

MARGUERITE



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Ein Film von Xavier Giannoli

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127 Minuten

Praesens-Film AG

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SYNOPSIS

Frei inspiriert von Florence Foster Jenkins Biografie, erzählt **MARGUERITE** die Geschichte einer Opern-Diva, die eigentlich nicht singen kann.

1921, Beginn der Goldenen Zwanziger. Unweit von Paris findet wie jedes Jahr ein großes Fest auf Marguerite Dumonts (Catherine Frot) Schloss statt, auf dem sich eine Vielzahl von Musikliebhabern versammelt. Niemand weiß Genaueres über die Gastgeberin, außer dass sie reich ist, und dass sie ihr ganzes Leben ihrer großen Leidenschaft widmet: der Musik. Denn Marguerite singt. Sie singt von ganzem Herzen, doch furchtbar schräg. Aber Marguerite lebt in ihrer eigenen Traumwelt und das heuchlerische Publikum, jederzeit bereit, sich auf Kosten anderer zu amüsieren, bejubelt sie als die Diva, die sie zu sein glaubt. Als Lucien Beaumont (Sylvain Dieuaide), ein junger, provokanter Journalist, einen überschwänglichen Artikel über ihren Auftritt schreibt, fühlt sich Marguerite umso mehr in ihrem Talent bestätigt. Dies gibt ihr den Mut, den sie braucht, um ihrem großen Traum zu folgen, einmal auf der Bühne zu stehen. Trotz der Widerworte ihres Mannes Georges (André Marcon) und mit Hilfe des sowohl humorvollen als auch abgehalfterten Stars Atos Pezzini (Michel Fau) probt sie für ihr erstes Konzert, welches vor einer Schar von wildfremden Menschen stattfinden soll ...

MARGUERITE zeichnet das Portrait einer starken Frau, die um Anerkennung ringt. Mit Meisterhand hat Regisseur Xavier Giannoli, der bereits mit QUAND J'ÉTAIS CHANTEUR sein Geschick für musikalische Themen bewiesen hat, dieses emotionale Filmepos inszeniert. Darüber hinaus zeigt er ein Zeitdokument der 20er Jahre in Paris, das Aufkommen der Clubs, des Jazz und der Rebellion gegen die Bourgeoisie. Als Marguerite brilliert Catherine Frot (LE DÎNER DE CONS, LE COUP D'ÉCLAT und LA TOUREUSE DES PAGES). Die junge Nachwuchssängerin Hazel wird gespielt von Frankreichs Shootingstar Christa Thérêt (LAUGHING OUT LOUD, RENOIR). In weiteren Rollen sind zu sehen Michel Fau (SWIMMING POOL) und André Marcon (LES RACONS ET GUILLAUME, À TABLE).

INTERVIEW WITH XAVIER GIANNOLI

How did the idea for this film come about?

About 10 years ago, I was listening to the radio, to an extraordinary opera singer who was singing *The Queen of the Night* aria by Mozart completely out of tune. It was very funny, and quite incredible...The recording crackled; it was old and mysterious as if it came from "elsewhere".

Who was singing?

I found out that her name was Florence Foster Jenkins, and that she had lived in the United States in the forties. She was a very rich woman who was passionate about music and the opera, but was totally unaware that her voice was so bad. She was used to singing to the same people in the same social circles and no one had ever dared tell her that she sang out of tune. Either they were hypocrites, or they were interested in her money, or they were simply cowards. It's an amusing story, but it also exposes a cruel side to human nature that I wanted to explore

So you did some research...

Yes. I found plenty of press cuttings in New York about her, about her incredible career and her eccentricities. I even found articles about a concert she performed towards the end of her life when she sang in front of a huge audience at Carnegie Hall. I also found a recording where she sings several famous opera songs really badly. It's extremely funny. On the cover of the record, there's a photo of her wearing angel's wings and a diamond tiara. She is smiling at the camera and she looks so naïve, yet at the same time very confident. I kept thinking about her expression in this photo. I listened to the record over and over for years thinking about her smile and letting my imagination explore what I had found out about her in my research. I wrote a first draft then went and made other films, but I always kept that photo of her, and her bizarre voice in my head. It felt like her faltering singing voice had something to tell me: an uncovered secret.

So MARGUERITE isn't a biopic...

No, it's a very loose portrait of a person who really existed. I suppose you could compare it to my film *IN THE BEGINNING* (À L'ORIGINE): I began by carrying out an in-depth investigation of the main character, doing a lot of research, and then I wrote a fictional story, after long discussions with my close friend Marcia Romano, which helped me work out the outline for the story. It's important to have a personal take on events, to present a viewpoint on fundamental human truths that come through in such an original vocation....and then to feel free to make it into a film. I truly believe that we all need fiction to try and gain a deeper understanding and a better sense of the reality of the world and the people who live in it. I wouldn't be satisfied making just a documentary or a work of pure fiction. Besides the character on-screen lies

somewhere between truth and falsehood, the actor's real life and the part he plays out; in self-invention.

While we were filming, I learned that a Hollywood biopic of Florence Foster Jenkins was being planned. It didn't really bother me, as that would never have been my take on her life.

Why did you choose to transpose the story to 1920's France?

During my research, I discovered in the library at the Paris Opera photographs of opera divas at the beginning of the century: beautiful women performing scenes from famous operas in an "expressionist" style. I came across these amazing women while listening to the terrible voice of my out of tune diva. The contrast was so stark but also very funny, and in some ways quite poetic... My opera singer dreamt of being like one of those great Paris Opera singers but simply didn't have the voice. That's when I came up with the idea for the photographs, and the film truly came into being.

I was also aware that the 1920s was an important time for both artistic and personal freedom. I wanted my character to distance herself from the old traditional society that prevented her from accomplishing her dreams, and from the new world that would lose her. I was looking to give the film a momentum that was both far-reaching and also intimate.

What is it about Marguerite that touches you?

I love characters that are both single-minded and obsessive by nature. They carry the whole film along with their personality and give it tension, pace and perspective. Marguerite is living her passion: she experiences the joys and the suffering that go hand-in-hand with a life dedicated to music. She sings completely out of tune yet she expresses a furious desire.

Marguerite is like all of us because we need to have illusions.

She also embodies something unique, something that has been lost: an authentic and candid passion for her art...

Unfortunately, passion doesn't translate into great talent and in life we often discover that they have little to do with one another.

I wrote this character when I was just over 40, having recently gone through quite a few painful life experiences myself. I needed to use humour to find a way to distance myself from the harsh realities in life, from feelings of betrayal and failure, from the hypocrisy and cruelty of society, from the distant echo of my Christian education that had always complicated my relationship with suffering, and from growing feelings of self-doubt ... I needed to have a good laugh about it all! When Marguerite sings, I see it as a liberating cry to live and let live.

Do you feel you have made a comedy?

There is something extremely funny about seeing Marguerite singing famous opera songs so badly and her disarming forthrightness in front of the cynics.

But the film is primarily a love story between a man and a woman trying to find a way to keep on loving each other. So yes, I hope people will want to laugh at Marguerite's adventures, but I also hope that between laughs, people will measure what is important in life: love and death. Tragically, Marguerite ends up in the arms of the man she loves, but who loved her too late, like in an opera. It is this element of sadness that prevents this film from being just a melodrama or a simple comedy.

When did you decide on Catherine Frot for the role of Marguerite?

I wanted an actress physically suited to the part of an opera singer, like in the American films I love, as well as someone who could express the character's innocence but also wasn't too young. Catherine has a very youthful and genuine side to her nature, a very open generosity that exposes her to the cynics and also injects tension into the scenes. She also has a working-class feel about her, which adds depth to the character's emotions by underlining the difference between her and the high-society snobs that she is surrounded by and who despise her, and the untouchable divas of the opera. I have seen many of Catherine's films but the deciding moment for me was when I saw her act in a production of Samuel Beckett's HAPPY DAYS. There was one particularly funny scene when she was talking to an ant, and suddenly there she was, Marguerite, there was no question about it. When Catherine saw the ant and said: "But, there's life there!" I immediately thought she is the one.

And her too?

She accepted the part straight away and then we battled for months to finance the film, making many sacrifices and looking for solutions. I was very touched that she put other work on hold and waited for this project. I think that this part was important to her, but I don't know why. I hope the public will rediscover her on the big screen. Actors make a bigger impact when they are rarely seen on screen.

She has rarely played this sort of character with these types of emotions.

I wanted to encourage her to surpass herself as an actress, to let herself get carried away in the emotional and sometimes quite chaotic scenes. Because this film is primarily the portrait of a woman at a very fragile moment in her life. On set, she often improvised and made suggestions, and also encouraged me to simplify my demands. She knew that something inherent in cinema was being played out here, in the actor's bodies, their presence, and in their movements. There are certain looks of hers that still move me, like when she discovered that her husband was cheating on her for years and she simply stroked his face and said "My husband ...". I think that she has inhabited her character really well and it's incredibly unnerving the way that she finds the balance between the two opposing registers of laughter and serious emotion.

Did you choose the other actors once you had chosen Catherine?

Andre Marcon is a hugely talented actor and I was delighted to offer him the part. He brings a great strength to the film although he is acting the part of a man who is at first quite cowardly and feeble and also a liar. He has a very captivating aura about him with his deep, complex voice, and he looks very dashing in his bearskin fur coat. His facial expressions hint at emotions that we finally discover to be very real. That is one of Marguerite's angelic powers: to turn the people around her into their true selves, saving them from their life of lies, by sacrificing her own.

Isn't Marguerite's husband her number one "fan", and her enabler?

It takes more than one person to build a web of deceit and lies. And her husband's role is cinematically very powerful as it draws the viewer into this way of thinking and its logic as well as its madness ... I think that the power of manipulating words and images is a theme that runs through the film and touches on the present day, reaching into the world in which we live. Take for example the illusion of advertising, political lies, the images we are bombarded with in our celebrity-obsessed society ... It is why and how I wrote this character, why I wanted to explore his troubled relationship with reality, his acid test of what is true.

In the end, Marguerite will manage to get her husband in the last photo of her as a Diva, in her world of illusion.

What made you think of Michel Fau?

I actually wrote the part for him, with the sound of his voice in my head. Whether it is his show *Recital Emphatique* or his staging of Guitry or Montherlant, I have always had a huge amount of respect and admiration for his sense of freedom and scope as a performer. I have rarely had so much fun creating a character for an actor. Atos Pezzini (a tribute to my Corsican origins) is repellent and yet endearing because Michel found a way to make him complex and unpredictable. After the audition in the castle, when he finds himself in the car with Madelbos, he has a way of saying "At my house, in Boulogne ..." where one feels the profound solitude of this strange and decadent creature.

There are also many supporting roles that are quite disconcerting...

The role of the driver / photographer Madelbos is played by Denis Mpunga, a Belgian actor to whom I would like to pay tribute as he gave striking depth to a character who is primarily there to listen and observe. Marguerite is his muse and something rather disturbing ties them together. He is the one to carry her all the way to her destiny. His character also raises the question about the meaning of creation. He enhances the life of his muse, by taking her to a dignified death, worthy of the opera heroine she always wanted to be. I'm not really sure whether he kills her or he saves her ... but, whatever he does, he accomplishes their "masterpiece".

Then with Christa Theret, Sylvain Dieuaide, Aubert Fesnoy and Sophia Leboutte (the bearded lady), and the others, they worked like an orchestra around Catherine. I

believe that a rich cast is one composed of actors that have rarely or never been seen on the big screen before. Supporting roles give a sense of truth to a film and I wanted them all to be strong and surprising.

This is your first “costume drama”.

My last film was set in the arena of the present-day media and tried to capture something of the modern world that both fascinates and frightens me. So I was happy to have a change and do something radically different. I didn't want to embark on a historical reconstruction. Instead, I wanted to make a more personal portrayal of that era. First, there is Marguerite's extraordinary house that acts as a protective bubble in stark contrast to the contemporary style of the newspaper offices and its clean, straight lines where Marguerite instantly looks out of place. But I think that the film's overall appearance remains simple and restrained. That which is timeless interests me more than a Hollywood-style reconstitution that my budget wouldn't have allowed for. Minimalist period films are often the most beautiful.

Besides, I quickly came up with the idea for the big black rectangle that Marguerite's teacher makes her practise in front of. A timeless, abstract background, to get back to basics and what is most important i.e. the true nature of the character. Similarly, I wanted to simplify the lines of the costumes, to make them plain and elegant, in keeping with the characters and their moods, and without falling into the cliché of the “Roaring Twenties”.

The lighting is along the same lines ...

The Flemish director of photography, Glynn Speeckaert, and I wanted an image with a limited colour palette, that had contrast and was minimalist, with the odd splash of red from time to time: the scarf worn by the mistress, the fan, and the curtain at the opera that appear to ‘shout out’ as Marguerite sings her heart out on stage. I require these break-up effects, in colour and in sound, so that something in the film can really start to come alive.

We shot the film using 1950's lenses which diffuse the light very sensitively and give the film a very unique quality with often unexpected flashes, like sparkles: discords in the image that I wanted to keep “alive”.

How did you go about choosing the music?

First, there was Marguerite's repertoire that consists of great opera arias that all great sopranos have sung, such as *Casta Diva* from Bellini's *Norma*. These are all highly technical pieces, that Marguerite is obviously incapable of singing properly ... But I also wanted the film to be a “complete” musical experience that matches my tastes and that I want to share with people. There are baroque pieces from Vivaldi and Purcell; jazz; modern pieces from Poulenc and Honegger, Australian didgeridoo and Indian music; a piano that is smashed up with an axe and on which Bach and Mozart are sung by the Swingle Singers a cappella, and Purcell's *King Arthur* re-orchestrated by the great Michael Nyman are played; the cries of a peacock and exploding

engines; and finally Marguerite most unusual voice that is like a black hole into which all of these others sounds are lost ... or come together. I don't know which.

How did you "invent" Marguerite's voice?

Catherine worked for a long time with a brilliant teacher to produce the right attitude, gestures, and facial expressions of a real opera singer. And although she sings out of tune, Marguerite works tremendously hard and this huge effort had to come across in the film ... The problem is that Catherine actually has a beautiful voice and has been taking singing lessons for a long time. But what I needed was something rather chaotic and discordant that was both funny and touching. This is something that is technically very complicated to achieve. Catherine's voice needed to be dubbed at times to avoid damaging her vocal chords. So a "real" singer lent us her voice and we worked hard to find the emotion and humour that I was looking for in every off note. The sound engineers and I then worked extensively on making sure that, on screen, there was no doubt at all that this was Marguerite's extraordinary voice. I wanted it to remain a bit of a mystery too for audience whether it was or not.

Finally, you often use words that make reference to music, such as "discord", to talk about your approach to this film.

In life, in music and in film directing, I think it is first and foremost about harmony or discord between the life we dream of and that which we have.

Film after film, I want to get right to the very heart of my subject and make choices that allow me to create different ratios of intensity, dramatic movement and/or visual breaks when editing. I try not to rule out anything and capture unexpected moments during filming, or when building highly constructed movements or when editing the music. I wanted to end the film with an eye, a look. For I need everything that filmmaking has to offer to bring my story to life, to try and draw in the viewer, as Marguerite is drawn in by the music.

I have dedicated my life to cinema and with every film I make, like my characters, I feel troubled. It is the fear of reality that fascinates but also slips away. I know that this underlines my work as a director: a desire to use the illusion techniques of cinema and the will to track down the true human nature of each character.

FILMOGRAPHY

Feature-length films:

2015	MARGUERITE
2012	SUPERSTAR Venise 2012 - Competition
2009	IN THE BEGINNING (A L'ORIGINE) Cesar nomination for Best Film. Cesar nomination for Best Director Cesar nomination for Best Original Screenplay Cannes Film Festival 2009 – Official Selection
2006	THE SINGER (QUAND J'ETAIS CHANTEUR) Cesar nomination for Best Screenplay Cannes Film Festival 2006 – Official Selection
2005	UNE AVENTURE
2003	EAGER BODIES (LES CORPS IMPATIENTS) Cesar nomination for Best Male Newcomer for Nicolas Duvauchelle Cesar nomination for Best Female Newcomer for Laura Smet

INTERVIEW WITH CATHERINE FROT

MARGUERITE marks your big return to cinema after a 3-year absence. How did you get involved in this project?

It all began during the premiere showings of HAUTE CUISINE, which was released in September 2012. I was chatting to the distributor of my film and they told me that they were also releasing Xavier Giannoli's SUPERSTAR. I mentioned that he happened to be one of my favourite French directors, and that I had seen both THE SINGER and IN THE BEGINNING and had loved them both. I said that I would love the opportunity to work with Giannoli. He must have got wind of that conversation, because, three weeks later, I received a first draft of the script for MARGUERITE. Then everything moved very fast. I invited Xavier to come and see me perform on stage in HAPPY DAYS... a Samuel Beckett play. I think that was when it clicked, when he saw me on stage in the role of Winnie. In fact, after the performance, Xavier told me that Winnie could have been Marguerite's cousin.

I knew the film would take a long time to get proper finance because of the cost of the sets, the costumes and the need to recreate Paris of the 1920s ... But I was prepared to wait and, as the saying goes, I laid down my weapons. I had made so many films in recent years, that I was happy to wait and just concentrate on the theatre and on HAPPY DAYS in particular... I performed in it on stage for two consecutive years. Xavier kept me regularly updated about the film's progress. I always knew that Marguerite would be an extraordinary role to play.

The character of MARGUERITE is inspired by the life of Florence Foster Jenkins. Did you know anything about her and her operatic voice before reading the script?

No. I really discovered this woman and the story of her life when we were making the film. In any case, I didn't want my contribution to be just pure imitation, especially as this film wasn't intended as a biopic. As far as I'm concerned, Marguerite is not Florence Foster Jenkins, so, when it was time to get into character, I tried to distance myself from the real person. I wanted, above all, to try and get into Xavier's mind, to understand how he works. He looks to you and to the character, and he mixes emotions and acting. It was something very different. As an actress, I had never previously experienced this working method.

As a cinemagoer, I think the only films that have engendered a similar emotional response to that of Xavier's are those created by Maurice Pialat. Both these filmmakers have a way of mixing fiction and reality so that the spectator can no longer distinguish one from the other. It is very unnerving. And that's what I love.

How did you prepare for the part?

Xavier sent me a copy of the book *Les tragédiennes de l'opéra: de Rose Caron à Fanny Heldy, le feu sacré des déesses du Palais Garnier 1875-1939*

(lit trad: *The tragedians of the opera: from Rose Caron to Fanny Heldy, the sacred fire of the goddesses of the Palais Garnier 1875-1939*), which was a great source of

inspiration to me. The photographs that illustrate this book refer directly to visions of Marguerite as a diva, to her dreams of being an opera singer.

I also took singing lessons so that I was able to perform Mozart's *The Queen of the Night* and *Voi Che Sapete* and Bellini's *Casta Diva*, among others. I learned them all by heart.

At first, I thought I could just sing them out of tune, but the vocal range was so high that they needed a serious coloratura technique, that is to say, very high-pitched singing. I put a lot of pressure on my vocal chords trying to reach those high notes so Xavier decided that it would be best if my voice were dubbed during certain singing scenes. From there on in I had to master the art of lip-synching. It was really all of this singing work which enabled me to let Marguerite gradually take hold of me from within.

Which is harder, singing in or out of tune?

The hardest is to sing out of tune well: to find what is beautiful in something erroneous. As Kyril and Lucien so rightly say, as they leave Marguerite's private concert at the beginning of the film, "She sings divinely out of tune, sublimely out of tune, wildly out of tune."

Xavier invited me to a session in the studio to appreciate the off-key singing quality of the person who was to dub my singing voice for the film. I have great memories of that afternoon.

Marguerite's character is also reflected in the appearance of her home, which is piled high with costumes and pieces of scenery from operas she loves, as well as her own clothes and stage outfits...

The first costume fitting was a decisive moment for me. I remember Xavier putting on the bear fur coat that André Marcon wears in the film. The tone was set; Marguerite's world was really taking shape. It was a powerful moment; it was wonderful. Pierre-Jean Larroque, the chief costume designer, is a true artist, and his passion for this film comes across in his work. We all talked a lot together; everyone sharing their ideas. We had to find the outfits that I felt comfortable wearing, and that suited Marguerite. We also had to choose the costumes that Marguerite would wear for her own photo shoots, when she dresses up as a diva under the watchful eye of Madelbos.

We actually started the filming process with these photo shoots. They took three days in total to complete. It felt like I was in a dream, one of Marguerite's dreams, where she turns into an opera diva from all the operas she loves. These photo shoots were also a great way to get into the part, into the character's world of illusion. MARGUERITE is a film about illusion. There is one line that sums this up I think: "Either we dream life or we accomplish it."

Marguerite is above all a very lonely woman, rejected by her husband ...

Music is her real passion but it's also a way for her to fill an emotional void. Her husband talks about her as if she were a monster. "Why does she need to bellow like

that?" he asks his mistress. He even admits that he is ashamed of her. Yet Marguerite is doing all of this for him. She wants him to look at her; she wants to exist in his eyes.

Marguerite is naive, an innocent waiting to be torn apart by the cynics, and that is why she is such a complex character. For, unbeknown to her, she makes the people around her face up to their own lies. There are those who want to laugh at her, those who are there to use her, and in the end they are the ones who are most touched, and most moved. They all end up believing that she can really achieve her goal, until reality catches up with them on the night of the concert.

You are truly immersed in the sphere of emotion throughout the film. It's an area that you have explored less in your film roles. You are best known for being an actress who knows how to entertain the public ...

I have acted in film dramas such as CHAOS directed by Coline Serreau, THE PAGE TURNER directed by Denis Dercourt and MARK OF AN ANGEL directed by Safy Nebbou, but it's true that MARGUERITE is different. Xavier wanted all that emotion, and a feeling of unease. I don't always recognise myself in this film: I think what a funny face I have and yet it's me. I feel the unfathomable depth of the character and the film. It really touches me.

MARGUERITE is a great love story. The film is structured in the form of chapters that also gives it the narrative of a fable.

Precisely, Marguerite sings to exist and paradoxically she speaks little. On screen, you are often portrayed listening to others. A major part of Marguerite's emotions are silent. Everything is conveyed in your eyes, in the eyes of the actress ...

Yes. It was not necessarily planned like that from the start. It gradually came about as filming progressed. Xavier wanted me to step beyond my comfort zone. He went in search of emotion within me that was bigger than me, something I had rarely given in a performance before. MARGUERITE is a very poignant film for me.

André Marcon plays George, Marguerite's husband. You had never worked together ...

I have known André Marcon for many years. He's a wonderful actor who I have always wanted to work with. I told Xavier that.

And what about Michel Fau who plays the part of Marguerite's singing teacher?

I have seen a lot of his shows, and he came to see me in HAPPY DAYS... We had wanted to work together for some time. He was able to make Atos Pezzini hateful and touching at the same time, for example in the way that he compliments Marguerite while saying the most unkind things to her in the same sentence. His character is full of contradictions.

The whole film seems to play on contradictions and paradoxes ...

Xavier is one of the few filmmakers I know who is very talented at playing with paradoxes. His film is both funny and tragic, as is his main protagonist: Marguerite is both alone and surrounded by people, in love and cheated on, sad and full of life, touching and yet open to mockery. Is she as naive as she appears? Are the other characters as cynical as they seem? These complex ambiguities are what make this film so powerful.

CAST

Catherine Frot
André Marcon
Michel Fau
Christa Théret
Denis Mpunga
Sylvain Dieuaide
Aubert Fenoy
Sophia Leboutte
Théo Cholbi

Marguerite
Georges Dumont
Atos Pezzini / Divo
Hazel
Madelbos
Lucien Beaumont
Kyril Von Priest
Felicity - the Bearded Woman
Diego

CREW

Director
Adaptation, screenplay and dialogues
Written in association with
Cinematographer
Editor
Sound mixer
Production Designer
Costume Designer
Original music score
Assistant directors
Casting

Post-production supervisor
Production manager
Executive producer
Executive producer (Czech Republic)
Produced by

Xavier Giannoli
Xavier Giannoli
Marcia Romano
Glynn Speeckaert - SBC
Cyril Nakache
François Musy
Martin Kurel
Pierre-Jean Larroque – AFCCA
Ronan Maillard
Tomas Pavlacky, Mirek Lux
Michael Laguens
Arwa Salmanova
Susana Antunes
Philippe Hagege
Christine de Jekel
Artemio Benki
Olivier Delbosc
Marc Missonier