a child who arrives in France with a lot of hope pinned on him. Like any child who loves his mother, he wants to fulfil her expectations.

Later, he is once again transported into another environment, the Rouen bourgeoisie, in which he does not feel legitimate. Perhaps he lacks the necessary culture, or certain behavioural codes. Academic success alone isn't enough. I was interested in depicting this "duty to succeed", in questioning its limits. He is an older brother who also acts as a "father" to his younger brother, and he is overwhelmed by his responsibilities.

Has he ever had time to have dreams for his life? That was what I wanted to question. He is also hypersensitive, permeable to his mother's anxiety, while not knowing how to help her.

Ernest, the youngest, has an almost opposite path.

Ernest also carries a lot on his shoulders. He seems more solid than Jean, but maybe deep down he's not so solid... He too has gone through a difficult phase. He also wonders about his identity. At one point he is even told, "Depression isn't for us. You've been hanging around with white people too much". But what colour does Ernest *really* feel he is? Sometimes melancholy is passed on, a sadness runs through the generations, and the youngest are the recipients of it, without being able to understand it.

This question of identity and skin colour is fundamental in your film.

Let's say that it runs through the film. The question of "back home" too. That interested me a lot when I started writing. To be black, to be born elsewhere, to be French, and to feel neither white nor black, nor both, or even that you belong nowhere. What does that mean? These are questions that are part of my daily life, my eldest daughter is 5 years old and she is already questioning everything. I don't have all the answers to give her, so I try to find them as best I can.

You also show that there are conflicts and tensions among Franco-Africans, that they do not always form a bloc, contrary to what communitarianism or racism would have us believe.

Of course, because there is complexity everywhere. It was very important to show these scenes of tension. Many of the actresses during the auditioning told me stories like this, where they weren't accepted by their family or friends. No, not everything is easy. When she arrives in France, Rose needs to build things in her own way, she's a free spirit, an example of rebelliousness.

The story of *Mother and Son* is very wide-ranging, but it seems to me that your directing aims at a certain sobriety. How did you imagine that?

Writing is a long, slightly crazy process in which everything has to be under control. So when I'm directing, I try to do the opposite, to let go. I'm pretty instinctive when it comes to directing. Making a film means preparing for unexpected things to happen, but what for example? The less I know, the better I feel.

But in this film, there were a lot of different settings, several time periods, quite a few inherent constraints. We had to *anticipate* much more than for *Jeune Femme*. So the job was to prepare the ground in order to be able to do things as freely as possible. I had time, and an incredible Director of Photography who immediately understood how I worked and worked non-stop so that the film could breathe as much as possible. We tried to vary the energy levels and use

cinematic devices to create different sensations. The film has three parts, but they are not three short films, we also had to find a way to slide between time periods as invisibly and elegantly as possible, organically.

Your Director of Photography is H  l  ne Louvart, a star of the profession who has worked with Christophe Honor  , Agn  s Varda, Wim Wenders, Nicolas Klotz, Alain Guiraudie, Maggie Gyllenhaal...

H  l  ne is one of the most extraordinary people I have ever met in real life. She is a chameleon, she is both a translator (of my mental mess) and interpreter of a story and its characters. They seem to be inscribed in her memory once and for all and never leave her. This makes working together exciting because, from there on, everything she does comes naturally.

I learned a lot from her and I think our dialogue was fundamental to the film's passage in time. We had to find a rhythm, a novelistic pace.

At the beginning of each idea, H  l  ne suggested that I push it further and further, which gave the impression that anything was possible, all the time. We tried to vary the factors, to never let a routine set in and create rhythms.

It was intuitive and free.

We only kept the camera on our shoulders for certain more "documentary" scenes, with the children in particular, and for certain isolated scenes. We took the time to lay things out with choreography and invisible movements. There was also this obsession of ours: to put these characters in a different setting, to leave the grey and the asphalt, to offer them air, sky, greenery, warmth.

With the actors, whether they were professionals or not, I proceeded in the same way as with *Jeune Femme*, with the comfort of having more time: we prepared ahead, but nothing was set in stone. We invented, considered things together, on instinct.

Sometimes, I decided certain very important things the day before or the same morning, but this daily suspense was crucial for me. It would be impossible for me to shoot a storyboard faithfully, I need there to be an element of chaos for it to seem like real life, which I find very chaotic. But doing things like that can only work if the whole team wants it. I had great people around me.

Annabelle Lengronne, who plays Rose, was a fantastic find.

Our meeting really marked me. The role seemed very important to her and that was important to me. When you're not alone in your choice, but the role seems to be very much awaited from the other side, the exchange is rich, less unbalanced. Annabelle had the stature to play Rose at different ages, and a singular mixture of strength and grace. I offered her several pieces of music to choose a favourite track for the character, and she suggested something else, which she felt was more in keeping with Rose.

From the first try-out, she was already in the film. Her point of view and her eye were precious, she was always spot on. On set, we could do anything, try anything together.

She's meticulous and highly inventive. There is both lightness and tragedy within her. And I think that's rare.

St  phane Bak plays Jean at the age of 20. We've already seen him in several roles and this is the first time he's acted in such an internalised way.

Youna de Peretti, the casting director, had the perfect intuition when she arranged for me to meet St  phane. St  phane is cerebral, he reflects a lot, he works a lot, he's stubborn, he likes

to debate and does so with intelligence and personality. He reminded me of the Jean as a child that I'd written in the script. There is also something of his childhood anchored in him, he is open and vibrant, passionate and talented.

He seemed to know Jean, and spoke to me about him with perspicacity, very aware of the role he had to play.

He had a lot of perspective on his character and the story.

The meeting between Stéphane and Annabelle allowed us to start building this family. There is a kind of balance of power between them, that you can feel it in the air.

And Ahmed?

Ahmed was working in an unusual register for him when we shot this film - that's what he told me. I think we were both surprised to be working with each other and I found it really uplifting. He is a very sensitive person, an actor who is both emotional and very technical, so he slipped into the film naturally and with great finesse. I was quite amazed, I must say. He doesn't have that many scenes, but he took the character further than I expected, obviously with great generosity towards the film and the other actors, especially the non-professionals.

LÉONOR SERRAILLE - Filmography

- 2022** **MOTHER AND SON (Un Petit Frère)** | Feature, 117'
2017 **JEUNE FEMME** | Feature, 97' | Cannes 2017, Caméra d'Or winner
2016 **BODY** | Short, 42'

CAST

Rose	Annabelle Lengronne
Jean (19 years old)	Stéphane Bak
Ernest (13 years old)	Kenzo Sambin
Ernest (Adult)	Ahmed Sylla
Jean (10 years old)	Sidy Fofana
Ernest (5 years old)	Milan Doucansi
Eugénie	Audrey Kouakou
Félicien	Étienne Minoungou
Jules César	Jean-Christophe Folly
Malick	Majd Mastroura
Marsac	Pascal Rénéric
Thierry	Thibaut Evrard
Camille	Angelina Woreth
Sonia	Manon Clavel
Anna	Laetitia Dosch
Ludivine	Saül Benchetrit
Romain	Rafael Rajabian
Gaspard	Aliocha Delmotte
Ludivine's little sister	Serena Goy de Peretti

CREW

Writer & Director	Léonor Serraille
Producer	Sandra da Fonseca
Associate Producers	Bertrand Gore, Nathalie Mesuret
Director of Photography	Hélène Louvart
Editing	Clémence Carré
Production Manager	Pierre Delaunay
Casting	Youna de Peretti
Assistant Director	Maxime L'Anthoën
Sound Engineer	Anne Dupouy
Mixing	Niels Barletta
Sound Editing	Charlotte Butrak, Pierre Bariaud
Production Design	Marion Burger
Costumes	Isabelle Pannetier
Makeup	Géraldine Belbéoc'h
Hairstyling	Aude Fidon, Clémence Gaag, Jimmy Springard
Electrician	Marianne Lamour
Key Grip	Sébastien Demarigny
Property Master	Julien Poitou Weber
Script Supervisor	Leïla Geissler
Location Scout	Sébastien Gardet
General Manager	Maxime Mund
Post-production Manager	Delphine Passant
Music Supervisor	Thibault Deboaisne
Production	Blue Monday Productions
Co-production	France 3 Cinéma
With the support of	Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée
With the participation of	Canal+, Ciné+, France Télévisions
With the support of	Région Île-de-France in partnership with the CNC
With the support of	the Région Normandie for rewrite and production In partnership with the CNC in association with Normandies Images
With the support of	Fondation Gan pour le Cinéma
With the participation of	Fonds Images de la Diversité – Agence Nationale de la Cohésion des territoires – CNC
In association with	Palatine Etoile 18, Cofinova 17
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