

SARA FORESTIER JAMESTHIÉRÉE



 63^e Internationale
Filmfestspiele
Berlin
Panorama

JACQUES DOILLON & DANIEL MARQUET present

mes séances de
LUTTE
LOVE BATTLES

a film by JACQUES DOILLON

SYNOPSIS

A young woman travels to attend the funeral of her father, who rarely showed her any love, and stays the time it takes to sell the family home in order to unravel the bond she feels toward him. And also to clarify with the highly attractive neighbor the ambiguous relationship they seemed to be developing a few months earlier.

The man, who was left confused by the elusive young woman, ironically asks her to reenact the scene that should have marked the beginning of a love affair. Not really in the mood for games and inhibited by what is at stake, she tries and fails.

She engages with him, getting ever closer. They spar and clash, backing off but never completely avoiding each other, reveling in the growing physicality of their battle. A battle that becomes a necessity - a necessity driven by playfulness with a serious edge.

They are increasingly attracted to each other, perhaps thanks to their now daily battles, which become a curious ritual they cannot escape.

She arrives at his house, they take up their positions and battle begins. The aim is not to tear each other's guts out—with his physique reminiscent of a Rodin sculpture, he is far too strong, but she possesses fearsome energy that allows her to riposte. Gradually, it becomes obvious they must end this violence - verbal as well as physical - or risk mutual destruction.

And, at the same time, break free of the kindly or malevolent ghosts of the past so that their battles finally become love.

INTERVIEW

WITH JACQUES DOILLON

Q: How did this film come to you, starting with the desire to write?

A: It's never entirely clear. I pictured myself cutting up a reproduction of Cézanne's *The Love Battle*—four couples wrestling, pretty much naked, in the open air (sea and clouds behind, a black dog next to them). I taped this love battle over my desk. There I was gazing at it and wondering. What I see needs to be relevant to what's going down on paper. Then I was reminded of the student neighbor of Kafka's hero, who stops by to fight with him every night and leaves without a word. And then Etty Hillesum's diary describing her curious relationship with her unconventional analyst.

Writing blind now, with the Cézanne reproduction in the line of fire. And the scenes between my two protagonists flow. Two—a single couple—without Cézanne's budget: four couples is way too many for me. And it could be four times the same couple. The need for words to try to illuminate a relationship that must be love. Taking care not to lose the bodies in action—that is what the shoot is for—to embody what is said and done. "There is no flesh in ideas," wrote Cézanne appositely.

A script ensues then, without knowing where it comes from. Cézanne can't be the answer to everything. The awareness that it must be more intimate than autobiographical fluff. It must mean something. And this question becomes the crux of the movie: why are these two fighting? Why do they need these "battles" and this ritual that falls into place? In terms of intentions, it's vague. Except for the intention to film them in order to find out what these battles might set free.

Q: "When bodies are well painted, damn!" What does this other quotation of Cézanne's inspire in you?

A: Basically, film by film, through caution and prudery, the workings of the heart and mind—to put it simply—were winning and overshadowing sensual and erotic interactions. Putting none of that on screen in my films provoked a sense of unease, the feeling of lying (by omission) about the nature of human relationships. And failure to speak of that aspect of those relationships increases the risk of undermining the subject. The aim was to make a film that combined heart, mind and sex. A positive

blend of physical interactions (with others). A film that dodged less and explored more. I have sometimes been criticized for making films that are all in the head. At last, I can be criticized for making a film that's all in the body, and I look forward to it. And on set, not chickening out, making sure these battles are "physical." Their battles must never be frivolous. No gratuitous grappling. It must become a necessity, even, and especially, when it starts as a game. It is a prerequisite to finding each other. Because that can no longer be through words; after a while, they (almost) stop talking. There has to be contact, violence, a battle, in order to reach some kind of peace. It must be a release. And, yes, it must release them.

Q: On set was there ever a sense of danger?

A: It wasn't about driving the actors to make mincemeat of each other. It suited me fine that James should be so robust, a Rodin sculpture compared to little Sara, who physically stood no chance despite the astonishing energy she is capable of generating. It's not a battle to see who will win. Something else is at stake.

But, yes, in the script, it became increasingly dangerous, so we had to be careful. To say I was scared during the shoot is an understatement, even though I always urged them to take it further...

We had to block each scene—"choreograph" it—very carefully, and both actors contributed greatly. And then break that down so the process was less visible, outwardly more unpredictable. That didn't stop some blows landing, James pulling a muscle and Sara ending some scenes black and blue. For the most difficult "battles," we restricted ourselves to four or five takes. Any more and it became too exhausting and dangerous for them. That was complicated for me—I'm not used to doing so few takes. We rehearsed a lot.

Besides being fighters (and actors trained to use their bodies, especially James), they were, above all, artists. To digress slightly, I am very taken by Busoni's definition of an artist: the artist must recapture the composer's inspiration, which, in the writing, is necessarily lost.

I think that Sara's impulsiveness and energy considerably help the film and that James matched his screen partner's wonderful qualities.

I think we made a good team.

I am greatly in their debt.



SARA
FORESTIER
JAMES
THIÉRRÉE

INTERVIEW

WITH SARAH FORESTIER

Please give us a brief description of your character. What were the key elements in creating the character?

My character doesn't have a name in the script. The characters are named "her" and "him". It is very important in so far as she is not marked out by informative elements, neither anchored in a too informative context. It permits to keep some kind of freedom for the projections the spectator can put on her. That way the character keep her savagery. In the movie she does not disclose herself by informations such as seeing her in her intimate life or seeing her in her social background. We discover her by her actions and especially her reactions, it is about emotional; and by her physical reactions and her physical aspect. If i were to give elements to describe her, i would say she is a modern young lady who wants to be an actress, delicate, quite savage, maybe a little prone to obsession? She has humor, a kind of insolence. She is flame, a lover, a young lady and a woman. She exists in her diverse femininity because she is put in front of a man, a male.

How did you handle the intense physicality of the role?

I always work my characters first by their physical aspect, it helps me to get me into the character, particularly the clothes that precondition your way to move. I choosed shoes that gave her a light walk, transparent tee-shirts that show her flagrance about her breast a mix between an assumed insolent woman and a little boy stripped to the waist, the undone hair without sauciness, rather wild. There has especially been the physical rehearsals... in the movie both characters sniff each other like prey, it is what we have done during the rehearsals, we have got into that process, with has gotten us James and I into the movie. Most of the work upstream was to trace an evolutionary emotional curve throughout the different scenes, in so far as the movie is constructed as repetitious circles. Choose in which scene she cracks, in which scene she pretends and controls, in which scenes she is troubled by him in an underground way.

Was there a lot of rehearsal, choreography?

The rehearsal and the shooting was a real physical experience. It was above all feeling oneself alive by the sensation of pain in the body, bearable pain. To be taken by the movement. The two characters are two blows that creates an eddy, a cyclone, and they are taken by this cyclone which sucks them.

How did the physicality add to the already emotional subject matter?

I have not gotten into a too physiological aspect, in as much as this story is mostly about magnetization. The two characters are magnetized by their bodies, physical energy, that leads their actions bypassing their toughs. The toughs are either there to try to avoid the physical confrontation or to trigger it, or to explain it... it revolves around, but it is only electrons, the nucleus is their physical attraction animal and savage.



INTERVIEW

WITH JAMES THIÉRRÉE

Please give us a brief description of your character. What were the key elements in creating the character?

Quite a lonesome character, a man that has clearly retrieved from social life, who has found a way to hide from obligations by simply taking care of a house who's owner is obviously absent most of the year around... my character has a complex mix of immaturity and raw intellectual approach of things, he is quite brute and defensive, hiding away a fragility, a romantic thrive that has difficulty to emerge... he will rather fight and lose himself in sterile debate than show his heart's yearnings...

How did you handle the intense physicality of the role?

The key elements for me converge in the behaviour of the character... the physical behaviour and the emotional... behaviourism is an astounding fountain of psychology, and I have to say that finding the costume, the way the character looses himself in oversized, almost teenaged brand of pants, t-shirts, overcoats, his carelessness, his awkwardness, aloofness, made me feel layer by layer the world and restrictions of this man. Also the way he would hide his strength and power behind his timidity.

Was there a lot of rehearsal, choreography?

Physicality has to handle me! Having been raised in a circus, and working essentially as a physical performer-director, the intensity of the scenes was something that pushed me into the project, the real challenge was to choreograph something that would look believable yet somehow disproportionate, as the relationship between the two characters is. With Sara, we rehearsed and performed all the "stunts", making sure to avoid any "show off" attitude, as well as injuring ourselves. She was incredibly devoted and courageous, and didn't avoid bruises! We always tried to keep the human aspect of the relationship a priority. Jacques' idea of the film was certainly not an action movie!

How did the physicality add to the already emotional subject matter?

In the end, the physicality was an extension of the emotional level of the characters. Their incapacity to solve and declare their love for each other became the starting point for a new language to emerge. A language of ritualized combat, of contained and framed violence. A sensual violence that filled their heart with a feeling of connection... a strange gift of love and despair.

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