

KG PRODUCTIONS, METAFILMS, STENOLA PRODUCTIONS
PRESENT



THE SUCCESSOR

A FILM BY XAVIER LEGRAND

2023 – FRANCE, CANADA, BELGIUM – THRILLER – FRENCH – 107'

mk2
FILMS

SYNOPSIS

Ellias Barnès, 30, is the newly-announced artistic director of a famous Parisian fashion house. But as expectations are high, he starts experiencing chest pain. Out of the blue he is called back to Montreal to organise his estranged father's funeral and discovers that he may have inherited much worse than his father's weak heart.

INTERVIEW WITH XAVIER LEGRAND - Director

Your first feature film, *Custody*, addressed the issue of domestic abuse. What was the starting point for *The Successor*?

Following on from my previous films, *The Successor* digs deeper into the issues surrounding patriarchy. Nowadays, we often speak of 'violence against women'; I've often used this expression when promoting *Custody*. But it somewhat bypasses the main element of the issue. In fact, when talking about 'violence against women', we're quite obviously forgetting to mention the main protagonist from which the problem stems: Men.

First and foremost, *The Successor* focuses on 'male violence'. How is it that men are also their own worst enemy? It's fairly easy nowadays to see how patriarchy subjugates women and children, but what perhaps isn't as obvious and more difficult to admit, because it is handed down and trans-generational, is that it also crushes men, brothers and sons. We regard blood ties as sacrosanct and therefore unbreakable in the eyes of our society. The axioms 'like father like son', 'from father to son', 'in the name of the father and of the son...' are deeply entrenched in our minds.

This idea of the fatality of blood ties is reminiscent of tragedies. You have a background in theatre, would you say this genre permeates the film?

Of course, I've read and performed lots of tragedies. Tragedy writers such as Euripides, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Racine and Shakespeare, as well as some more contemporary ones, draw their stories from Greek mythology. Mythology shows a form of determinism and fatalism. To create the lead character of Ellias, I drew a great deal of inspiration from tragic figures such as Oedipus, Orestes, Icarus or Hamlet. What they all have in common is that, each in their own way, they attempt to find a form of healing, which fatally leads them to disaster, so crushing is the weight of the patriarchy.

Even more so than in *Custody*, *The Successor* uses the conventions of genre films. Why did you choose to move in this direction?

Just like in *Custody*, I bring to light what we refuse to see. Injecting genre into a difficult subject, can help audiences be more willing to be invested in the film. As a writer and director, I always enjoy playing with codes by bending, twisting and circumnavigating them: using a specific code which is familiar to the viewer, but anchoring it in realism, in what is tangible, in the reality of the situations we encounter. This allows the viewer to recognize the code but to rediscover it and experience it in a different way. I have the firm belief that cinema allows the viewer to do more than identify themselves with the character, they are able to feel more with them, to endure the events more. But what's interesting is that *The Successor* is a genre film, but one that can't be defined, it is hybrid, multi-faceted: neo-noir, horror tale, tragic parable, anxiety-inducing thriller?

The film opens with the image of a spiral during a fashion show, just before Ellias falls into a spiraling nightmare. How did you come up with such a concept for this sequence?

This image of a spiral is that of Daedalus' labyrinth in Greek mythology, Dante's *Inferno* or Kubrick's *The Shining*. It's also reminiscent of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. The idea was inspired by the scenography of a fashion show that one of the major fashion houses had put on. A majestic design based on the same motif. We're far from the traditional catwalk and the podium on which the models parade. I wanted it to be monumental, so as to establish the character of Ellias in a world so far removed from where he later finds himself. Composer SebastiAn's powerful music, the rhythm of these models as they walk through this gigantic installation; already signals that the character, when he comes to receive the honors, will at the same time be shutting himself away into a dreadful internal prison. Right from the opening credits, this spiral prepares the viewer to a dizzying journey. A journey of initiation that will most likely lead Ellias to the underworld.

The fact that Ellias Barnès is a fashion designer means he sometimes objectifies women; he switches at the very last minute one model for another for a photoshoot. How did you want to place Ellias in this world?

Everything carries a symbol in the film. The creative work of fashion allowed us to weave together threads that are both symbolic and poetic. By placing the character of Ellias as an Haute Couture designer, it gives him a strong public image and a powerful status at the very center of an empire which won't tolerate any mistakes, or any slips. It is a fact that fashion sometimes objectifies women. I had to imagine Ellias's collection to be elegant, without it being hypersexualized. A perfect statement of this is Thibault Kuhn's work on the film. Ellias Barnès is a designer who knows and respects women and their bodies. In the scene following the opening, however, the fact that he changes models is also his way of 'killing the father', the founder of the brand, Yann-Oliver Orsino, whose head he succeeds following his death. Orsino, like all great fashion houses, has a muse. Therein lies the ambiguity of the complex situations in which this character finds himself; this is interesting: by personifying the young models that pose for him, he ends up objectifying and reifying them. He imposes his own signature by imposing a specific female image. The themes of identity, image, identification; as well as names, surnames or family names, are symbolic recurrences of the story.

Ellias is able to reinvent himself far from the world he grew up in. What attracted you to this trajectory?

Being a parent is above all about offering love and emotional security to a child. If these fundamental elements are missing, some people choose to move away or cut ties with their family. That's what Ellias does. He changes country, culture and social context. In a sense, we can say he is nomad; he has broken away from his lineage, abandoned his past in order to write a new chapter in his life, he's fled what he considered mediocre or toxic in order to freely reinvent himself. We discover the character bearing this ambiguity. What to think of him? Some may find his choice for solitude and independence to be laudable, comparing him to a 'child prodigy', whilst others may condemn him for denying his roots, like the 'unworthy son'.

This feeling echoes that found in the memoir *Retour à Reims* by Didier Eribon, who also rejected his background and denied his roots. The writer mixes with the Parisian intellectual and literary circles. When he finds out his father has laryngeal cancer, he starts to develop a sore throat. It's a kind of physiological realization: if his father dies, he'll be next. It's a very masculine feeling rooted in the adage 'like father like son'. When Elias finds out a few years earlier that his father has had a stroke, he doesn't seem to care, but his subconscious is beginning to wear him physically for fear of heredity. But when his father dies of a heart attack, Elias starts to feel pains in his chest. Just as he was expecting to be freed from the weight of his father, he accidentally finds himself trapped by it.

Why did you choose to set the story in Quebec?

The idea was to present Elias within his French Empire, where, whilst being fundamentally lonely, he is nonetheless surrounded by people and even cared for. On the other hand, once he sets foot in Canada, he becomes truly alone because he is completely isolated. I could have chosen to set the story in France, between Paris and a smaller town, even one which is remote – but it wouldn't have been enough to isolate him throughout the turmoil. He needed to travel but also stay in a French-speaking country. Belgium or Switzerland are too close. He had to be removed, completely uprooted. There needed to be at least one ocean for him to cross in order to return and rediscover a culture he had fled, that he quite literally had put behind him, on another continent. Quebec became an obvious choice. What's more, the fact that he rediscovers his accent is a fundamental element which allows us to tackle the symbolic aspects of his rejected and repressed heritage.

When shooting the film in Canada, did you let the aesthetic of American cinema influence your direction?

For this film, I wanted to build two specific worlds, like a motif that can be found in literature or adventure films. A knight leaves his castle and sets off on a quest through the dangers of the world. Or a film in which the call for adventure is first refused by the hero but then finally accepted by him, but with the need to remove himself from the comfort of his world, and dive into one which is much more hostile. This is all the more interesting since Elias works with the Parisian elite – we needed luxurious backdrops to depict the fashion industry. When he becomes the artistic director of this fashion house, he becomes the chosen one: 'The king is dead, long live the king'. His spiritual father, who'd been at the realm of the house before him, hands him down a real pedestal, from which his biological father will bring him down...When he arrives in Montreal, he is in a neutral suburban neighborhood. I couldn't succumb to the fantasy of showing the beauty of Montreal by filming Quebec's stunning landscapes. The only forest that I shot is one you enter at night; there are no leaves on the trees, the melted snow has turned to mud and the opacity of the night means you can't see a thing.

How did you choose to work with Marc-André Grondin for the role of Ellias?

In my first drafts, I imagined him being feline, delicate and graceful. But his nervousness, fragility and growing anxiety made me quickly turn to more nuance and subtlety. Ellias is feline, feminine and delicate, but it seemed more interesting if what came across on the surface, was a simpler masculinity and a more conventional manliness. I really wanted to break away from the traditional image of the male lead. Here, we have a man who can't cope, who struggles, who is riddled with fear, who loses control and is completely crushed by disaster. It takes a solid actor to be able to delve into these kinds of meanderings, a performance full of fear, tears, snot, suffocation, incontinence and breathlessness. Marc-André was the obvious choice. With his childlike eyes and his vibrant, feverish, fiery, moving, concrete, charismatic, strong, solid, delicate and precise body, as well as being very intelligent and truthful, Marc-André possessed all of the power and contradictions needed for such a part. From the moment he agreed to play the role, Ellias's humanity gained in depth. This anti-hero became even more so tragically disastrous. I was struck by the strength of his performance on set. Everything was already in place, all I had to do was tweak the detail, fine tune: a shorter line here, a change of tone there, or the energy of an action more tense or slower. I am constantly amazed by his work every time I see the film.

Have you had to ask yourself how you'd portray violence without it harming your actors?

It's a question I've had to ask a lot when I was making *Custody*, especially since I was working with a child actor. I don't think violence has a negative impact as long as the actor is aware of what they're playing, and we create a safe working space around them. This is something that needs to be considered from the point of casting though. Some actors are able to deal with this level of violence, others can't – which doesn't mean they're not good. Actors have personal stories. They may or not be able to take a step back. As an actor myself, I'm aware that some places are easy for me to go, while others are trickier, even though they can sometimes seem insignificant to some actors. It's a matter of making sure, from the start, which actor will be able to withstand these kinds of sequences. But above all, I find it important to remain within the semantics of acting: no matter how violent the situation is to be played out, all those involved in the making and acting, must enjoy recreating it. As if it were a game.

There is a turning point in the film, how did you conceive it and do you think it might be difficult for some viewers, who might of identified with Ellias, to accept it?

This turning point is radical: when we say 'life is turned upside down', we mean there is no turning back. You have to come to terms with this new event that changes everything, that shatters things. That's what happens to Ellias. Nothing will ever be the same again, he has to come to terms with this as a matter of urgency. Everyone will take a stand in the face of his response, his decisions and actions. In extreme situations, humans react in ways which are unforeseen: adrenaline, trauma, shock; nothing is predictable and there is no going back, everything can disappear in an instant. We had to work on a 'coherent incoherence'. If the character behaved rationally, he would be anticipating, premeditating. Ellias doesn't have the

time to think. Events follow one another, they sometimes seem absurd, but are in fact very real. It can be unsettling for the viewer who can either be drawn into the situation with the character, or remain on the sidelines with its moral judgement. But I think it is hard to remain impartial. As an audience member, I enjoy being pushed, knocked by getting close to characters that may seem at odds with the way I live and see the world. We often say that the spectator should empathize with the hero. I think it's just as enjoyable to follow characters who are said to be 'unsympathetic'. It's not because we understand him that we validate or excuse his actions. It's not because we recognize a mistake or a bad deed that we approve of it. Cinema is still one of the rare places where one can explore all of the possibilities of humanity, without shamefully condemning the individual to the post or to death.

ABOUT XAVIER LEGRAND

Before becoming an author and director, Xavier Legrand worked as an actor with many directors in theatre, cinema, and television.

His first short film, *Just Before Losing Everything*, was nominated for an Oscar in 2014. The film has won numerous awards, including four prizes (among which the Grand Prix) at the Clermont-Ferrand International Short Film Festival in 2013 and a César, the French Academy Awards for Best Short Film in 2014.

His first feature film *Custody* was awarded the Silver Lion for Best Director and the Lion of the Future for Best First Film at the 74th Venice Film Festival. Winner of the Louis Delluc Prize for Best First Picture in 2018, the film also won the Best First Film Award from the French Syndicate of Cinema Critics in 2018 and 5 César at the 2019 French Academy Awards (including Best Picture).

He then directed a music video for Alex Beaupain, a campaign for the CIIVISE (Independent Commission on Incest and Sexual Violence against Children) and two episodes of the French series *Tout Va Bien* created by Camille de Castelnau for Disney +.

The Successor is his second feature film.

FILMOGRAPHY

2023	THE SUCCESSOR Feature
2022	TOUT VA BIEN TV SERIE
2017	CUSTODY Feature
2012	JUST BEFORE LOSING EVERYTHING Short

CAST

Ellias	Marc-André Grondin
Dominique	Yves Jacques
Janie	Laëtitia Isambert
Mina	Anne-Elisabeth Bossé
Judith	Blandine Bury
Funeral director	Vincent Leclerc
Pierre-Luc	Louis Champagne
Communications director	Thierry Harcourt
Editorial manager	Florence Janas

CREW

Director	Xavier Legrand
Producer	Alexandre Gavras
Co-producers	Sylvain Corbeil Anton Iffland Stettner Eva Kuperman
Screenplay	Xavier Legrand
In collaboration with	Dominick Parenteau-Lebeuf
Dialogues	Xavier Legrand and Dominick Parenteau-Lebeuf
Cinematography	Nathalie Durand (afc)
Editing	Yorgos Lamprinos (ace) and Julie Wuillai
Music	SebastiAn
Production Design	Sylvain Lemaître and Jérémie Sfez
Costume Design	Caroline Bodson
Fashion Show Concept	Roy Genty
Fashion Show Concept Designer	Thibault Kuhn
International Sales	mk2 films
French Distribution	Haut et Court

INTERNATIONAL PRESS & SALES

INTERNATIONAL PRESS

PREMIER

Paul Ockelford

paul.ockelford@premiercomms.com



INTERNATIONAL SALES

Fionnuala Jamison, Managing Director

fionnuala.jamison@mk2.com

Olivier Barbier, Head of Acquisitions

olivier.barbier@mk2.com

Quentin Bohanna, International Sales

quentin.bohanna@mk2.com

Elise Cochin, International Sales

elise.cochin@mk2.com

Anne-Laure Barbarit, Festival Manager

anne-laure.barbarit@mk2.com

Visit our website www.mk2films.com