

NORD-OUEST FILMS & ARTE FRANCE CINÉMA
PRESENT



THE PASSENGERS OF THE NIGHT

A FILM BY MIKHAËL HERS

2022 – FRANCE – DRAMA – FRENCH – 111'

mk2
FILMS

SYNOPSIS

On election night in 1981, celebrations spill out onto the street and there is an air of hope and change throughout Paris. But for Elisabeth, her marriage is coming to an end, and she will now have to support herself and her two teenage children. She finds work at a late-night radio show and encounters a troubled teenager named Talulah whom she invites into her home. With them, Talulah experiences the warmth of a family for the first time. Although she suddenly disappears, her free spirit has a lasting influence. Elisabeth and her children grow in confidence and begin to take risks, changing the trajectory of their lives.

INTERVIEW WITH MIKHAËL HERS

After *Amanda*, firmly rooted in the present day, with *The Passengers of the Night* you take us on a deep-dive into the 1980s.

At the heart of the project lay the inscription of the story in that decade. Those were my childhood years. They say you are as much a product of your childhood as of your country, and I wanted to plunge back into that time of my life, revisiting all the sights and sounds. Those sensations and colors made me. I carry them in me.

Although you were younger than the characters in your film...

True, I was a child, and happy to be so, but I have always fantasized about being a teen or young adult in the eighties and experiencing that vibe to which art was central, especially in music. I will always feel a pang of regret about not fully experiencing that scene in real time, only encountering it as it was petering out. Making this movie allowed me to revisit those years at the age I wish I had been back then.

Also, I wanted to explore a slightly different temporality. Usually, my films have a highly circumscribed timeline. In *The Passengers of the Night*, I wanted the story to have an epic feel. The tone is still a slice of life but the story unfolds over seven years.

The central figure is Elisabeth, who has a son at high school and a daughter in college, and whose husband has just walked out on her.

When her husband leaves her, Elisabeth loses her emotional and material anchor points. While she continues living in their apartment for the duration of the movie, she confronts a new daily reality. She is not in dire straits but it's a big deal having to get by on your own, working two jobs, including one at night. I have always been fascinated and moved by people who seemed to have a path laid out for them and then, when it runs into a wall, manage to sidestep and reinvent themselves. It feels as if that emancipation requires uncommon strength, generosity and independence.

Nonetheless, Elisabeth is no "superwoman."

We learn little about her family's past or her married life, but I think it's fairly obvious that Elisabeth does not possess an ostensible urge to construct herself in opposition. I wanted to portray a character that would escape the usual pigeon-holing. In life, people rarely have a single facet. Elisabeth is as vulnerable as she is determined and solid, as lucid as she is naive. I was keen to make sure her parenting and her relationship to work, love and politics would not be a manifesto but rather evolve out of the humdrum and real aspects of her life.

The film opens on a major historical event: François Mitterrand's election as French president on May 10th, 1981.

It was a striking image, a seminal moment for a whole generation, but we'll never know how Elisabeth experienced the event. I think this absence of political messaging comes from my childhood. I was six years old on that famous night and I sensed that something important was happening, which made my parents happy because they leaned to the left, but it was all very vague. My parents never joined a political party. Their political activism primarily infused their daily lives, their relationship to the rest of the world and other people. I think that shaped my relationship to politics, and therefore Elisabeth's. What better activism than the one she

demonstrates every day in the love she shows her two children, in the way she takes in Talulah, and how she envisions love and social bonds?

Elisabeth and her son Mathias are constructed in parallel: they (re)discover love and share a passion for writing. Even their love scenes echo each other.

The resonance between those two scenes was not conscious, but it leaped out at me in editing. *The Passengers of the Night* is a film with two heads, a sentimental education at two stages in life.

Tell us what it was like to film the 1980s?

However rigorous and opulent it may be, a faithful reconstitution is not enough to capture the sense of an era. I didn't want to check boxes. Our approach was more sensorial.

Of course, reconstitution of the period depends on the sets and dressing, costumes and music, and so on. Some scenes required substantial resources—the election night and the family's apartment built in studio. Others were a more natural fit with the 1980s—the nighttime radio show, for example.

And then there is the archive footage interwoven into the film, bringing the weight of reality to bear on the rest of the film, like an invitation to travel in time.

How did you choose the archive footage?

Mostly it was random footage, except the shots of Rivette in the Métro, lifted from Claire Denis's documentary *Jacque Rivette, le veilleur*. My editor came up with the idea of using that scene, but I don't think many people will recognize it. The most important thing is the subway car with all its anonymous passengers, more "passengers of the night."

Even the photography seems to work in eighties tones.

Before we started shooting, my DoP Sébastien Bachman and I worked very hard to set down the formal identity of the movie. Early on, I sensed we could work with the grain of the picture. The mental picture we have of the period is to my mind associated with a particular tone that I tried to recapture by softening the image, especially by using filters, and dialing down the supreme definition of digital cameras.

The important thing was to bring together the film's different formats without a break in rhythm, so that they communicate with each other to define the tonality of the movie. I liked the idea of the images bouncing off of each other contagiously. People may see the joins as the film switches between formats but, above all, I hope they will be swept along by the flow of the movie, and that the different formats will interconnect to give a sense of an era.

Those interacting images speak to your lack of nostalgia for what is gone. Instead, you celebrate where things still are.

Indeed. It's about revisiting the past in the light of the present, which it continues to pervade. It's my way of finding peace with the question of demise and mourning. That's another reason why I make movies: to create a semblance of eternity.

Music also plays an important role in catching that sense of an era.

I contacted Anton Sanko, with whom I had already worked on *Amanda*, but this time I asked him for a whole different tone, more electronic with synthesizers to resonate with the original tracks from the eighties. There was also the desire for themes and melodies blending in more

classical instruments to evoke something slightly more timeless. As with the photography, we tried to give the film its own vocal range. As for the songs on the soundtrack, there were a lot of personal choices. As I said, my relationship to that period revolves largely around music.

Radio France's HQ, La Maison de la Radio, is omnipresent, with the nighttime radio show that Elisabeth works on.

My inspiration for it came from a program on France Inter radio station that I didn't listen to at the time because I was too little: Jean-Charles Aschero's *Les choses de la nuit*, which ran almost through the night and included a slot titled *What's your name?* A guest would talk about their life, after promising to tell the truth. The only thing they could lie about was their name. The presenter could not see the person, who was in the studio but hidden behind a screen. There are clips on YouTube that capture the zestful language, the musicality and the tone of the period, which inspired me when I was writing the young dropout, Talulah.

Those voices in the night held the key to a mystery. They were a bridge between people, an evocative, impalpable bond. For my generation, those voices mattered and I wanted them to add color to the movie. I like the idea of someone revealing all, a voice in the night. There are not so many programs like that now, and their influence was waning even then. As Vanda says to Elisabeth, "Radio has no monopoly of the night anymore."

To play the role of the show's presenter, Emmanuelle Béart was the perfect choice, with her unbelievable voice. I could picture her as someone who is clearly a little broken, with open wounds...

Revealing yourself while remaining hidden. That idea echoes with your films, with reserved characters who speak up when they have things to say. Whether it's Mathias declaring his love for Talulah or Elisabeth admitting to her daughter Judith that she feels bereft since Judith left home.

I make films with my own sensibilities. I'm personally quite shy but I also like meeting and interacting with others. At some point, you have to release things, and I want my movies to embrace that life dynamic, to grasp how, after digressing and holding back, things can happen between people. The big issue is finding the right temporality and making these confessions espouse the characters' arcs, to bring the rhythm of life to scenes and grow the melody of the film.

You never blow up the drama and conflict.

To my mind, a lot happens in this story: a separation, a burgeoning love story, children coming of age... These are all major events in life, real dramatic shifts. It's fair to say, however, that I enjoy breakaways and detours because life is also made up of those moments, and that my films are not conflict-based—those are not stories I feel the urge to tell. Once again, it most likely comes from a personal sensibility. Conflict does not drive my life and work, or my relationship to others. It's not a source of energy for me. It tends to turn me off. Here, my characters love each other, help each other, watch each other. I own that benevolence and generosity that, to my eyes at least, is the stuff of movie heroes.

Nonetheless, your films are not contemplative.

No, despite the absence of conflict, I really challenge myself to find a musicality, tonality and rhythm that make the film striking and addictive. I try to make films that reflect my take on life, that tell stories about events that may seem trivial or ordinary, and endow them with an

impulse, a melody, poetry, grace, heightened reality. I want to make movies that take account of the supposedly hollow phases of life, the "bottlenecks" as Truffaut called them. I like a film not to be taken over by its subject, for life to remain the subject of the movie, for the film not to be a hostage to its subject.

The emotion of ordinary life also seems to derive from the fact that you acknowledge its fragility.

The fragility of life in general, and of people in particular. Yes, that is the relationship to the world that I want to try to get across, like in the Anne Sylvestre song *Les gens qui doutent* (*People who doubt*). My characters all have a fragile aspect, which I aim to make beautiful so that people might feel understood at a place in their solitude. That's what I enjoy when I watch a movie. It makes life a little softer.

The character of Talulah brings to mind Pascale Ogier. The superimposed images of her seem to be inhabited by the ghost of the actress, who died so young.

Pascale Ogier is a unique figure, a combination of incredible fragility and great strength. She was one of the elements that made me want to make this film. You can only wish there were more movies with her in them. The presence of Eric Rohmer's *Les Nuits de la pleine lune* and the short clip from Jacques Rivette's *Le Pont du nord* were a kind of homage to the actress's devastating destiny. I wish I had known her during her lifetime. She lives on, as an emblem of that period, with that voice that can only be her.

When I met Noée Abita, it was her similarly singular voice that won me over, a perfect echo of Pascale Ogier and of my imaginings of that period.

What was it like working with Charlotte Gainsbourg?

As with Vincent Lacoste in *Amanda*, I was first and foremost attracted to what Charlotte exudes in real life, and I was overwhelmed by her ability to become the character. I think that, in so many ways, Elisabeth's life is far removed from Charlotte's and from what she is, but she found points of resonance within herself—the bond with the family and children, a form of shyness...

Charlotte's intuition, intelligence, sensitivity and subtlety are striking. She found the character's pitch from the very first day on set when we were shooting a scene in the library, where Elisabeth is checking books out, registering loans, and so on. When I saw just how beautiful and graceful Charlotte made that humdrum, everyday scene, I felt new perspectives opening up for the movie. With Charlotte, everything is always driven by complex, ambivalent feelings.

And Quito Rayon Richter and Megan Northam, who play Mathias and Judith?

Quito can come across as quite angular. He does not immediately win the audience over, and may even seem unnerving, but as soon as he lets down his guard and his fragility shows, he is very touching. As with Charlotte, I like that ambivalence.

As for Megan Northam, who brings to life a character that is slightly in the background, she took over what I had written, as if it were her own work, as if she could hear the music that was playing in my head. For me, that was a miraculous encounter!

And Didier Sandre, who plays Elisabeth's father?

Whenever I can, I bring him in from one film to the next. I'm haunted, overwhelmed, by his gaze. Didier is an actor of rare beauty, with a wound and generosity.

Similarly, Ophelia Kolb and Thibault Vinçon are "regulars" that I am always delighted to meet up with again. Thibault has been there since I started out. We've been making movies together for over fifteen years, and I love prolonging that connection. One of cinema's grace notes is the chance to see actors grow and change, to grasp the passage of time.

As for Laurent Poitrenaux, who plays Elisabeth's coworker on the radio show, by his very presence, he brings depth to a supporting role. I wanted the character to continue to be present after his breakup with Elisabeth, especially at her birthday party. I wanted the audience to see him dancing near her, so there was no falling into two-bit psychology about bitterness. Time has passed, life moves on.

After the eleventh and twelfth arrondissements of Paris in *Amanda*, here you film the high-rises of the fifteenth arrondissement.

I wanted to continue the exploration of Paris with the Beaugrenelle neighborhood, which rose out of the ground in the 1970s. Its towers and plazas have always fascinated me, with the Seine down below, more residential streets and La Maison de la Radio across the river. I think it's a very touching and cinematic landscape because it is the conjunction between spaces of very different natures. The idea was to circumscribe the film in that location.

In the scene where the characters dance to a Joe Dassin song, Elisabeth, Mathias and Judith form a family that is capable of reaching out to an "outsider." The moment seems to symbolize your cinema.

Yes, that was the point of the scene: how the family circle suddenly expands to include a young woman who has never felt like she had a home. *Et si tu n'existais pas* is a great song, both strange and popular, in the most noble sense of the word. It's a song everybody can relate to, and easy to imagine as a special song for a family.

Interview by Claire Vassé

INTERVIEW WITH CHARLOTTE GAINSBORG

What appealed to you when you read the script of *The Passengers of the Night*?

To be honest, I don't really know. I choose films on instinct, without profound analysis of dramatic structure, plot twists, timing, and so on. I read scripts like a beginner. Either I'm hooked or I'm not. In this case, I was hooked!

Looking back, I imagine I was touched by the script's warmth, the mother's relationship with her children, the passing of time, the delicacy of the storytelling and descriptions... The beauty and poetry of this project comes from its light touch. Also, I was excited about diving back into the 1980s.

And then I really enjoyed Mikhaël's earlier films, which I saw after reading the script. And I was very intrigued by his personality.

How did you get on?

Mikhaël is quite timid and the first time we met, he didn't say much. Actually, I'm not sure "timid" is the right word. It's more that Mikhaël has a quirky personality.

On set, we had to get to know and understand each other, but we didn't necessarily have to talk much. I sensed we were on the same wavelength. That doesn't mean we have exactly the same sensibility, but with regard to my character, it felt like we understood each other perfectly. We were connected.

How did you make the character of Elisabeth yours?

Elisabeth comes from neither a working-class background, nor from a privileged or intellectual environment. I didn't have too many personal references for the character, but that's precisely what I found interesting. I was also very curious about this part of Paris in the fifteenth arrondissement with its high-rises, which I hardly knew at all.

The first important issue for me was to find out if Mikhaël was one of the ultra-punctilious filmmakers concerning his dialogue or if I could reappropriate the lines a little, which turned out to be the case. Mikhaël even seemed surprised that I asked. I think he wanted me first and foremost to be very comfortable with my part.

I loved the way he becomes attached to specific details, such as when Elisabeth makes breakfast while smoking a cigarette. Those moments say a lot about his talent. He hooks us with little routine things, a few lines that might easily pass us by but assume greater depth thanks to his sense of detail and rhythm. At the start of the movie, Elisabeth seems overwhelmed, constantly breaking down in tears, but just then we sense she has rediscovered her peace of mind and accepts her daily life.

How did you dive back into the period, which encompassed your teenage years?

Firstly through the costumes, with the slight, endearing mismatches that Elisabeth makes, and her hairstyle. Mikhaël had very strong opinions on small details, which I liked a lot. For example, we agreed to add to her hair so that it would be thicker than mine.

The decoration of Elisabeth's apartment was also an important element. When I walked on set and found it full of 1980s objects that you don't necessarily see on screen, it gave the film a tonality that was not on the page in the script. The whole crew was enchanted by the set, which reminded us all of our childhood and teenage years. Mikhaël went all out on orange and brown while staying this side of realistic, not falling into caricature. The apartment scenes, shot in studio, really were the time when I found my character.

As for period authenticity, the birthday bop with my coworkers from the radio show was the scene I was most apprehensive about. I kept telling Mikhaël that, except for slow dances, I really had no idea anymore how people danced in the eighties! Mikhaël just told us to improvise because all that mattered was a sense that Elisabeth was happy and infused with the thrill of dancing.

Elisabeth is very reserved but doesn't hide her feelings.

That's what I really like about the character: she is very sincere and transparent in her emotions, not at all calculating. Even in her relationships with men, she is very upfront about her feelings. I get the sense that it's easy to understand the feelings that go through her. Her shyness could incite her to take cover and protect herself but that's not her. She is not afraid to show when she is perturbed, and barely conceals her tears from her children. Most likely, I used my own shyness and my own weaknesses, which I am also very open about.

The scene when Elisabeth admits to her daughter Judith that she is bereft since Judith left home is very moving.

Children leaving home really is something that overwhelms me. My sister Kate told me, when her son was about to leave home, "It's crazy. Nobody prepares you for it at all. Nobody talks about it!" She was right, and I experienced it too, and continue to experience it. It's such a painful moment. Of course, you want your children to be happy, for them to leave without any weight on their shoulders, but it really is the start of a new life. I find it very touching that Elisabeth, who also has to face the event alone, is so upfront about her mental disarray.

There is a sense of Elisabeth and her son having a lot in common.

Elisabeth and her son share a kind of innocence. Like him, she experiences a lot of first times, in love and at work. Obviously, she is not so carefree because she has the responsibility of making ends meet, but they are real first times. I like the way she gives the radio a shot, how moved she is to be hired, and how emotional everything makes her, like a beginner. And that's what she is.

I really enjoyed being in the position of learning a new profession, on the radio and in the library. Usually, for a movie, you're asked to pretend to do a particular job, so you pick up a few gestures, just to be credible on camera. In *Les Passagers de la nuit*, I could be perfectly open about the fact that I was totally lost and learning the ropes. Mikhaël gave me space for that moment of hesitation that comes when you learn something new.

More generally, Mikhaël gave me time to get into my character and my lines. Very often, directors ask for tempo. They want you to accelerate. With Mikhaël, I felt I could go at my own pace, and that suited me just fine because it takes time for me to pick up what I need to do or say, so it sounds genuine and right.

At the end, Elisabeth gives her journal to her son, who aspires to become a writer.

Elisabeth shares with him the fact that writing helped her at a specific time in her life. As she gives him the journal, she is practically apologetic that it is badly written. What she is giving him, above all, is a record of their life together. I can really understand that since I also regularly kept a journal. And in the margin, I marked up the parts that concerned my children, so they wouldn't have to grind through the whole thing when I'm gone!

Elisabeth feels the concern that any mother might feel with regard to Mathias's choice of profession but she feels pride and confidence in what her children have become and in their

talent, and that is very beautiful. When she gives them these objects that mean so much for her, there is no doubt she is making no judgments about their choices, which she accepts as self-evident.

Mikhaël Hers focuses on people's benevolence rather than their conflicts.

I didn't really notice, reading the script or on set, but watching the movie, absolutely! It felt like we were in an epic drama, especially in the first part of the movie, with the end of a marriage, repeated professional setbacks and money problems. Those hardships grow my character but in the end, it's not what you see on screen. Everything revolves around affection, reaching out, emotion without pathos. It might come off as sentimental and high-minded if it weren't for Mikhaël's subtlety and superb judgment.

What was it like working with Quito Rayon Richter, Megan Northam and Noée Abita?

I enjoyed a wonderful relationship with Quito and Megan, who play my children. You might think we needed to see a lot of each other to create such a tight family bond without it seeming fake, but it fell into place very naturally.

And it was moving to watch young actors starting out on their careers, to witness their delight at being there and learning their trade. Everything impressed Quito and Megan. It was all new to them, which was magical to see, especially when you sense the huge potential they have.

Quito is quite disarming in the way he expresses clumsiness and innocence, and all those early emotions he is beginning to feel. That very delicate moment linked to adolescence really means something to me, with its ambiguities, things left unsaid, and peaks of audacity that don't last. It is so believable the first time he sleeps with Talulah, it's almost as if we are in his body.

Noée Abita, who plays Talulah, was more experienced and less tentative. I was very touched by her personality and fragility, and that of her character, but I made an effort to rein that in to preserve the mystery of the affection that Elisabeth feels for her.

You started your career very young, in the 1980s, in fact.

And most likely that's why I found it all so touching. I really had a sense of understanding what they were going through and recalling the times when I dreamed of becoming an actress without daring to come out and say it. I knew that making *L'Effrontée* was no guarantee of a long career. It's a very hazardous period, when you feel easily unnerved while wanting only to believe it's true. You're vulnerable in a good way. After each take, I could see that Quito and Megan were lost if Mikhaël said nothing to them. They were giving so much of themselves they had no perspective.

The scene that most touches me is the motorcycle scene with Quito. We shot it at the end, and I sensed how hard the end of the shoot would hit him, because I felt that too when I was starting out: losing that concentration and going on set every day, which you have fallen head over heels in love with. We didn't talk about it very much because he is not very expansive either, but I could see it.

This is the first time you've worked with Didier Sandre.

I loved acting opposite him. Firstly because he knows my mother really well. Patrice Chéreau cast them together in *La Fausse Suivante*, which was my mother's first experience on stage. They have kept in touch ever since. I was really enchanted by Didier. He is so elegant, subtle and handsome. It was very easy to play his daughter, to act out the bond they share.

And Emmanuelle Béart?

I was delighted to work with her again, twenty years after we played two sisters in *La Bûche*. Emmanuelle is a charming, gentle and generous woman. As for Laurent Poitrenaux, who plays the coworker who breaks up with me, we had very few scenes together besides one awkward and clumsy love scene, but we used that—how awkward it was because we'd hardly had the chance to talk. Laurent is a remarkable actor.

And Thibaud Vinçon, who plays Hugo?

It was wonderful to see the connection that he and Mikhaël share. In scenes that could have been awkward, there was no awkwardness. Everything was extremely simple, correlating to our characters, who have the delightful sense that something is happening between them. In fact, there were no scene partners with whom things were tricky, and that's a stroke of luck! When things go so smoothly, it feels like it's normal, but in reality it's far more normal to have little clashes, as opposed to a shoot that was so pleasant and peaceful despite the lockdown. And Mikhaël is so respectful of the actors. He thanked us each time we moved on to the next set-up, and it was incredibly genuine. At the beginning, it felt strange. It's our job after all to act out scenes and emotions.

What did you think when you saw the movie?

Above all I was struck by how much it resembles Mikhaël. It's a surprising film, driven by a gaze whose originality I have rarely encountered. Ever since, we have messaged each other regularly but I am no closer to understanding his endearing yet enigmatic personality!

Interview by Claire Vassé

ABOUT MIKHAËL HERS

Mikhaël Hers was born in Paris, on February 6, 1975. He studied in the Production department at La Fémis and graduated in 2004. He then directed three acclaimed short films: *Charell* (selected at the Critics' Week, Cannes 2006), *Primrose Hill* (his second selection at the Critics' Week, Cannes 2007, and awarded at Clermont Ferrand International Short Film Festival) and *Montparnasse* (selected at the Directors' Fortnight, Cannes 2009, and winner of the Jean Vigo Prize). After *Memory Lane* (Locarno Film Festival 2010), *This Summer Feeling* (Rotterdam Film Festival 2016) and *Amanda* (in Official Selection at Venice 2018, winner of the Grand Prize at Tokyo IFF, and two nominations at the César Awards), *The Passengers of the Night* is his fourth feature film.

FILMOGRAPHY

2022	THE PASSENGERS OF THE NIGHT (Les Passagers De La Nuit) Feature, 111'
2018	AMANDA Feature, 106'
2015	THIS SUMMER FEELING (Ce Sentiment De L'Été) Feature, 106'
2010	MEMORY LANE Feature, 98'
2009	MONTPARNASSE Short, 58'
2006	CHARELL Short, 45'
2006	PRIMROSE HILL Short, 57'
	THERE AND BACK AGAIN LANE Short

CAST

Élisabeth	Charlotte Gainsbourg
Matthias	Quito Rayon-Richter
Talulah	Noée Abita
Judith	Megan Northam
Hugo	Thibault Vinçon
Vanda Dorval	Emmanuelle Béart
Manuel Agostini	Laurent Poitrenaux
Jean	Didier Sandre
Leïla	Lilith Grasmug
Carlos	Calixte Broisin-Doutaz
Domi	Eric Feldman
Marie-Paule	Ophélie Kolb
Francis	Raphaël Thiery
The Teacher	Zoé Bruneau

CREW

Director	Mikhaël Hers
Screenplay	Mikhaël Hers, Maud Ameline, Mariette Désert
Producer	Pierre Guyard
Associate Producers	Christophe Rossignon, Philip Boëffard
Executive Producer	Ève François-Machuel
Co-Producers	Olivier Père, Rémi Burah
Music	Anton Sanko
Director of Photography	Sébastien Buchmann – Afc
Editor	Marion Monnier
Casting Director	Marion Toutilou - Arda
Director Assistant	Lucas Loubarette
Set Design	Charlotte De Cadeville
Sound	Vincent Vatoux
Sound Editor	Vincent Vatoux, Caroline Reynaud, Sylvain Malbrant
Sound Mixing	Daniel Sobrino
Costumes	Caroline Spieth
Make-up	Sarah Mescoff
Hair	Reynald Desbant
Production Director	Vincent Lefeuvre
Post-production Director	Clara Vincienne
Production	Nord-Ouest Films ARTE France Cinéma
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