



# UN COUPLE

a film by

**Frederick Wiseman**

with

**Nathalie Boutefeu**

*USA / 2022 / 63 min / DCP / Scope / Color*

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# SYNOPSIS

UN COUPLE is a film about a long term relationship between a man and a woman.

The man is Leo Tolstoy. The woman is his wife, Sophia. They were married for 36 years, had 13 children, nine of whom survived. Each kept a diary. Although they lived together, in the same house, they wrote letters frequently to each other.

The Tolstoy's were also a dysfunctional couple, arguing frequently and being very unhappy with each other while occasionally enjoying passionate moments of reconciliation. The film is Sophia's monologue about the joys and struggles of their life together, loosely drawn from their letters to each other and their diary entries.

The film was shot in a beautiful garden on Belle Ile, an island off the coast of Brittany.

## ***A conversation with Nathalie Boutefeu and Frederick Wiseman***

### **How did you meet?**

*Nathalie Boutefeu.* By chance, in 2005 at the Berlin festival. Fred was scheduled to present *The Garden*, a film about New York's Madison Square Garden. But since the film couldn't be shown for legal reasons, *Welfare* was shown instead. I was there to present *Les Yeux Clairs* by Jérôme Bonnell. We became friends very simply and very naturally. We hit it off right away and instantly got into very long conversations.

*Frederick Wiseman.* It took us between ten and fifteen seconds to become friends. Then, we met up in Paris and talked a lot... Then, in 2012, at the Théâtre Le Lucernaire, we did a play together.

*NB* That was your idea.

*FW* Yes... The play was called *La Belle de Amherst*. It's a monologue based on the Emily Dickinson's poems and letters. Nathalie played Emily Dickinson. I love monologues. In 2002, I had directed a play and a film, both monologues, based on a chapter from *Vie et Destin* by Vasily Grossman. After the Dickinson play, Nathalie and I continued discussing and thinking about the possibility of new joint projects. Nathalie read Leo Tolstoy's letters and the diary of his wife, Sophia. She suggested we do something about their family and married life.

*NB* I did that reading specifically thinking about a film. The idea came after thousands of hours of talking with Fred about art and life as a couple, love, the sharing of freedom, territory, creation... How do you go about things when there are two of you and you both want to create? I got the feeling that these texts, and particularly Sophia's journal, came to illustrate and even metabolize our exchanges. One thing that fascinated us was that, while Leo Tolstoy was obviously a wonderful writer, Sophia, in her own way, was also a wonderful woman. She had immense personal and creative abilities. How did these two people go about things together? That's the question we wanted to explore.

### **Before deciding on Sophia Tolstoy, did you talk about other texts or personalities?**

*NB* Yes, but Sophia stood out. She kept a diary her entire life, or at least from the time she married at 18 up until her death at age 75. That diary wasn't translated into French until thirty years ago. So, it remained confidential for a long time. And for a long time, Sophia Tolstoy didn't exist. For most people, the wife of someone that important generally doesn't exist. That's a dimension we wanted to talk about. Sophia also had a very strong personality.

Not only did she admire her husband, but she was also able to understand him and support him in his writing career.

### **Who was Sophia Behrs in 1862 when she married Tolstoy?**

*NB* She was 18 and he was 36. She'd known him since she was five years old. Tolstoy had already published *Childhood*, *Boyhood* and *Youth*, which made him famous. Sophia lived in the Czar's court. Her father was a doctor. She spoke several languages including English and French. Sophia was well educated. Leo was well read and educated but also very worldly.

*FW* In particular, he had an excellent knowledge of the brothels in France and Germany.

*NB* Both perfectly ticked the masculine and feminine boxes as defined at the time.

*FW* The issues that made them a dysfunctional couple are very contemporary. Sophia published two novels in which she talks about a relationship with a kind, faithful man... In them, she expresses hope for a life that is totally different from the one she had with her husband. When I look around at the couples I know, I have the impression that life as a couple is a little hard these days. Is that eternal or did things start getting worse starting as of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century? I don't know about the history of couples over the last centuries, and even less about their lives, but I read a lot about the Tolstoys, and I have big ears, I listen to what I'm told... I get the impression that the fights between Sophia and Leo, particularly those regarding the division of labor between family and work, the nature of the children's education, who got up at night when a child was sick are relevant today. The Tolstoys faced problems that they couldn't resolve. We'd thought about the possibility of making them a modern-day couple, but Nathalie insisted on it being the Tolstoy's. She was right. Their respective artistic achievements and interests lend another dimension to the film, which perhaps resonates with contemporary life.

*NB* The couple only gradually became dysfunctional. In the beginning, it was mad love. Sophia gave herself body and soul. She was her husband's copyist, she read to him, played music for him, took care of the children, managed the huge house with its many maids... She was a very good pianist, she created. She could also talk to him about what he was writing. Basically, Sophia was able to face a man of his power, she was even as powerful as him in other areas. But at the end of the day, it was no longer giving on her part, it was servitude. And it even harder since they'd always been extremely frank with each other.

*FW* Just after their wedding, at a dinner, each of them read excerpts from the other's diary out loud in front of the guests!

*NB* And each of them was discovering those passages for the first time while reading them! Over time, their relationship eventually became quite violent. You need only read the book

written by their eldest daughter, Tatiana, to understand the extent of it. At a certain point, Leo remained in the countryside while Sophia went to Moscow for the children's education. She could no longer stand being alone, living alongside a man who was absent... Among the things that helped drive a wedge between them was the fact that Tolstoy didn't want their children or her to receive any royalties. He could no longer stand the wealth and opulence in which he'd always lived. And it's true that he was always very close to the poor... But Sophia worked day and night alongside him and for him, and he refused for her to receive any income. That, of course, made her furious. During the last ten days of his life, he flat out refused to see her. He couldn't stand her anymore. The film doesn't go that far, but it shows you how dark their relationship became.

### **How did you choose the texts enacted in the film?**

*NB* I read all of Sophia's journals and letters. I started by making a huge selection. Fred and I often work this way, in a funnel: I show him a selection, he chooses, and we gradually refine. We reworked a lot to establish a consistency, a progression, and to avoid being overly repetitive.

*FW* We also made some adjustments to the texts.

*NB* We occasionally changed the order, rewrote a few lines that were overblown. Most importantly, we transitioned the entire text into the present. I insisted on that, so it would become accessible and immediate.

### **On several occasions, Sophia seems surprised by her fate, surprised at having to experience and accept such difficult things.**

*NB* At least twice in her journal, she expresses her amazement at being with a man she loves so much and who is so complex. She is, too, in her own way. In fact, she's always astonished: she therefore remains alive, so she can project herself. That was one of the things I used to help me play the role.

### ***Un couple* is a SHORTER film compared to your usual projects.**

*FW* Yes, it is. Shooting with Nathalie took 14 days, and there were four more days where we filmed only the garden, the flowers and the animals... When I shoot a documentary, I have around 150 hours of rushes. This time, I had forty. The editing process was short: three or four weeks.

**How did you choose the magnificent garden where the majority of the film takes place and whose beauty contrasts so sharply with the darkness of the text?**

*NB* It was Fred who thought of the garden and wanted the film to be shot outdoors.

*FW* It's the La Boulaye garden in Belle-Île. It belongs to a friend, Véronique de la Boulaye, who's cultivated it for 17 years. It covers six and-a-half hectares. That garden became one of the characters in the film. At night, it turns into a place of violence where animals kill each other... This underlying violence and beauty is related to the expression of certain themes of the film.

**Up until now, you hadn't really filmed nature...**

*FW* It's true that I'm usually more interested in human nature. But nature is an active presence in some of my documentaries, for example, *PRIMATE* (1974), *CENTRAL PARK* (1986) and *ZOO* (1992).

**Does the garden in *Un Couple* echo that of the Tolstoys?**

*FW* Tolstoy was one of the richest men in Russia. His land holdings were immense, he owned forests, he loved hunting... But I have no idea if he had a garden that looked like the one in Belle-Île. That's artistic license!

**Did you consider the possibility of *Un Couple* actually depicting a couple - not just Sophia, but also Leo, played by an actor as well?**

*NB* For a while, Fred wanted to find a man's voice to read a letter over the film's closing credits. A violent letter written by Leo and directed at Sophia, denouncing a relationship in which neither of them was free... But after editing, he decided it wasn't necessary. So, the letter was replaced by a Mendelssohn piano piece under the end credits.

*FW* That letter didn't bring anything new to the monologue...

*NB* It would be more interesting to make another film, *Un Couple 2*, shot this time from the man's perspective and focusing on this impossible woman. Because Sophia could indeed be that way. I understand her journey very well, the presence she pursued and didn't obtain;

but I also think that she could be unfair, wildly angry, extremely demanding, and just as impossible to live with as he was.

**You, too, have always worked a lot: you've made a lot of serious, complex films... Is it crazy to think there could be a resemblance between Leo Tolstoy and Frederick Wiseman?**

FW No resemblance whatsoever! I'm not rich, I can't ride a horse, and I don't have a beard.

**In any case, it's a sort of reverse angle on your usual work.**

FW Yes, and that was an excellent reason to make this film. Emerson said it well: "*A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds*". Nothing is forcing me to only make long documentaries about institutions. I just do what interests me.

*(interview conducted by Emmanuel Burdeau, July 2022)*

## ABOUT FREDERICK WISEMAN

Frederick Wiseman was born in Boston, USA in 1930. He graduated from the Yale Law School in 1954.

From his first documentary film, *Titicut Follies* in 1967, Wiseman has used the same technique for all his films: no interviews, narration or additional music. He edits the films himself and it usually takes 12 months.

Wiseman has made 43 documentary films that form a mosaic portrait of contemporary society as seen in institutions that are common in all societies. He considers his work a single film lasting more than 100 hours over 54 years, to date.

Frederick Wiseman directed a fiction film, *The Last Letter*, in 2002. He has directed two plays at the Comedie Française : Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* and *The Last Letter*, based on a chapter from Vasily Grossman's novel, *Life and Fate*. In Paris, at the Lucernaire Theatre, Wiseman staged *The Belle of Amherst*, a play by William Luce on the life of Emily Dickinson.

Frederick Wiseman has received numerous awards, including four Emmys, a MacArthur Prize Fellowship, a Guggenheim, a Golden Lion lifetime achievement award at the Venice Film Festival in 2014, and, in 2016, an Honorary Oscar from the Board of Governors of the American Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

In 1971, in order to guarantee his creative independence, he founded his own production and distribution company, Zipporah Films.



## FREDERICK WISEMAN FILMOGRAPHY

*Titicut Follies*, 1967  
*High School*, 1968  
*Law and Order*, 1969  
*Hospital*, 1969  
*Basic Training*, 1971  
*Essene*, 1972  
*Juvenile Court*, 1973  
*Primate*, 1974  
*Welfare*, 1975  
*Meat*, 1976  
*Canal Zone*, 1977  
*Sinai Field Mission*, 1978  
*Manoeuvre*, 1979  
*Model*, 1980  
*Seraphita's Diary*, 1982  
*The Store*, 1983  
*Racetrack*, 1985  
*Blind*, 1986  
*Deaf*, 1986  
*Adjustment and Work*, 1986  
*Multi-handicapped*, 1986  
*Missile*, 1987  
*Central Park*, 1989  
*Near Death*, 1989  
*Aspen*, 1991  
*Zoo*, 1993  
*High School II*, 1994  
*Ballet*, 1995  
*La Comédie-Française ou L'Amour Joué*,  
1996  
*Public Housing*, 1997  
*Belfast, Maine*, 1999  
*Domestic Violence*, 2001  
*Domestic Violence 2*, 2002  
*La Dernière Lettre*, 2002  
*The Garden*, 2004  
*State Legislature*, 2006  
*La Danse—Le Ballet de l'Opéra de Paris*, 009  
*Boxing Gym*, 2010  
*Crazy Horse*, 2011  
*At Berkeley*, 2013  
*National Gallery*, 2014  
*In Jackson Heights*, 2015  
*Ex Libris – The New York Public Library*, 2017  
*Monrovia Indiana*, 2019  
*City Hall*, 2020  
*Un couple*, 2022

## **NATHALIE BOUTEFEU**

Nathalie Boutefeu studied theatre at the Conservatoire de Strasbourg TNS where she graduated in 1992.

Alongside her theatre studies, Nathalie began her film career with roles in *Barjo* (1992) by Jérôme Boivin and *The Butterfly's Dream* (1994) by Marco Bellocchio. She then worked with Olivier Assayas in *Une Nouvelle Vie* (1993) and again in *Irma Vep* (1996).

Nathalie worked on several projects with Jérôme Bonnell including *Les Yeux Clairs*, which won the Jean Vigo prize, among others. She also made several films with Antoine Barraud including *Les Gouffres*, for which she won Best Actress at the 2013 Montréal Film Festival, and his most recent film, *Madeleine Collins* (2021 Venice Mostra).

Throughout her career, Nathalie has also worked with great filmmakers such as Patrice Chéreau in *His Brother* (2003), Arnaud Desplechin in *Kings and Queen* (2004), Claude Miller in *A Secret* (2007), Xavier Giannoli in *In the Beginning* (2009), Maïwenn in *Polisse* (2011), and Joachim Lafosse in *Our Children* (2012).

On television, Nathalie Boutefeu plays Captain Leclerc in the France 2 series *Candice Renoir*. She also worked with Eric Rochant in the Canal + series *The Bureau*.

On stage, she has acted in some 20 plays, both for private and public theatre, alongside directors including Isabelle Janier, Philippe Berling, Pierre Laville, and Frederick Wiseman.

## **CAST**

**Sophia Tolstoy**

**Nathalie Boutefeu**

## **CREDITS**

**Director – Sound – Editor – Producer** **Frederick Wiseman**

**Screenplay**

**Frederick Wiseman & Nathalie Boutefeu**

**Cinematographer**

**John Davey**

**Sound**

**Jean-Paul Mugel**

**Editor**

**Frederick Wiseman**

**Producers**

**Frederick Wiseman, Karen Konicek**

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*UN COUPLE will have its U.S. theatrical premiere at Film Forum in NYC*