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THE BALCONETTES

A FILM BY NOÉMIE MERLANT

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SYNOPSIS

As a heat wave brings a Marseille neighbourhood to the boil, three roommates gleefully meddle in the lives of their neighbours from their balcony. Until a late night drink turns into a bloody affair.

INTERVIEW WITH NOÉMIE MERLANT

How did you get to a film that combines comedy, horror and fantasy on a subject as sensitive as sexist and sexual violence? How did it all begin?

I started writing, alone, maybe four years ago, working off real-life events. I'd been forced to run from my home, and from a situation in which I didn't feel fulfilled. I took refuge with friends, including Sanda Codreanu, who plays Nicole in the movie. She lives with her sisters, who are also very good friends. I lived in a kind of gynaeceum for several months. It was a whole different life dynamic. I had never lived alone, and never with other women, and it did me the world of good. There were running conversations between us all about our dreams, traumas, desires, and patriarchal oppression. A guy lived opposite—nothing like the neighbor in the movie—and we could see him watching us. He was curious about our freedom, the nudity that we granted ourselves in each other's company, which wasn't the nudity of seduction, but that of rediscovered confidence, bodies letting go. I wanted to start from there in the film, with a powerful, liberating urge toward humor, gore, excess, absurdity and fantasy. So, a combination of genres that reflects the multiplicity of messages: denunciation of oppression, in several forms, as well as, above all, the dreamlike promotion of a liberation.

This combination of genres is one of the film's most striking characteristics. How do you explain that permanent tension?

It's a style I like a lot and find particularly touching, and it feels like me deep down. It appeared to be the most interesting path to describe the feminine, and explore everything I wanted to talk about. I wanted a blend of colors and textures, an outgoing and exuberant movie that flirts with bad taste and vulgarity, while preserving the humor, a kind of lyricism, and strong themes that are intensely close to my heart: women's intimacy, rape and its consequences, patriarchal oppression. From an early stage, I pictured the film as an unbridled punk farce, but it had to come to life seeing things through the eyes of characters people can relate to. So I drew on my own experience. The rapes the characters endure—I was subjected to them. Filming them while maintaining a comedic vein was the only way to take hold of the subject and keep perspective on it. For me, comedy and satire are powerful weapons. Beyond liberating, I hope this will also be a movie that makes people feel good, as well as laugh and think.

The screenplay was co-written with Céline Sciamma. How did you work together?

Céline Sciamma had been following progress from afar from the get-go. Then, with enthusiasm that deeply moved me, she offered to help write the movie. We have kept in touch ever since *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. The dialogue between us was already there. Céline knows my world well and understands my personality, as well as my way of writing, which is pretty profuse and unstructured. The process was very fluid. Céline made

suggestions without imposing anything, while understanding my intuitions—my urge for genre and comedy, the kind of mad aspect, and the ghosts, which for me were essential. Without dispossessing me of anything, she allowed me to reassert and back up my decisions. She also helped strengthen the structure to allow the film to be freer, enriching the characters and their arcs, and developing, I hope, a kind of sisterly lyricism.

One of the heroines, Nicole, is a writer who takes an online creative writing course. She questions preconceived formats and ideas. Does that capture your approach to writing?

Nicole—and this was Sanda improvising—says in the movie, "I prefer to be wrong with my idea than right with someone else's." That's my way of thinking. I like the idea that risk-taking is a road to personal discovery. By stepping back from established methods and ideas, I felt I was touching on a form of authenticity and honesty that seemed necessary with regard to the subjects I wanted to address in this film. I wanted to have fun with the codes of the male gaze, the objectified woman, the woman of mystery, while ducking classical narrative devices that encourage conflict. Trying to reinvent certain codes, even if it means messing up, is also one of the issues addressed in the movie, through the character of Nicole. Stepping off your balcony, and out of your comfort zone. Reversing perspectives, putting yourself in other people's shoes, reappropriating our stories, including those of sexist and sexual violence. For example, it was about not showing the "spectacular" rape of Ruby, and believing her, while filming, on the other hand, the marital rape that Élise endures, which is so rarely shown and so little understood.

Each of the three main protagonists of your film has a strong personality, which is revealed in the course of the film. How did you develop the characters?

When I was mapping out the story, I wanted to begin by taking the time for the exposition of all three characters, so the audience understands their personalities—one's lust for life, the other's repressed dreams, and so on—to heighten the impact of the shock of the rape.

Also, at another moment, we fleetingly lose one of the characters. Céline was a great help with that. The disappearance was necessary, to feel a void that is practically organic.

Moreover, I really enjoyed writing a film with three main characters, which results in a sisterly group dynamic, on the one hand, and individual arcs that enable each woman to break free, on the other.

Nicole, the idealist dreamer and writer. She is battling an inner contradiction between her need to be who she is and engrained toxic structures, such as her desire to be liked, to be seen and listened to by men. She sits on her balcony writing, and no longer goes out because the world seems hostile to her. In her writing, she tries to invent a new world where the

living is easy. I like the idea that people might wonder if the story told in the movie isn't, in fact, the story she's writing.

Ruby, the liberated and passionate camgirl. She is presented from the get-go as being in a throuple with a man and a woman. It was important to show a character who owns her choices, who is happy and alive, and who reinvents the rules of love. She loves her work, she is assertive and provocative, and she doesn't take any shit. After the assault she is forced to endure, she continues to be the motor of her own life, in particular thanks to her friends, who believe her and support her.

Élise, the devoted, anxious actress. She is in a crisis when she rocks up on Nicole and Ruby's doorstep, in full Marilyn Monroe costume. Through her, I wanted to talk about a stifling and paralyzing figure that we have been assigned to embody since forever: the woman of mystery, a devoted, maternal fantasy creature. In my dreams, I see Marilyn meeting up with her girlfriends in a cocoon where she can be safe, alive, gradually liberating herself from this absolute icon that prevents her from being herself. That's Élise's path, and I can relate to it deeply. Marilyn only exists through male desire. She was shaped by it and for it. So it was fun and cathartic to play with that figure.

You shot this film in completely different conditions than *Mi iubita mon amour* with, I suppose, a longer shooting period and greater resources. How did that change of gear affect you?

I shot my first film totally non-professionally, in two weeks, with a crew of two people. On this one, we had a full crew every day and months of post-production. As a relatively anxious person, that heaped pressure on me, but in the end I found it healthy and constructive because those resources also buy you time to think and experiment, developing more complex ideas for direction and staging. To relieve the pressure, or give it a human dimension, I surrounded myself with people I already knew: Sanda, my producer Pierre Guyard, who came aboard on my first film when I was in post, Céline, who touched base throughout the whole process, and my crew, sound mixer Armance Durix and DP Evgenia Alexandrova, to whom I am very close now. I was not lost.

Which particular issues and aesthetic choices did you talk through with Evguénia and the crew in general?

I knew that I wanted to take the audience on a lavish journey, and go far out with the costumes, colors and sets. Beyond the story's occasional flirtations with horror and fable, it was crucial to follow through formally, and for the aesthetic choices to bring excess and farce. I set out to play with our fantasy worlds and codes. Coming up with a sweet, colorful and upbeat first part, as if venturing into romcom-meets-wrecking-ball territory, with Almodovar as a reference. A surprising mixture of color, extravagance and life, which offers

the women scope for vulgarity and, in so doing, gives them back a place of their own. This "healthy vulgarity" also required a laidback approach to filming the woman, to keep at bay the sexualization of the bodies. From farts to cellulite, down with the fantasy woman of mystery! I love the colorful personalities, these loud, characterful women. It verges on caricature at times, cartoon characters.

In the second part, at the neighbor's place, I wanted the film to venture into thriller, fantasy and gore territory. On screen, we had to veer toward green, toward suspense, while holding the line on the comedic and the absurd. We had in mind Korean and Japanese thrillers, such as *The Strangers* and *The Chaser* by Na Hong-jin, or the very trashy *Ichi the Killer* by Takashi Miike. Or even Tarantino and *Death Proof*, or all the gorefests I watched as a kid with my sister, and genre-busting ghost movies, especially the ones that push the comedy. Some scenes were tightly mapped out, with detailed blocking and breakdown, whereas others, such as the evening at the neighbor's, were shot on the fly with a handheld camera. Another major reference I discussed with Evgenia was Vera Chytilova's *Daisies* because she showed the intimacy of women as it had never been seen before.

As in your debut feature, you direct and act. What does that change in your approach to your character?

As director, I have less time to look over each take, think and step back on set. And as actress, I don't have time to analyze each performance. But I had been preparing for the part since I started writing, so I knew where I needed to go in each scene, so I allowed myself greater exuberance. Also, when I was acting, I sensed the film inside me, and I dared to go to places I would never have imagined taking actors if I were only wearing my director's hat.

You cast Souhelia Yacoub and Sanda Codreanu to complete the trio at the heart of the movie. How did you make those choices?

I had Sanda in mind when I was writing. She's a woman who truly inspires me in real life, an excellent actress, who has done a lot of stage work and whose singularity I find very touching. For Nicole, we needed someone with a corporeal peculiarity and bodily shyness, who nonetheless proclaims her ideas.

Also, the film starts with her, in her home. I feel like we don't see actors like Sanda a lot in movies. I asked her to watch Kwak Do-won in *The Strangers* and Whoopi Goldberg in *Ghost*, with a very burlesque angle. Sanda played a major part in writing her character's dialog. She has great repartee and rhythm, which allows a scene to unfurl fast.

For Ruby, I auditioned lots of actors, but Souhelia's screen tests made it an easy decision. She is very instinctive, whole-hearted and genuine. There is a raw, vibrant side to her. We went looking for the character and found her together.

And Lucas Bravo as the neighbor who lives opposite?

For that character, I was looking for a man who was physically attractive but above all a good actor, able to switch moods, capable of charming the women one moment and making them ill at ease the next. Lucas has incredible presence and has no problem breaking with the image he has in *Emily in Paris*, for example. For me, the greatest quality an actor can possess is not to fear ridicule.

The neighbor who fascinates your protagonists is a photographer. Tragedy strikes during a photo shoot with one of them. It's the reverse of the relationship between your character and Adèle Haenel's character in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. What's your take on this muse-pygmalion theme?

I started out as a model, and I based what happens to Ruby on personal experience. There are true stories, real-life anecdotes, scattered throughout the film, like the photographer saying he wants to capture the models' soul even though they're stark naked with a bag on their head! Underpinning the photographer's explanations of his relationship to art is the notion of possession, domination and the idea of achieving "authenticity" through conflict and tyranny in the creative process. A lot of artists still work like that. Thanks to people like Céline Sciamma, I realized that a completely different creative process was possible. That's what Nicole is trying to achieve in her writing. Completely reinventing the quest for truth and meaning. It's complicated because our whole society is based on that dynamic and that power structure. It's harder to create a piece of work collectively, yet it brings so much. There still needs to be a conductor, but the perspective needs to be horizontal and open to dialog, allowing scope to admit you don't know, you messed up, or someone else has a better idea, and so on.

The men in the film always embody "problematic and oppressive" situations. Was that deliberate?

Yes, it's the premise of the film, a kind of nightmare. As if, for one day, they had all put the word out. It's taken to an extreme in order to fit the overall tone. This film is about abuse and abusers, and I didn't want to slip into the PC trap of having one or several male characters who make up for all the others. In my film, the abusers and oppressors leave no room for anyone else, literally and figuratively, so you don't see or hear the others, "the good guys" who have got it, and who don't abuse. Where are they? Maybe that's the question I want people to ask themselves. I also wanted to show that, as with Élise's husband Paul, there can be love, confusion and a genuine attempt to understand, even if he remains stuck in a toxic pattern of behavior. In spite of everything, I like the idea that he can be a likable character at some junctures. Because abusers are not always monsters—and often aren't, in fact—but

human beings who may have some good sides. I hope people understand why Élise was once able to picture life together with him, and why she loved him. And why she just can't anymore.

ABOUT NOÉMIE MERLANT

Noémie Merlant is a French actress and director.

As an actress she has worked with many prestigious directors, such as Céline Sciamma (*Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, 2019), Jacques Audiard (*Paris, 13th District*, 2021), Todd Field (*Tár*, 2022) and, most recently, Audrey Diwan (*Emmanuelle*, 2024). In 2023, she won a César award for her performance in *The Innocent* by Louis Garrel.

After directing several shorts, Noémie Merlant wrote and directed her first feature *Mi iubita mon amour*, in 2020. Her second feature, *The Balconettes (Les Femmes au Balcon)*, in which she co-stars with Souheila Yacoub and Sanda Codreanu, will premiere at the Cannes Festival 2024, in the Official Selection.

CAST

| | |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Ruby | Souheila Yacoub |
| Nicole | Sanda Codreanu |
| Élise | Noémie Merlant |
| The neighbor across the street | Lucas Bravo |
| Denise | Nadège Beausson-Diagne |
| Paul | Christophe Montenez de la Comédie Française |

CREW

| | |
|-------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| Director | Noémie MERLANT |
| Producer | Pierre GUYARD |
| Writer | Noémie MERLANT |
| In collaboration with | Céline SCIAMMA |
| Associated Producers | Christophe ROSSIGNON, Philip BOËFFARD |
| Director of Photography | Evgenia ALEXANDROVA |
| Editor | Julien LACHERAY |
| Original score | Uèle LAMORE |
| Casting | Pierre-François CRÉANCIER |
| Set Design | Chloé CAMBOURNAC |
| Sound | Armance DURIX |
| Costume | Emmanuelle YOUCHNOVSKI |
| Make-up | Vesna PEBORDE |
| Hair | Cathy VIDAL-JABES |
| Production | NORD-OUEST FILMS |
| In co-production with | FRANCE 2 CINÉMA |
| With the support of | CANAL+, CINÉ+, FRANCE TÉLÉVISIONS |
| International Sales | MK2 FILMS |
| Distribution France | TANDEM |

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