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Catherine Breillat: Last Mistress

04 Apr 2008

Catherine Breillat's new film, *The Last Mistress (Une Vieille Maitresse)*, is a lavish costume drama set in the 19th century starring Asia Argento as the mistress and handsome newcomer Fu'ad Ait Aatou as the man who can't give her up.

Argento plays La Vellini, a Spanish wildcat in a passionate cat and mouse affair with Aatou's penniless aristocrat Marigny. Their destructive union continues after he marries a wealthy woman of 'good stock', played by Breillat favourite Roxane Mesquida.

Breillat could be described as the misunderstood mistress of films about intellectual sex featuring strong female characters that incorporate images of violence and extreme sexuality into the art-house format.

Interviewing Breillat is no easy feat. The director of such controversial films as *Romance* and *À Ma Soeur!* would put your average philosopher through their paces, so she's more than capable of making mincemeat out of a mere film journalist. As fiercely pedantic with language as she is a warrior of sexual politics you get the feeling so much is lost in translation.

In *Romance* her heroine went on a sexual binge when her boyfriend refused to make love to her. In *À Ma Soeur!* a 12-year old girl is intent on losing her virginity and in *Anatomy of Hell* a woman pays a gay man, played by porn star Rocco Siffredi, to watch her while she is 'unwatchable'.

Thanks to Breillat it was Siffredi who can claim the dubious honour of showing the first erect penis to a mainstream cinema audience in *Romance*. Breillat gets away with such provocation because her films mix pornography with philosophical issues – uneasy bedfellows for most viewers and many critics.

Evidently not with supermodels though as Breillat has written her next film, *Bad Love*, especially for Naomi Campbell, who approached her after seeing *À Ma Soeur!* That should be one worth waiting for.

Her reputation as an unceasing trasher of the tender love story is disclaimed with *The Last Mistress*. There's an old-fashioned romanticism to her most accessible film to date that girls can only fantasise about these days. So is the 59-year old director who suffered a stroke in 2004 mellowing with age? Rachael Scott met with Breillat to find out.

There seems to be a softer tone to *The Last Mistress* than in your previous work?
There *seems* to be?

I thought so.

I've always been soft although people don't understand it. I'm also very romantic and passionate. I wanted to show how romanticism is. It's not purely something meek and borderline naff, it's violence and it's purity.

Considering your previous films it's difficult to think of you as a romantic.
I've always said I'm romantic and a puritan – and transgressive because they go together.

Do you think your previous films have so far only represented a certain side of you and now you're moving on to a new phase?
No, they all represent me. People only see what they choose to see.

"[*The Last Mistress*] is a story that contains all the ingredients of my films; it's passionate at the same time as being pure and bad."

What attracted you to the story of *The Last Mistress*?

It's a story that contains all the ingredients of my films; it's passionate at the same time as being pure and bad. Also, my absolute passion for androgyny because the man is also feminine and the woman masculine. And, of course, the myth of the femme fatale going from Rita Hayworth to Bridget Bardot.

The period *The Last Mistress* was set was the last cry of aristocracy against the bourgeoisie. If you think of aristocracy as the nobility of the soul, the bourgeoisie represented a surge of industrialism and money. Instead of having nobility of the soul they had a so-called nobility of money.

With this freedom and surge of money came a tightening and buttoning up of the collar. They had much more freedom in the 18th century than in this century. I have remained totally 18th century and I think we are still in the 19th century when it comes to freedom of the mind.

How was working with Asia Argento?

First of all I do not 'work' with my actors. I consider them material matter. Having said that, the material that she is, is very, very flamboyant. She's different off set but in front of the camera she really maintains the frame. She's completely explosive. For example, in the scene with her arguing with Marigny by the wall she just chucked herself backwards. There was nobody as a safety to catch her. Marigny grabbed her because he thought she was going to fall. She doesn't do things by half.

Which must be a perfect actress for you in many ways.



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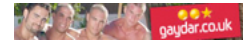
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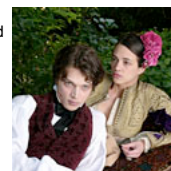


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All my actresses are perfect for me otherwise I can't bear them. I adore my actresses and since I do not hate them they are perfect.



I never thought you hated your actresses or abused them in any way.
It has been said in the past. It has been known for me to dislike some actors.

Are you accused of hating your actresses because of what you make them do?

No. It's much more because of what they don't do. It's written in their contract that they have to do these things.

You've worked with Roxane Mesquida three times now. How has your relationship developed?

The first time I used her as material that I could mould. She was so young. I wasn't nice at all. I criticised her hair because she was always very careful about it and I wanted it to fall in her face. She cried. She was very miserable.

Bizarrely when we got to the love scene (in *À Ma Soeur!*), which was very delicate for a young girl who had never taken her clothes off in front of so many people, I went to see her at the end of the shoot and I thought she would be completely distraught, but she was just radiating. People have said to her all over the world, "she forced you, Catherine forced you to do this scene", and Roxane has always said that she was born in that scene. It was the most beautiful memory of my life.

I touch my actors a lot and she knew from the previous films I attach a lot of importance to the shape and the whole line of the body. She would say, "You're touching me", and I would say, "I'm not touching you. It's the film that's touching you".

All directors will treat their actors as material to mould because that's the nature of the work, but for a director who is egotistical and selfish there's nothing better than to hear that. To have your actress being born in your film. It's your child. Now our relationship is deep and heartfelt, and built on spirit and love.

"There's no female sexuality, there's human sexuality. If it were female sexuality, it would be between two women. There isn't sexuality itself, but a language of sexuality."

Do you consider you and the film to be the same thing?

I often say that. I do not make the film, that's the director of photography, the actors... It's very much I think therefore I am.

In all the interviews I've read about you, your personal life is never mentioned. Can you give me some background info?

I was born in a horrible city called Noire in the outskirts where Clousseau also grew up. When you're constrained in that kind of town it's like a pressure cooker and you explode. I have three children from three different fathers. A Jew, a Catholic and a Protestant. *[She laughs]*

There are certain themes that run through your films, namely female sexuality, loss of virginity and masochistic desire. Could we talk about why they are important to you?

There's no female sexuality, there's human sexuality. If it were female sexuality, it would be between two women. There isn't sexuality itself, but a language of sexuality. All the other species have a sexual act for reproduction, but men perform a sexual act for production...to produce themselves. To have an image reproduced of themselves, so it is a language. It goes from the start/basis of the sexual act. The first step of sexual pleasure. It's very very sexual. When you get to that height of transparency of a body, that heightened pleasure, it is no longer sexual.

Er, what is it then?

That's why all the churches concur and are against it. Because it is a transparent body, a body of eternity. It's not terrestrial; it's celestial. Something that takes you away from the baseness of the earth and takes you up to the sky.

You used religious elements in *Anatomy of Hell*.

I'm interested in religion and religion that's gone bad. It's the desire of idealism, an eternity which has turned sour.

I read an interview with you where you said the real rape in *À Ma Soeur!* took place with the older sister, not the 12-year old. Could you elaborate on that?

The prime essence of the rape is that the concept of virginity actually belongs to the girls and not to the parents and society. The primary rape is society's accounting of the virginity of the girls. That is the main rape. There is a different accounting system for boys' virginity.



Can we talk about *Bad Love*? Did you have a hand in choosing Naomi Campbell?

Naomi came to see me and I did some screen tests. In the tests she was very pure and shining and emotional. I don't think anybody sees her like that and she never shows herself in that way, so she's made to do a film with me. I have written a film especially for her.

What's it about?

A passionate love affair that turns bad. Veers towards the passion that is most magical, that is murder.

I'm surprised that she came to you. I wouldn't have imagined you were the sort of director she would want to work with.

Because she had seen *À Ma Soeur!*. It's a cult movie in the States. She knows that I film the faces of women well and that I scrutinise emotions.

Where did you find Fu'ad (who plays Maligny in *The Last Mistress*)?

I was on the terrace of a café with my assistant. I was getting up and I said to my assistant, "You see that?" I didn't even say "this boy"; I said, "That. You see that?"

You could go round all the drama schools and you'd never find him. I've looked for him for years. I said to my assistant, "run after him", but he actually came straight towards me and said he'd seen *Romance* and asked if I was Catherine Breillat. Then he gave me his phone number. People who do that kind of gesture could lower themselves a bit, but he was so proud there was something magical about the way he came towards me and gave me his number.

He'd never acted before had he?

Never.

"You have to be hated otherwise you don't disturb people from their conventional comforts, and then you're not an artist."

Roxane has said that since your stroke you have become more peaceful. Do you think that's true?

I think it's because she is so much more at ease with me now and she understands the things I'm saying. Before she was completely terrorised, but maybe I have become much kinder.

Do you think being ill and having to be conscious of your health has affected you artistically?

Actually not at all because I saw my doctor yesterday and I'm taking so many pills that really I should be asleep. Anyway, I function with endomorphins because I have so much passion for what I do and that wakes me up. It doesn't tire me. Only boredom tires me. As soon as I have nothing to do I become disabled again and I go and lie down.

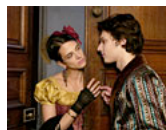
You must have had some difficult times with the censors over the years.

All big movements in art battle with censorship, not just literature and film, but music and art too. So when people say, "this is not cinema, this is not what cinema is about", it's a compliment because it's not the cinema that could be done.

Do you get tired of critics misunderstanding what you're trying to say?

If there's one person in the world who understands, then it means the film is done correctly and represents what I want to say. Of course, then it's a financial disaster if there's only one, but it's not an artistic disaster and that's the most important thing.

I don't want to be unfair to the critics because some of them understand me very well and love my films, but the ones who hate my films hate them beyond understanding. So I'm not that stoic. I have to avoid reading what they say because some of them give you the impression that I should be killed and then I'm afraid.



Relating to *The Anatomy of Hell*, one critic put a black strip on two pages of the paper and had written, 'in order to finish with Catherine Breillat', like a death or a mourning thing. Then I sobbed and wrote an article on the importance of being hated. You have to be hated otherwise you don't disturb people from their conventional comforts, and then you're not an artist.

Why do you think your work gets such strong reactions?

Because fiction is a representation. As a spectator you see it, but you're not that close to it. It reflects itself on you. It just kind of bursts out in front of them and they can't accept it.

All my works are about denial – the things that everybody knows that they won't admit to each other. Freud says you cannot live without denial. I'm not Freudian, but I don't like denial so I make it explode. I don't want to die in denial. I want to die having known myself perfectly. That's why in all my films all my characters look at themselves in the mirror. They really scrutinise their soul. "Who am I?" they ask. "Yes", they say, "I admit to myself that I am this and I'm proud of it."

It seems to me that each of your heroines have been metaphors for your thoughts on different aspects of sexuality. In that context where would Vellini be?

On a world level she would be a femme fatale who comes from Spain with links from Georgia and the Ottoman Empire. Her sensual seduction is also the death of men. It's a very powerful cinematographic and pictorial myth. Obviously it's a myth that hardly exists in films nowadays and I really wanted to go for that. I've always said that I'm a feminist and I'm against this myth of the femme fatale, from a base level, but from an artistic point of view it's so beautiful.

Catherine Breillat's latest film, *The Last Mistress (Une Vielle Maitresse)*, is released in the UK on 11 April 2008. Read our review of [The Last Mistress \(Une Vielle Maitresse\)](#).

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Watch the trailer for *The Last Mistress (Une Vielle Maitresse)* below.

Author: Rachael Scott

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