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Christophe Honoré: Love Songs

17 December 2007

Christophe Honoré often includes gay characters in his films but doesn't make a big song and dance about it - though there's plenty of singing and dancing in his latest film *Chansons d'Amour (Love Songs)*, starring Louis Garrel.

Further exploring familiar themes of death, grief and rebirth, *Love Songs* is a musical about the effects of the sudden death of a loved one and continues Honoré's move away from the shocking sex play and incestuous relationship of *Ma Mère*, that began with *Dans Paris*.

Rachael Scott met with the 'former' bad boy of French cinema to discuss his work and learnt he'd love to direct the next *Harry Potter* film.

Why did you decide to make a musical?

I didn't really set out to make a musical, but I had a desire to tell a personal story around a friend who disappeared. Alex Baupain, who wrote the music, and I decided to make a film around the woman who left us. Because he's a singer and I'm a filmmaker it became a musical.

Was directing a musical different to directing a straight film?

Technically there's something quite different in that the songs have to be recorded separately, so they were recorded a month before. It's rather strange because a month before you get to filming there's a good part of the film that's already there.

You've cast actors who aren't known for their singing capabilities. Did you consider casting professional singer/actors?

We didn't wonder at the time, especially for the actresses, if we should offer the roles to singers or actors that we knew had already been in films. But then singing is something quite common now among actresses because it's part of their training and a skill that they should have, so a lot of them sing.

Also they are very aware that the moment in the film when they sing puts them in a special position. It's a kind of glamorous position to be in and they are seen from a very glamorous point of view.

For Louis's character I got to meet lots of singers, but they were catastrophically bad actors. Because Louis and I are friends we talk to each other a lot and eventually Louis said, "You do know that I'm a singer myself". So then I had to cast him as part of an *X-Factor / Fame Academy* type thing where he sang in front of everybody. We realised he sang very well and it was obvious to cast him.

Musicals are traditionally a light medium. Were you worried some of the deeper emotion of the story might be lost?

It was a hard challenge in that sense, but the songs bring a dynamic and an energy to the film. Also the lyrics help to express the feelings.

When you get to the point that the characters can no longer express anything with words they then have to find another way of expressing their feelings in terms of dealing with the death of the mutual friend and family member. It's in the same way that Alex and I couldn't find a way of expressing our joint feelings about our friend leaving. The music is there to express the stage when you can no longer use words.

"For me he is always straight. I don't think it's a story about a straight man becoming gay. I think it's because a young guy happens to be passing and dares to say he would be Ishmael's next love story."

Louis Garrel's character Ishmael starts the film straight and ends up having a relationship with a man by the end.

For me he is always straight. I don't think it's a story about a straight man becoming gay. I think it's because a young guy happens to be passing and dares to say he would be Ishmael's next love story. Ishmael would probably have had a deep feeling of betrayal to his dead girlfriend if he'd been having an affair with a woman. I'm pretty sure if I saw Ishmael in a few years time he would not be with a man.

You always include gay characters in your films, but you don't make your films about gay issues.

Because homosexuality isn't a subject, as such, for me. The only subject there could be linked to homosexuality could be homophobia. I've never done a film around that, but I certainly will one day. For me it's logical that there would be homosexual characters in my films, not necessarily the main characters, but interacting in the story because that's part of my life.

Why do you think many gay directors focus on gay stories?

For certain gay directors it's a way of moving out of the margins where they're placed. Making films are a way of getting into the centre. So they have this feeling that their only weapon is their homosexuality. I don't think people of my generation have had to fight so much. It is something socially that is much more recognised, so as a result of that homosexuality is not a subject.

Gaël Morel directed *Le Clan*, but you wrote the script. Where did you get the idea?

Gaël and I both come from families with brothers and we wanted to do something novelistic and romantic. Gaël wrote a big script, but unfortunately we didn't have a budget to shoot it.

All of the cast are very good looking.

Gaël tends to look for a more realistic actor with something earthy about them, where I look for a more literary quality in my actors.

Does Romain Duris (who starred in *Dans Paris*) have a literary quality about him?

I think so, yes. It's often not exploited properly. You'll notice that often in the roles he's had he plays characters that do not think. They feel things and do things, but they don't think. And it was my idea of offering him a role that would close him in a room, so he couldn't go out, and show that he's thinking.

"For me it's logical that there would be homosexual characters in my films, not necessarily the main characters, but interacting in the story because that's part of my life."

When *Ma Mère* came out everyone thought it was part of the New French Extremism, which includes films by Catherine Breillat (*Romance, A Ma Soeur*) and Gaspar Noé (*Irreversible*). Have you ever considered yourself to be a member of that group?

It's strange because now I know I wouldn't be able to do *Ma Mère* again. I don't know how I dared ask actors to do those things. At the same time it's a film that I love greatly, but also it got itself made in a sort of unawareness. It was a film that was conceived and made without thinking of the audience it was going to get.



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Afterwards I realised that I didn't make it for who I was aiming it for. I was very embarrassed afterwards showing it to spectators. There was a certain austerity in *Ma Mère* that went against my nature – and Louis's – because we have a certain likeness in the fun of making a film. That didn't exist at all in *Ma Mère*.

I think it was a real turning point in my career because that's when I realised that if I wanted to be a filmmaker I wanted to make films to present to an audience and not just to make films in an absolute way. Films like *Dans Paris* and *Love Songs* are very demanding, but in terms of the work they're films that address themselves to an audience.

Can you tell me what it was that originally interested you in George Bataille's short story?

Because I have a background in literature I knew that my identity as a filmmaker would be to study the frontiers between literature and cinema. As a second film that's why I went for Bataille because his writing seems impossible to adapt to cinema. That's what gave me the energy to make the film. There are also a lot of literary references in *Dans Paris* and *Love Songs*.

There was obviously a deeper meaning running through *Ma Mère* so what were you and Bataille trying to say?

In the novel there's a thread of how to survive the experience of death. The father dying gives the people left a freedom and the mother initiates the son to sexuality. In *Love Songs* there's the same thread even though it has less grandiloquence or austerity. When the character played by Ludvine Sagrier dies it opens up possibilities sexually for the other characters that are left.

What I'm really interested in, and is part of Bataille's work, is this link between the death of a loved one and what it gives you afterwards. What it creates in terms of freedom whether that be emotive or sexual.

I've always associated your films with grief and mourning. Are you saying you're more interested in rebirth than death and the experience of grief?

There is the idea that grief has to be transformed into something else. For some people that's not possible. It's not completely the idea of rebirth or carpe diem, the idea that you should just go for life, but it's just the fact that it opens new spaces.

Why do you have such an interest in that theme?

Because it is something that I felt personally when my father died when I was 15 and even though I was interested in cinema before, the death of my father made me see the possibility of becoming a filmmaker. It gave me the energy and tenacity to write. We've mourned the death of cinema so much since the golden years of Hollywood, but this is 40 years on and films are still being made. So in terms of the idea that it's all finished, what happens when it carries on? Because it is carrying on.

British audiences see French films as being about sex and little else. How do French audiences see British films?

For most French people British cinema is Ken Loach. They see the films as socially aware and right on.

“For certain gay directors (making gay films) is a way of moving out of the margins where they're placed. Making films are a way of getting into the centre. So they have this feeling that their only weapon is their homosexuality.”

You've said you find French cinema today provincial and bourgeois. Are you trying to break away from that?

French cinema has other faults apart from being bourgeois. It's difficult nowadays because at one point French cinema was the leader in auteur cinema, but it is no longer the case. The definition of auteur as a writer / director of films is very hard to pin down now because a lot of people who call themselves auteurs...their points of view are not how I would express myself as an auteur. That's why in my films I have references to what I believe was the Golden Age of French cinema – the New Wave – and I do it to remind people that's what we should go back to in terms of inspiration.

Can you think of any examples of directors who you don't consider to be auteurs, but would classify themselves in that way?

When I see someone like Guillaume Canet who directed *Tell No One* and won the César in France defining himself as an auteur I have a problem with that. There are lots of people and most of them have an economical situation that's very different to a true auteur. They are usually much more comfortable and suddenly they claim themselves to be an auteur like a fashion or a business label.

If Hollywood came knocking would you be pleased?

I would love to do the final *Harry Potter*, so don't hesitate to say that I'm interested.

Find out more at www.christophe-honore.net

Chansons d'Amour (Love Songs) opens in the UK on 14 December 2007. Read our interview with [Louis Garrel](#) and our review of [Chansons d'Amour \(Love Songs\)](#).

Want more? Then buy the DVD of [Le Clan](#) online and save yourself some money to put towards the excellent [Dans Paris](#), [Ma Mère](#), [À Toute Vitesse](#), [Presque Rien](#) and [Drole de Felix](#).

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