

Acropolis Cinema presents



August 15, 2018 ~ 8:00pm ~ Downtown Independent

ABOUT THE FILM

In a delicate, even generous manner, Valérie Massadian's new film begins as a story of two young lovers' life on the fringes before shifting towards one of recent cinema's finest depictions of motherhood. Milla and Leo live clandestinely, their meager furnishings and sustenance countered by a love for which there is neither a logic nor substitute. But such an existence will only last until forces of nature take hold. Where is there to go in its wake? *Milla* considers every dimension of love, loyalty, and grief through a poetic, startling vision that recalls the likes of Barbara Loden and Chantal Akerman while remaining without precedent. (Grasshopper)

128 min // France/Portugal // 2017

Add It Up: Valérie Massadian on *Milla* by Andréa Picard

The following is an excerpt of an interview originally published in Cinema Scope 72

Cinema Scope: Where did *Milla* come from? How are *Nana* and *Milla* linked? Do they form an informal diptych or series?

Valérie Massadian: When I did *Nana*, I knew I wanted to explore three hinge ages—the moments in girls' lives when all is in between, all is uncertain, changing. Childhood at four years old, as an age when most children, not all of them, but most of them, are still undomesticated, still "savage," hungry for life, to learn, understand, search, interrogate. Next, 11 to 12 years old, when suddenly one morning the world treats you completely differently than the night before, when you just became "responsible," when your candid, naïve, and playful state suddenly doesn't fit with society anymore and all becomes serious. Let alone the fact that your body changes, and that sex is between your legs, or that blood coming from it—you have no idea how to deal with it all. And then motherhood as a teen—in a way, both of the first stages together, fighting inside. Teenage mothers don't belong anywhere. Not with the ones their age who have a freedom that they no longer have, and not with the adults, with whom they don't yet share the codes or interest.

Three stages, where basically you don't have a defined place in the world...something like that, and how it renders a person fragile, and at the same time shapes that person. So a triptych, yes. Three films, three girls who don't belong yet to the world, but manage.

Scope: Would you say that the films are about forms of resilience?

Massadian: *Absolument*, darling!

Scope: Where does *Milla* take place, and what is the significance of this landscape for the film, for the characters, and for you?

Massadian: It always starts from a place. Always. Landscape, nature, is the beginning for me. With *Milla*, I wanted the wilderness of *Nana's* nature with the ocean. Water, fluidity and roughness with motherhood unconsciously, I guess. I found that place completely by chance, if chance exists! I was reading about Alexandre Trauner, and how he and Jacques Prévert are buried in the same very small village by the English Channel named Omonville-la-Petite. I thought, these two old guys knew how to live, and if they had decided to spend the last 15 years of their lives there, I should go see it. So I went. And driving around I also ended up in the village of Millet, whom I love, and Marie Ray-enel, a heroine of mine. She was a miller and a poetess in a time when girls rarely went to school, especially when they were from a farmer's family, but Ravenel knew how to read and write at seven

years old...in 1820 or something. The poem in the film is one of hers. As I'm very superstitious, I saw it all as a sign! No, but really, there's something very powerful up there. How the sea, the cliffs, the fields, all merge together. How there is almost no separation, as the blues, the greens, the dark browns, just melt into one another...the roundness in contrast with the brutality of the English Channel, the harsh, regular, and very impressive sound of that sea.

I don't have a postcard relationship to nature. I know how the beauty of nature equals its dangerousness. And, believe it or not, these sequences of nature are the hardest for me to cut, to find the right duration for, because I prefer them to last for really long...Nature has no time, apart from seasons. You can't say, "Oh, that landscape is from 1999 or 2017"—it just is. And I'm not very anchored in time. I scratch and twist and caress details in people I film, that I think, or at least hope, are timeless. They just are, like nature just is.

Scope: You have a very particular way of observing bodies and conveying physicality, and doing so without giving up a sense of formal composition. More and more, I'm seeing films that are reducing their scale, rendering intimacy, perceiving physical presence in the world. Can you talk about this?

Massadian: That's a complicated question for me because it's very difficult for me to intellectualize or analyze that. That's my relationship to people, that's my relationship to the world. So I don't "think" about how I'm going to film the intimacy, I do it. I don't "think" where to put the camera, I know in a very instinctive way entering a room, facing a wall, a tree, a face, a body, someone...And I don't ever feel I'm in an observing position, ever, strangely. On the contrary, to reach that level of small things that sweat, slip from someone, you have to be very close to the person, very present. It's always together—with or against—but together, that it happens, or not sometimes. Maybe that's why there is this sense of physicality, because the relationships we build before, during, and after are very engaging, very physical—meaning beyond words, way beyond words, which I don't trust so much.

Scope: On a similar note, both of your actors have a tremendous presence. I had of course seen Luc Chessel before, most notably in Nicholas Klotz's *Low Life* (2011) and Benjamin Crotty's *Fort Buchanan* (2014), but where did you find Séverine Jonckere, who plays Milla and more than ably carries so many scenes on her own?

Massadian: I found Séverine doing casting. I was going to shelters for young girls and women with my DVD of *Nana* and showed the film there. I met many girls, and filmed about 30 of them. Then Séverine walked in, just like Kelyna [from *Nana*] walked in. And I knew, for the same reason always. That this girl, the way she moves, her frontality, her roughness, her mistrust of people, her resistance, her *folie*, I could dance with. I knew that it would be a battle, but maybe with a lot of patience and a lot of tenderness we could do something. And again, same as for *Nana*, Séverine doesn't act. She plays as you play a game, not a character. She becomes a character, with the editing. Same for Luc. I know that for Luc it was a completely different experience than any film he has done—there was no script, no lines to learn. We had to work and build, and search and fight and laugh...Again here I can't explain how we work—it's not improvisation, it's something else. It's a confrontation between them and me, and not confrontation as a negative thing, but as a positive one. They never know what I'm looking for; I don't know sometimes. I know the emotion I'm looking for, the emotional motif, and I don't care how to get there narratively. Sometimes, they don't have a clue what I saw happening and how maybe I can build on that. Sometimes I feel very strongly about what came out, but don't know how it's going to be in the construction.

Scope: But if not extemporized, how was the dialogue constructed? And did you fight with yourself, also, in those moments of not knowing? It's a risky way to work, no?

Massadian: Risky is a too-big word: uncertain, uncontrolled, but not risky. I don't fight with myself when not knowing. I fight with myself when I suddenly stupidly insist like an idiot on a situation that doesn't work for them. I get very angry with myself in these moments. But I'm getting better. An example: I wanted a sequence or two that shows the dichotomy between them. The contrast between boys and girls, or men and women. So, I have to find two or three or more actions, situations I put them in to try to unfold something of that nature. Damn, I'm really bad at explaining...

Scope: *Milla* has been compared to early Varda, and pitched somewhere between Pialat and Bresson (by *Les Inrockuptibles*, for example); there also has been mention of the Kaurismäkiian flourishes, with the musical interlude and its saturation in primary colours. Are these references apt for you? Or were others perhaps more relevant when you were thinking about the film?

Massadian: I don't want to be rude to anybody, but I find these kinds of comparisons lazy. No insult to any of the filmmakers quoted: I love Pialat, adore Bresson, and like Varda and Kaurismäki a lot. But also I love Chaplin or Keaton, or Lillian Gish, or, or, or...When I made *Nana*, because there was a four-year-old girl and the death of her mother, the reference was to *Ponette* (1996), when to me it's the absolute opposite of *Ponette* if you're forced to think about it. So it's more in that sense that I find it very lazy to compare people's work.

I don't think anybody thinks about another filmmaker when they work. You carry them inside of you, as well as all the works you've looked at, read, love, from painters, to writers, to musicians, photographers...So, it's inside you, it's how you're built. It's how between a grey sheet and an old flowery one, I'll pick the faded flowery one, or how instead of a beautifully printed photograph I'll pick the Polaroid...

I mean Kaurismäki, why? Because the girls wear housekeeping blouses, the hotel is colourful, and you can feel the proletariat all around? Or because you have musicians in some out-of-the-blue scene? The scene with the musicians, for example, is actually something completely different. I wanted that Violent Femmes song to be Milla's and Leo's song throughout the film. It comes in during the three movements of the film in different ways. The one in the middle is a daydream, or a mental thing. Valentine, the singer, had done the song twice, very nicely, but to me it wasn't there yet, something was missing. And I thought of Pipilotti Rist at that moment, and her version of Chris Isaak's song "Wicked Game" that I love. So I asked Valentine to get enraged, and didn't allow her to be barefoot, for it would have been too easy; I liked how her high heels restrained her. The fight between the rage and the high heels interested me. For me, it's a scene of rage, the frustration of memory. It's my homage to Pipilotti Rist! Maybe when I found the structure of the film while editing, one day I thought of Keechie and Bowie from *They Live by Night* (1948)...but just because it's two kids in love, and *They Live by Night* is one of my favourite, if not my favourite love story.

Scope: It also has one of the best titles, ever. "This boy"... "and this girl"... "were never properly introduced to the world we live in..." The superimposed title cards that Nicholas Ray used to introduce *They Live by Night* declare so much with this simple stylized gesture: a flouting of reality, portending a great, doomed adventure. *Milla* begins with a boy and a girl nestled in the backseat of a car seen through a hazy layer of condensation on the windowpane. How did this image come to you?

Massadian: We had shot many scenes of them running away with their crappy car, from at a gas station to by the sea. And I only kept the sequences that in some way resonated with *Nana*: a picnic in between the trees, sleeping in the car in the middle of nowhere. And that shot through the window, apart from being beautiful, already tells duration and timelessness. How it came to be? It was very early in the morning and it was cold, so when we shot inside the car we had to have the doors open and Luc and Séverine were freezing. So we closed the doors so it would warm up, and condensation built on the window and reflected the forest. And while you're blowing in your hands, you turn your head and see that image. You decide to film it because suddenly it says it all to you. Simple. ♦

Coming Soon to Acropolis:

-*Notes on an Appearance* (Dir. Ricky D'Ambrose)—Aug 22, Downtown Independent



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