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Entertainment : Film & TV : Interviews

Olivier Ducastel & Jacques Martineau

02 Oct 2009

Quietly political filmmakers [Olivier Ducastel](#) and [Jacques Martineau](#) are masters at creating serious dramas with a lighthearted feel. Maybe that's because after living together for 15 years as a couple and making movies for 12 they've learnt how to see the funny side of life and worked out that there's more than one way to skin a cat.

Political with a small 'p', their past films include *Cockles and Muscles*, *The Adventures of Felix* and *Ma Vie*, all full of insight, humour and humanity. The writer-director team's ability to deftly weave burning issues into real life situations makes them all the more palatable.

Their latest release *Born in 68* begins with the May 1968 riots in France, which saw the average man stand up against oppressive working conditions and the birth of a new revolutionary mindset, the culture of the commune and how that period influenced the AIDS crisis of the 1980s.

As charming and talkative as ever, the pair chatted to Rachael Scott about the epic undertaking of condensing 40 years of political and social history into one film.

How did the idea for the story come together?

Jacques Martineau: This is a long story because the movie was not our idea. It's the idea of a producer who developed the script for French television over the course of a year and a half with another director, but then the director decided not to do the movie. There wasn't a full script at the time but proposed characters and an idea.

Olivier Ducastel: A canvas.

JM: Yes. So we thought about it and decided we could do it because we thought we could add something very personal to it. Also it was exciting to make a movie for French television. Even if the origin of the film wasn't ours we knew we could make it really personal.

Did the events of 1968 influence certain things in your own lives?

OD: Maybe it's more that we never imagined to write a story set over such a long period of time with so many characters and we never imagined how to deal with working with aging actors and things like that you know. It was a lot of problems that were a little bit frightening for us. So when this was proposed we tried to find a solution so I think if we'd imagined something like that on our own probably we would have stopped very quickly and decided it was too complicated for us.

JM: Or too expensive.

OD: Or too expensive. It's true that we were seduced by the idea of working with that period, though.



Are you old enough to remember it?

JM: I was five. I went on some protests with my parents. It wasn't a riot or anything just some protests.

OD: Our memories of '68 are also related to our teenager period because, when we were teenagers, most of our teachers were students during that period and they still idealised it, so it was an influence for us.

What do you think is 1968's legacy in France?

JM: That's a terrible question because we're not sure. We were challenged in doing the movie because it was a way to ask that question. What was the legacy? We didn't try to answer that but to explore things in the most personal way we could. In a way, I think the most important point in the movie is everything that is related to our sexuality, personality and expressing yourself – this is the important legacy. They discovered something – my body is mine.

Do you think that period enabled people to feel freer in who they were and their sexuality?

JM: Yes. Also as a person, to be more free, to build yourself from yourself and not from what society wants, to build your own identity. I think this is a very important legacy and that's why we decided to speak about women and gay liberation.

"I think the most important point in the movie is everything that is related to



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our sexuality, personality and expressing yourself – this is the important legacy. They discovered something – my body is mine."

I think there will be a lot of people who don't really know what 1968 was about.

OD: That was the case with all the young actors in the film. Even **Edouard** (Collin, who plays Christophe) wasn't really aware of the AIDS crisis. He knew a little but he needed to read a lot of books to prepare. He was shocked, more than surprised. We were a little bit surprised too because he is aware, but it's really a question of generation.

So was the 1980s segment covering the AIDS crisis in the original story?

JM: A little bit, but it wasn't organised like that.

OD: When we started, there was a small but concise story that was written by a novelist. Then someone else worked one script for the '80s and '90s, which was very different. They threw away all the elements related to AIDS because they were scared. So when we started we worked from the basic story and had some ideas we wanted to introduce for the AIDS crisis. The producers agreed because they thought we could do something a little bit different.

JM: The idea wasn't only to speak about the AIDS crisis because we do that often, but something really important happened in politics in 1968.

You always seem to have some kind of political statement within your movies without battering the audience over the head with political issues.

OD: It was particularly important in this one to organise the personal stories with lots of dramatic events. We had to deal with two aspects: the general history and the family stories.



There will also be a lot of people who don't know very much about communes. How did they work? Did you do much research? Do they still exist?

JM: Yes, but in a different way though because they were really crazy in the '70s. We still have big problems in France. Probably about one year ago people sabotaged the TGV, the fast trains. It wasn't dangerous but our government decided the people who did that were people from the Left and they put them in jail, but there was absolutely no proof.

Probably the people who did that were German activists who wanted to protest against atomic waste crossing the border, but the government decided these people who still live in a community were responsible. So we heard a lot more about people who live in modern communities.

OM: We did a bit of research. We read a book on how to live in a commune. It talked about how to cook goat's cheese and how to have a baby on a farm. It was written by a couple and we were a little bit surprised because it didn't have a very feminist point of view. We also got testimonies from people who had friends who raised their children in communities. So we got a lot of information, which was more interesting than books.

JM: We confess that we lied a little bit in the film because in a real community there would have been more children, but it's very complicated to organise a shoot with children.

Communes seem like a nice idea in theory but don't really work because there has to be someone in charge.

OD: A leader. Absolutely. In the testimonies we got the story generally ends a little bit like the film in that someone becomes the leader and then that person ends up there on their own. Generally a community doesn't survive the first winter because they aren't really organised for that. Some people find jobs outside the community. The assistant camerawoman on the film lived in a community with her parents and her mother was a yoga teacher, so they need to have something other than just the goat's cheese.

JM: In the film, Catherine becomes the leader but she doesn't want to be. So when the others go away she sacrifices herself for the idea of the community.

"The idea wasn't only to speak about the AIDS crisis because we do that often, but something really important happened in politics in 1968."

I thought Laetitia Casta who plays Catherine was very good. She's an ex-model, isn't she?

OD: Yes. She works on stage and was a model but always wanted to be an actress. She is very courageous and clever. She still does a few model things, but she is 32 now, which is old for a model.

JM: Laetitia Casta in France is - wow - more than a model. She's incredibly well known and everybody loves her.

OD: We weren't sure she would agree to play in such a small production but when we met her she was perfect.

JM: She gets on your nerves because she is perfect. We love her very much. In normal life she's a very normal person. We thought it could be a good idea because if we imagined Catherine as some kind of representation of that period she is iconic and Laetitia is iconic in our country.

Are the basic principle of what goes on in a commune, as far as sex is concerned, that anything goes?

OD: It seems to be a very important part of the project. The other important thing was that they worked together, put the money together and money was never related to one person but to the group. And generally problems arose because not everybody put the same investment into the community.

But as far as the sexual liberty was concerned, we read and were told that if there was homosexuality in the community it was between women but not generally between men. The set decorator and his assistant were older than us and both lived in different communities and one of them told us that in the first community she lived in there was a gay guy and when he arrived he wasn't completely open about being gay and it was very difficult for him because he was surrounded by naked boys who weren't interested in men at all. She said that it was probably more difficult for him because he was trapped in a heterosexual group and it was

uncomfortable for him to come out.

JM: Freedom of sexuality was a very important part of the experiment and it was also something very tough, but you had to do that.

OD: It could turn to something very oppressive, especially for women because they had to do it. If you wanted to be a cool girl you had to say yes to everything.



There's a scene where Catherine has a foursome when she's pregnant. That was quite a risqué thing to include.

JM: We had no problems with that but the only thing was trying to include children. You see so many pictures of children running around naked playing and it's so cute but it's impossible to do that today which is a shame. Even when I was a kid it was normal to be naked along the beach and every one thought it was normal.

You guys seem to like the like the idea of sexual fluidity. It appears in *Cockles and Muscles* and ties in quite nicely with the sexual liberation that occurs in a commune. Do you think people can change their sexuality?

JM: We know people who have changed. Personally, I don't think that way but it would be so nice if we could.

OD: We have friends who changed young and others later and it's interesting.

Do you think it's more about the person you fall in love with than the gender of that person?

OD: Generally it seems like you need to meet someone who will help you realise that you can change.

JM: Also it can be a fantasy. Even if its only a fantasy, it's already part of your sexuality and exciting.

You've worked with Edouard twice now, so what is it about him that you like?

OD: We really wanted him to play Christophe because it relates to what he did after *Cockles and Muscles*. He went into big private theatre productions, which were all a big success. For the first time he has his name at the front of the theatre in a big production.

When he read the script he was very happy that we'd thought of him for this character. He was a little bit afraid because it was a challenge. When he did *Cockles and Muscles* it was his first film and we feel a little bit responsible for him. We think he's a very touching person and there's always something from the humanity of the person that ends up on screen and that's why we like him.

Where did you find Theo Frilet who plays Boris?

OD: When we were looking for the character who plays Boris we really wanted to have a contrasting gay couple, so we chose Edouard and found someone who contrasted with him in terms of acting and physical appearance. Theo isn't gay, but it was interesting because he was questioning his sexuality and when we did the scene in the bed with Edouard he struggled and said, 'Oh, it's bizarre', but he didn't try to hide it or play the macho guy, he was more touching. He's a very good actor, working on his performances and sensibilities.

So how long have the two of you been working together and how long have you been a couple?

OD: I think we've been working together 12 years and living together for 15.

And who does what?

JM: Usually I do the vacuum cleaning

OD: No, it's not true.

JM: No, he does the vacuum cleaning.

OD: It usually depends on the project. Generally when it's our own script Jacques does more of the writing. Both of us had to work on the script because time was very short.

JM: It was challenging and funny to do that.

OD: We try to share as much as we can. Sometimes I am more comfortable with being on set than Jacques, but we work with the actors together and, for instance, on *Cockles and Muscles* it's true that it was easier for Jacques to deal with Gilbert Melki (who played Marc) because my relationship with him was a little bit tense.

JM: I must confess that I hate meetings but I had to do a lot on *Born in 68* because we had such a short time so I was heavily involved. I teach French Literature and this year I'll be doing a Masters in scriptwriting.

OD: Jacques is always busy and I am the lazy one.

JM: Usually I have less time but for this movie and the next one I was totally involved.

Tell me about your next movie.

OD: The next one is finished and we hope to premiere it in Berlin. We can't say much about the story because it's constructed on a family secret, which will destroy the family relationship between the grandfather, his older son and his granddaughters. But we can say it's a more dramatic aspect of our imagination. All the film is set in the same house and the forest around it so it's quite claustrophobic.

What's it called?

OD: *L'arbre et la forêt* (*The Tree and the Forest*). It stars Françoise Fabian Guy Marchand, who became a famous singer in France, and Sabrina Seyvecou, who played Ludmilla in *Born in 68*, and Yannick Renier who played Yves.

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Born in 68 opened in UK cinemas on 25 September 2009.

Author: Rachael Scott

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