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PRESENT



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
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DOG ON TRIAL

A FILM BY LÆTITIA DOSCH

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2024 – SWITZERLAND, FRANCE – COMEDY – FRENCH – 80'

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FILMS

SYNOPSIS

Avril, an independently minded lawyer known for taking on lost causes, resolves to secure a victory in her next case. However, when Dariuch another seemingly hopeless client, asks her to defend his faithful canine companion, Cosmos, Avril is unable to resist. She dives into the absurdity of defending a canine client, confronting not only the legal system but also advocating for both women's and animal rights. A lively and at times comical court case unfolds – where a dog's life hangs in the balance.

INTERVIEW WITH LÆTITIA DOSCH

Before *Dog on Trial*, you had already shown interest in non-human species. In your performance, *Hate* (2020), you shared the stage with a horse, Corazón, and in your show, *Radio Arbres* (2021), you imagined a free-form radio show for trees. What do you find when you explore this otherness?

The environmental crisis makes me very anxious, and I'm looking to find a role culture can play with respect to it. For me, this crisis largely stems from ignorance and insensitivity towards other species in our ecosystem. I wanted to document this, then arouse the audience's curiosity and question their preconceived notions. Because, as we can see, we need to reinvent our relationship to living things if we want to survive. For instance, we often think of animals as objects. In *Dog on Trial*, Swiss law equates the dog Cosmos with a thing, not an individual, so if it's euthanized, "you don't kill it, you destroy it".

This idea of objectifying animals is precisely what authorizes us to eat them. They have no value other than being useful to us. I think about this a lot, and it's probably because I'm a woman. I've always felt I had to conform to certain conventions, to serve a purpose. That's probably why I love people who don't fit in. In my film, there are quite a few of them. Dariuch, Cosmos' owner played by François Damiens, is visually impaired and a bit of a misfit. Then there's Avril's punky neighbour, a child who's being abused. Finally, there's Lorene, played by Anabela Moreira, a Portuguese cleaning lady bitten in the face by the dog, who chooses to keep her scars and reject norms. She represents one of the film's feminist ideas.

What made you want to get behind the camera and direct?

At first, there was simply the desire, as a viewer, to see a certain kind of film in a theatre: an unfettered, unsettling comedy that talks about important issues and shifts tones constantly. I also wanted to act in a film like that. But it had never crossed my mind to direct it myself. In life, things just happen to me. My Swiss producer, Lionel Baier, came to see *HATE* – my play with the horse. On the way out, he said to me, "If you can do that, then you can direct a film." And I believed him, even though I now know they're nothing alike. A few days later, I was told a story about a trial involving a dog. And I felt it was my kind of comedy: absurd, nebulous, and raising lots of questions.

You push the absurd to the point of making the dog Cosmos the defendant in a trial. Did you also want to explore the limits of justice?

When forests and rivers can have legal status, we're not far from those limits today. People can file lawsuits on their behalf, and they can be given the status of victim – but not that of a guilty party. Equality among species would mean that a fig tree, a dog, or a person could be equally guilty or innocent. That would be absurd.

What made me laugh was that all it took was for the dog's status to change – he was no longer a thing, but a person – for everything to become instantly surreal. Suddenly, a dog is called to the stand with humans who are completely powerless to judge him.

I often go to the court and sit in on trials. I admire the importance of listening there: how patiently they listen to witnesses, ask questions, form an educated opinion to get as close to

the truth as possible before passing judgment. For me, the justice system is precious. It's our compass, even if it's imperfect. It reassures me in an age of hasty judgment. In this trial, the judge goes to great lengths to understand this dog: he brings in religious figures, high-tech dog-human translation machines... It's all absurd, but it's also beautiful.

You play Avril, a lawyer who defends cases that are deemed impossible. How did you come up with this character?

This film is first and foremost about a woman's trajectory. Avril is a 40-year-old woman caught between two eras, the old world and #MeToo, looking for her own voice: an off-screen voice, an absent voice, a deep voice, a grating voice.... She's sort of like Cosmos, a dog trying the best he can to recover his wolfish howl, which years of domestication have erased. Cosmos is her mirror. By trying to save him, she'll find her own power. And therefore, her place in the world.

Why did you choose a comedy for your first feature?

It was a wonderful challenge, and I wouldn't have wanted to explore this theme any other way. For me, laughter is essential, and comedy is a noble art that's accessible to everyone. I think it's great to entertain viewers, especially if you want to talk about deep, serious issues. I'm a fan of Pierre Salvadori's films, or of Phoebe Waller-Bridge's series *Fleabag* for these very reasons. It's a genre that should be considered more highly, because it can really make life more liveable.

Much of the film's comedy plays on the error humans make by projecting so much of themselves onto animals. How do you understand anthropomorphism?

The most interesting thing for me was figuring out how to film Kodi, the dog who plays Cosmos. I didn't want him to be a comic dog like *Beethoven*, who'll make a cute face at the right time to either move us or make us laugh. But I didn't want to fall into the opposite extreme either of a wild, incomprehensible animal. What I find beautiful about pets is that they're half with us, half elsewhere.

And what's funny is the way they see us: our extremes, our stupidity. Kodi is an acrobatic dog and circus performer. Initially, I'd written some incredible bits of choreography for him, but I took most of it out. In the film, he's not a circus animal. What's moving are the shots where he's simply there, where we tried to capture his inner self, his emotions. We got a few shots of him worthy of any great actor. This dog is more like Patrick Dewaere than Christian Clavier! (laughter)

You portray the speed with which groups of people now react to trials. What was it about this that you found interesting?

The film was inspired by real events. I'd heard about a dog owner who was put on trial because his dog was accused of repeatedly biting people. It ended up inflaming an entire town. People started petitioning, getting very involved, confronting each other... It reminded me of the time when gay marriage was being legalized. When there's a shift in thinking, there's an immediate, hostile reaction because there's a vagueness or confusion that humans find hard to accept. The fact that in such moments, everything can take on enormous proportions and degenerate very quickly, scares me. On the contrary, times like those require a gentle pace, time, nuance, conversations... If only we could all sit down around a table and talk things through.

Putting a dog on trial raises some dizzying questions. For example, can a violent individual change? We're reminded a little of Samuel Fuller's *White Dog* (1982), which asked the same questions about a dog who'd been trained to be racist.

In this film, violence is everywhere, and we're not quite sure how it started. Was it with the dog biting, or the woman attacking him? Was it with Avril hitting a man, or with the violent words against her just before? Everything is constantly blurred and escalating.

I was inspired by Romain Gary's book *White Dog* (1970), which Fuller adapted to make his film. In this novel, there's a black dog trainer who makes it a point of pride to correct a racist dog by all means necessary. Avril does the same thing: she's obsessed with curing this dog of its alleged misogyny. I thought it was funny and pathetic – as if by correcting Cosmos, she could make all the misogyny in the world disappear.

You explore the notion of personal and social responsibility in the face of violence, especially through the relationship between Avril and her neighbour: a boy who's being physically abused. What questions did this raise for you?

Initially, the idea was to create a very strong relationship between a little boy and a woman who was not maternal, which you rarely ever see in film. Avril becomes the boy's friend, but also a point of reference for him. They're each other's lifeline. Joachim is a victim, in the sense that he has no control over his life – but he's still a strong person, a little unlovable, vulgar, and provocative. He hides behind a façade. That's how I see children who are victims of violence. Among people I know, or through thin walls, I've heard violence. When that happens, you don't know what to do. It takes time to really understand what's going on, what your role is, and what to do. It's a disturbing situation.

How did you work on the court scenes, which play with a certain theatricality and larger-than-life characters?

It was like organizing a concert. Every day, we had 80 spectators – all highly motivated extras. And the actors would bring the best out of them! I wanted the characters to be very clearly defined – kind of like in a book I love, *The World According to Garp* by John Irving, which is a bit of a fairy tale. But I also wanted it to feel like a documentary because, in Switzerland, where I lived for five years and where we filmed, I met a lot of personalities in that vein, who were colourful and singular.

The plaintiff's lawyer, played by Anne Dorval, is a caricature, not unlike Éric Zemmour or Donald Trump – politicians who exaggerate everything, play on people's fears and sometimes use ridicule. This surreal far right terrifies me. This feeling that it's all a big joke, when it definitely isn't... I had to find a way to get all the different comic types to play together, kind of like instruments. Jean-Pascal Zadi, who plays the animal behaviourist, doesn't have the same tone as François Damiens. He's more of a "boy next door" that everyone falls in love with, like Drew Barrymore. As for me, I had to be the common thread running through the film as Avril – to be less hyperbolic than the others, but still be burlesque. I could afford to make silly faces, which in today's comedies seems to be somewhat reserved for men. I thought of Louis CK, who, in his TV series, can take us from urban to poetic scenes, from vulgar to serious ones, without any feeling of inconsistency.

You spoke of fairy tales. The candy-box, pastel colours of your film are somewhat reminiscent of that aesthetic.

I feel like comedies often aren't very pretty. I wanted there to be splashes of colour that create joy – but I also wanted contrast and lurking shadows. The courthouse really had a special status in the film's palette, with its brighter – but also softer – colours. It's like a protected space, one that's preserved. We also took the same approach with the sound: the atmospheres are hushed, without any street noises. I wanted the voices to be highlighted.

One really beautiful aspect is how you sometimes build up to an expectation of comedy, then suddenly veer towards emotion.

In this film, there are a lot of prejudices to overcome. Some characters are prisoners of their own image. Like Dariuch. Often, people like him, who put on a show, are actually hiding beneath it: they also have problems and depth. One of my favourite scenes is when Lorene, the Portuguese housekeeper who we think is trapped in the role of victim, gets angry with Avril. We've hardly heard her speak up until that point, so we don't even think she's capable of it.

These false leads allow you to confront the audience with their own contradictions, even if their own laughter makes them uncomfortable.

I like to make people uncomfortable. I like to be vulgar and shock a little. It makes me feel free as a woman. But above all, I want to leave enough space for everyone to take time and question themselves, to take the risk of having their judgements be up-ended and experience nuance. All the while making people laugh.

ABOUT LETITIA DOSCH

In 2013, Laetitia Dosch starred under the direction of Justine Triet in *Age of Panic*. She then worked with Christophe Honoré (*Sophie's Misfortunes*), Catherine Corsini (*Summertime*), and Maïwenn (*My King*). She played the title role in *Jeune Femme*, directed by Léonor Serraille, which won the Caméra d'Or at Cannes in 2017 and earned her a César nomination. She then took on the lead role in Anthony Cordier's *Gaspard at the Wedding* and worked with Guillaume Senez on *Our Struggles*. In 2018, she conceived and created the show *Hate* at the Théâtre de Vidy-Lausanne, a unique duo between herself and her horse.

In 2021, she appeared in Danielle Arbid's *Simple Passion*, and in 2022, she starred in films such as *Employee of the Month* by Jérôme Commandeur, *A Little Lesson In Love* by Eve Deboise, and *Libre Garance !* by Lisa Diaz. She worked with Benoit Delepine and Gustave Kervern in *Sticking Together* and in Just Philippot's latest film *Acid* alongside Guillaume Canet.

She will soon be seen in Thierry Klifa's "*Rachel's Game*" with Fanny Ardant, Mathieu Kassovitz, and Nicolas Duvauchelle, as well as in Arnaud and Jean-Marie Larrieu's "*Le roman de Jim*".

Alongside her work in cinema, Laetitia is also a writer and director. She notably conceived the piece *Hate*, a duo with a horse, and the ecology-themed show *Radio Arbres*. Laetitia has directed her first feature film, *Dog on Trial*.

FILMOGRAPHY (Actress)

2023 LE ROMAN DE JIM directed by Arnaud and Jean-Marie Larrieu

2023 DOG ON TRIAL directed by Laetitia Dosch

2022 RACHEL'S GAME directed by Thierry Klifa

2022 ACID directed by Just Philippot

2021 STICKING TOGETHER directed by Benoît Delépine and Gustave Kervern

2021 THE TAKEOVER directed by Gilles Perret

2021 LIBRE GARANCE ! directed by Lisa Diaz

2021 MOTHER AND SON directed by Léonor Serraille

2020 EMPLOYEE OF THE MONTH directed by Jérôme Commandeur

2020 SIMPLE PASSION directed by Danielle Arbid

2020 A LITTLE LESSON OF LOVE directed by Eve Deboise

2020 PLAYLIST directed by Nine Antico

2020 A CHANGE OF HEART directed by Jérémie Elkaïm

2020 APPEARANCES directed by Marc Fitoussi

2018 OF LOVE AND LIES directed by Julien Rappeneau

2018 OUR STRUGGLES directed by Guillaume Senez

2017 GASPARD AT THE WEDDING directed by Antony Cordier

2016 TWO PLAINS AND A FANCY directed by Lev Kalman and Whitney Horn

2016 MONTMARTRE BIENVENUE (or Jeune Femme) directed by Léonor Serraille
2015 SUMMERTIME directed by Catherine Corsini
2015 SOPHIE'S MISFORTUNES directed by Christophe Honoré
2015 STAN directed by Magaly Richard-Serrano
2015 4 DAYS IN FRANCE directed by Jérôme Reybaud
2014 KEEPER directed by Guillaume Senez
2014 MY KING directed by Maïwenn
2012 AGE OF PANIC directed by Justine Triet
2010 ACCOMPLICES directed by Frédéric Mermoud

CAST

Avril Lucciani

Dariuch Michovski

Marc

Roseline Bruckenheimer

Lorene Furtado

Joachim

Le Juge

Jérôme

Cosmos

LAETITIA DOSCH

FRANÇOIS DAMIENS

JEAN-PASCAL ZADI

ANNE DORVAL

ANABELA MOREIRA

TOM FISZELSON

MATHIEU DEMY

PIERRE DELADONCHAMPS

KODI

CREW

Director	LAETITIA DOSCH
Producer	LIONEL BAIER, AGNIESZKA RAMU, THOMAS AND MATHIEU VERHAEGHE
Screenplay	LAETITIA DOSCH, ANNE SOPHIE BAILLY
Based on an original idea by	LAETITIA DOSCH
Artistic direction	ELSA AMIEL
Photography	ALEXIS KAVYRCHINE
Editing	SUZANA PEDRO, ISABELLE DEVINCK
Music	DAVID SZTANKE
Setting	ANNE-CARMEN VUILLEUMIER
Costumes	ISA BOUCHARLAT
Sound	XAVIER LAVOREL, VUK VUKMANOVIC, RAPHAËL SOHIER, MAXENCE CIEKAWY
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