



presents

THE INNOCENTS

A film by Anne Fontaine



115 min | France/Poland | 2016 | PG-13 | 1.85
In French and Polish with English subtitles

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Official Selection – Sundance Film Festival
Official Selection – COLCOA Film Festival
Official Selection – San Francisco Int'l Film Festival
Official Selection – Minneapolis St. Paul Int'l Film Festival
Official Selection – Newport Beach Film Festival

SYNOPSIS

Warsaw, December 1945: the second World War is finally over and French Red Cross doctor Mathilde (Lou de Laage) is treating the last of the French survivors of the German camps. When a panicked Benedictine nun appears at the clinic begging Mathilde to follow her back to the convent, what she finds there is shocking: a holy sister about to give birth and several more in advanced stages of pregnancy. A non-believer, Mathilde enters the sisters' fiercely private world, dictated by the rituals of their order and the strict Rev. Mother (Agata Kulesza, *Ida*). Fearing the shame of exposure, the hostility of the occupying Soviet troops and local Polish communists and while facing an unprecedented crisis of faith, the nuns increasingly turn to Mathilde as their beliefs and traditions clash with harsh realities.

LOGLINE

Warsaw, December 1945: a young French Red Cross doctor is summoned to a local convent where she discovers several nuns in various states of pregnancy, facing an unprecedented crisis of faith as their fiercely private world clashes with harsh realities.

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR ANNE FONTAINE

Les Innocents is inspired from a little-known true event that occurred in Poland in 1945. The story of these nuns is incredible. According to the notes taken by Madeleine Pauliac, the Red Cross doctor who inspired the film, 25 of them were raped in their convent - as much as 40 times in a row for some of them - 20 were killed and 5 had to face pregnancy. This historical fact doesn't reflect well on the Soviet soldiers, but it's the truth; a truth that authorities refuses to divulge, even if several historians are aware of the events. These soldiers didn't feel they were committing a reprehensible act: they were authorized to do so by their superiors as a reward for their efforts. This type of brutality is unfortunately still widely practiced today. Women continue to be subjected to this inhumanity in warring countries around the world.

What was your initial reaction when the producers, the Altmayer brothers, came to you with this project?

I was immediately taken with the story. Without really understanding why, moreover, I knew that I had a very personal connection with it. Motherhood and self-questioning with regard to faith were themes I wanted to explore. I wanted to get as close as possible to what would have been happening within these women, to depict the indescribable. Spirituality had to be at the heart of the film.

Are you familiar with matters of religion?

I come from a Catholic family - two of my aunts were nuns - so I have a few connections in regards to the subject. But I can only work on a theme if I know it perfectly well and I wanted to experience what life in a convent was like from the inside. I felt it was important to learn about a nun's daily routine, understand the rhythm of her days. I went on two retreats in Benedictine communities - the same order as the one in the film. I was only there as an observer during the first retreat, but I truly experienced the life of a novice in the second.

Tell us more about it.

Beyond life in a community, which impressed me a great deal - this way of being together, praying and singing seven times a day - it's also as if you were in a world where time is suspended. You have the feeling of floating in a type of euphoria and yet you are bound by a very strong discipline. I saw how human relationships were established: the tension and shifting psychology of each person. It's not a frozen, one dimensional world. But what touched me the most, and what I attempted to convey in the film, is how fragile faith is. We often believe that faith cements those who are driven by it. That's an error: as Maria confides to Mathilde in the film, it is, much to the contrary, "twenty- four hours of doubt for one minute of hope." This notion sums up my impressions after speaking with the sisters, and also after attending a conference about questioning one's faith given by Jean- Pierre Longeat, the former Abbot of Saint-Martin de Ligugé Abbey. What he said was extremely moving and has a profound echo within today's secular world.

Were the members of these religious communities aware of your project?

Fortunately, the people I met immediately had a favorable opinion of the project even if there were complicated truths revealed about the Church. We share, along with the sisters, the paradoxical situation that they are forced into as a result of being attacked: how to face motherhood when one's entire life has been committed to God? How to keep one's faith when confronted with such terrible facts? What to do faced with these newborns? What are the possibilities available?

Had these priests and nuns seen your previous films?

They had seen some of them, *The Girl from Monaco* and *Coco Before Chanel* in particular. One monk confided that one of his favorites was *Adore* [*Perfect Mothers*]. I have to admit that I was rather surprised.

This is the second time you have worked with Pascal Bonitzer.

Pascal wasn't any more familiar with these themes than I was, but we had got on very well when writing *Gemma Boveri*, my last film. All of our work consisted in gradually merging the movie's two worlds: the materialist world of Mathilde, this rigid communist doctor, and the spiritual world of the sisters, in a traditional Poland upset by the war. How was Mathilde going to pierce the wall behind which these women lived, removed from society, not wanting anything to change or be revealed? In every situation brought to an extreme, human behavior can become subversive. Faced with this ideological questioning, Pascal and I tried to carve out each character's psyche and dark side.

Mathilde, played by Lou de Laâge, has an incredibly modern side to her.

She's a scientist, very much ahead of her time, not to mention that women doctors were quite rare then. She is young, has just completed her studies and is still only an assistant at the Red Cross. In a way, she's accomplishing an initiatory journey. It takes a lot of guts to take on the responsibility of delivering these women's babies, to keep such a weighty secret and take risks that include having to go through the forest at night to reach the convent, which means trying to bypass the Soviet roadblocks. She almost pays for it physically, moreover, which ends up bringing her closer to the sisters. Mathilde's world is very far from the nuns' world. She wants to heal people and for things to move forward. Yet, there's nothing Manichean about her: without adhering to a specific faith, she gradually glimpses what the mystery of faith might be.

She joined the French Red Cross, which is also a sign of courage. What was the role of this association in Poland in 1945?

Their mission was to heal and repatriate wounded soldiers and former prisoners of war, but only French citizens. That is why at the beginning Mathilde tries to turn away the novice Teresa when she comes to the dispensary.

Maria, played by Agata Buzek, is quite a revolutionary person herself. She also takes risks in allowing Mathilde to come.

Maria, just as Teresa, resolves to transgress the rules of the order; rules she was accustomed to and blindly obeyed. I have always been interested in the subject of transgression. At the heart of it all, this film is a more stylized extension of themes I have treated in the past, such as in *In his Hands* [*Entre ses mains*] or *Dry Cleaning* [*Nettoyage à sec*].

The friendship that Maria and Mathilde are able to build is quite fascinating.

These two women, who are diametrically opposed, invent something together that allows them to make something possible out of an impossible situation. The inner path they travel is also the path that will end up uniting them.

While sharing her doubts with Mathilde, Maria adds that without the war and the horror of the raping, she would have been completely happy.

Many people who have chosen this life are happy. I had long interviews with religious people whom I met about this subject. Their intelligence, their vision and sense of humor were fascinating. Some were going through very painful bouts of inner questioning. I'm thinking in particular about a sister whose story I was told by the order's psychoanalyst - yes they do exist.

Having entered the orders at the age of 25, she spent the next 25 years asking God if he loved her without ever receiving an answer. She is still a nun today.

You also bring up the deviations that religion can lead to... an example would be the Mother Abbess' attitude, which, under the pretext of not letting anyone know what was occurring at the convent, prohibits the sisters from receiving proper medical care.

The film raises questions that haunt our societies, and shows what fundamentalism can lead to.

Yet you do not judge the Mother Abbess.

It was extremely difficult to construct and balance out this protagonist. We may deem appalling the acts she commits. But I quickly realized that, without toning down her actions, we had to try and understand her interior motives. I wanted her to explain herself with this ambiguous statement that she pronounces before the sisters: "I've damned myself to save you." When she begs for God's help, and when we see her ill in bed, without her veil, we can tell that she has been drawn into an abyss. This type of character role can easily become caricatured. Without Agata Kulesza, who is exceptional, I don't know if the Mother Abbess would have had this interiority or brought this dimension, reminiscent of Greek tragedy.

Agata Kulesza is only 42. She is much younger than the character. What gave you the idea to entrust her with the role?

I thought she was remarkable in *Ida*, but I also thought she would indeed be too young to have the authority the role required. She's the one who asked if she could do a screen test. She put on a veil and without makeup - just by the force of her acting - she was able to project what we see on the screen.

Tell us about Agata Buzek...

Just like Agata Kulesza, Agata Buzek is a very well-known actress in Poland. We spotted her in a Jason Statham film and I thought she had this incredible physical presence - it was staggering - very spiritual in fact. Krzysztof Zanussi had also spoken very highly of her. Agata worked tirelessly for months in order to become accustomed to the refined and sophisticated French that her character spoke. Every evening during the shoot, she listened to Victor Hugo to better familiarize herself with our language.

You have given Lou de Laâge her first adult role with the character of Mathilde.

The entire story is told from Mathilde's point of view. She is the one who takes us into the nun's world and she is witness to the terrible, unheard of events that happen there. She couldn't be bland: her profession alone required her to have a strong character with a touch of virility. Here is the key problem for this type of role - if the actress grows too soft, the film is over before it has begun.

I was very impressed by Lou's work in Mélanie Laurent's film *Breathe [Respire]*. She is graced with a strong, distinctive beauty. I sensed that this grace, combined with her slightly stubborn side, along with her freshness and a fragility that lie just beneath the surface, would well serve the film. Lou is never insipid; she can sometimes be harsh. It was important to feel how pervasive she became to the situation she discovers during her journey and that we perceive something that lights up within her, on her face, without necessarily thinking: "She's become a believer." That wasn't the point. What was important was to feel the metaphysical questioning that is experienced by the protagonist and how it changes her. How does one understand life's meaning in the midst of such chaos? How does one survive the violence that has so strongly marked the flesh of these Polish nuns? How does one judge their faith, which appears to have survived this harrowing ordeal? Lou's dramatic insight is impressive; she doesn't set boundaries

- she is courageous and hardworking, a bit like Mathilde. It wasn't easy for her to end up deep in Northern Poland surrounded by Polish actresses whose language she didn't speak.

The unconventional couple she makes with Samuel, the Jewish doctor played by Vincent Macaigne, adds another facet to her non-conformist character.

Samuel casts a different light onto Mathilde in an original way: he is not a classically handsome man and I find that Vincent Macaigne brings a great deal of humanity to the character's dark sarcasm. It always pays to start off with a couple who sleep together without any obvious commitment, yet whose feelings for each other rise to the surface unbeknownst to them. Moreover, it is quite easy to imagine the medical personnel in these units having these types of relationships in order to evacuate stress. Pascal Bonitzer and I really enjoyed ourselves while creating this character. We thought he would give the audience some comic relief before returning to the convent. And also, it was a way to tackle the war from a different angle and to underscore what had just happened in Poland: Samuel is Jewish and his family died in the camps.

Why did you choose this ending?

There is something galvanizing in forging a new path when everything seems hopeless. With this solution, in a way found together by Mathilde and Maria and passed on to the other sisters, we go towards life. Isn't going against life the height of irony for a nun? I thought it was very important that this story - which plunges us into depths of darkness - end in light. I personally know nuns in Vietnam who dedicated their lives to children without parents. These women are heroines. They crossed all of Vietnam on foot during the war and managed to shelter hundreds of young orphans. I thought Maria was just like one of these women.

The film has a unique rhythm: it's quite meditative despite its fast pace.

I wanted to convey the singular, meditative passage of time in a convent while maintaining the dramatic tension: It was a delicate balance to find both while writing the screenplay and during the film shoot. I also replicated what I saw during my retreats. I thought it was important to know that the sisters grant themselves peaceful moments when everyone can pursue their own interests: reading, music, sewing, conversation...

The labor and delivery scenes give one the feeling that they were taken from real life.

Those scenes were shot in the convent with the actresses. Without overdoing it, they gave the feeling that something real was happening before our eyes. I wanted the deliveries to be trying. Through these moments and through the physical examinations that Mathilde gives the nuns, the sisters' bodies start to exist in a very powerful way. They may blossom - Irena, for example, the young very sensual novice who laughs happily when Mathilde palpates her belly; or they are mentally blocked - such as Ludwika, in extreme pregnancy denial, who gives birth on the floor of her cell.

Les Innocents was shot in Poland. How did you find the convent where the story takes place?

Naturally, the Polish convents weren't amenable to a film shoot. Caroline Champetier, the director of photography, had us visit an abandoned convent, where only the archways and the cemetery that we see in the courtyard remained. The upstairs cells had been destroyed; everything was in an advanced state of neglect. But the location was ideal and we thought of building rooms inside the archways: an infirmary, refectory and the little chapel. It was a bit of a gamble. We were lucky that the priest in charge supported our project. You get the impression that this convent has always existed. Caroline and I showed the Polish crew radical films like Alain Cavalier's *Thérèse*, and Robert Bresson's *Angels of Sin* [*Les anges du péché*]. We also all chose together each bench, every chair. Not a single object was there just "for decoration."

This is the third time you've worked with Caroline Champetier.

Our working relationship goes back to 1996, since our first film together, *Dry Cleaning* [*Nettoyage à sec*]. Caroline is fantastic when it comes to radical topics and my feeling was that there was potential for thorough visual work with *Les Innocents*. The commitment of the director of photography to a film is akin to that of an actor. I knew that she would bring the fervor that the project needed. We began our work well in advance of the shoot and worked very closely together. We researched iconography and conducted a thorough study of colors. We wanted to give the impression of being in a painting - we were thinking, naturally, of the Quattrocento period Madonna with Child paintings - while breathing life and movement into the scenes. The air had to be palpable.

It's the second time you've shot a film in a foreign country.

It's not that I'm attracted to other countries in particular; it's the subject that leads me there. Of course, when I found myself in Poland, directing actresses and a crew whose language I didn't speak, It occurred to me that I was nuts. Thankfully, the Polish actresses were exceptional. That was a great help.

A quarter of the film is in Polish. How did you work with the actresses in spite of the language barrier?

I had an interpreter with me of course, but all the back and forth could become grueling. We mostly relied on English to communicate. The rehearsals we conducted a month and a half before the shoot were paramount. They were true rehearsals, like in theater. This allowed the actresses to appropriate the subject and the physical place, make it their own. It also provided the opportunity to bring up issues that had been oversimplified at times. They were very reactive and I even modified some scenes as a result of comments they had made.

FROM REALITY TO FICTION: THE STORY OF MADELEINE PAULIAC

When she was 27 years old, Madeleine Pauliac, a doctor on staff at a Paris hospital, joined the resistance movement, providing supplies and lending support to allied parachutists. She then participated in the liberation of Paris and in the Vosges and Alsace military campaigns.

At the beginning of 1945, as a lieutenant-doctor in the French Interior Forces, she left for Moscow under the authority of General Catroux, the French Ambassador in Moscow, to direct the French repatriation mission.

The situation in Poland was dramatic. Warsaw, a martyred city after 2 months of insurrection against the German occupant (between August and October 1944), had been razed to the ground causing the death of 20,000 combatants and 180,000 civilians. During this time, the Russian Army, present in Poland since January 1944 under Stalin's orders, remained armed and waiting on the other bank of the Vistula River. After a backward surge from the German Army and the discovery of all the acts of violence committed by the Germans, the Red Army and its provisional administration followed to rule over the liberated territories.

It's within this context that Madeleine Pauliac was named in April 1945 Chief Doctor of the French Hospital in Warsaw, which was in ruins. She was in charge of repatriation within the French Red Cross. She conducted this mission throughout Poland and parts of the Soviet Union. She accomplished over 200 missions with the Blue Squadron Unit of women volunteer ambulance drivers for the Red Cross in order to search for, treat and repatriate French soldiers who had remained in Poland. It's in these circumstances that she discovered the horror in the maternity wards where the Russians had raped women who had just given birth as well as women in labor; individual rapes were legion and there were collective rapes perpetrated in convents. She gave medical care to these women. She helped them to heal their conscience and save their convent. Madeleine Pauliac died accidentally while on a mission near Warsaw in February 1946.

Les Innocents recounts this episode of her fight as a woman to save other women.

Philippe Maynial
Madeleine Pauliac's nephew

CAST AND CREW FILMOGRAPHIES

ANNE FONTAINE, Director

- 2014 **GEMMA BOVERY**
Toronto 2014
- 2013 **ADORE [PERFECT MOTHERS]**
Sundance 2013
- 2011 **MY WORST NIGHTMARE [MON PIRE CAUCHEMAR]**
Toronto 2011
- 2009 **COCO BEFORE CHANEL [COCO AVANT CHANEL]**
Academy Award Nominee (Best Costumes – Catherine Leterrier)
BAFTA Nominee (Foreign Film, Leading Actress, Costumes)
European Film Award Nominee (Music – Alexandre Desplat)
César Award Winner, Best Costumes
- 2008 **THE GIRL FROM MONACO [LA FILLE DE MONACO]**
Toronto 2009
- 2006 **OH LA LA! [NOUVELLE CHANCE]**
Cannes 2006 - Out of Competition
- 2005 **IN HIS HANDS [ENTRE SES MAINS]**
Toronto 2005
- 2003 **NATHALIE...**
Toronto 2003
- 2001 **HOW I KILLED MY FATHER [COMMENT J'AI TUÉ MON PÈRE]**
Toronto 2001
César Award Winner, Best Actor - Michel Bouquet
- 1999 **AUGUSTIN, ROI DU KUNG-FU [AUGUSTIN, KING OF KUNG-FU]**
Toronto 1999
- 1997 **DRY CLEANING [NETTOYAGE À SEC]**
Venice Official Competition 1997
Best Screenplay Award, Venice Film Festival
César Award Winner, Most Promising Actor - Stanislas Merhar
- 1995 **AUGUSTIN**
Cannes Film Festival, Un Certain Regard 1995
- 1993 **LOVE AFFAIRS USUALLY END BADLY [LES HISTOIRES D'AMOUR FINISSENT MAL EN GÉNÉRAL]**
Cannes Critics' Week 1993 Winner of the 1993 Prix Jean Vigo

LOU DE LAÂGE (MATHILDE)

- 2015 **THE WAIT [L'ATTESA]** by Piero Messina
Venice 2015
- 2014 **BREATHE [RESPIRE]** by Mélanie Laurent
Cannes 2014
César Award Nominee, Most Promising Actress
- 2013 **JAPPELOUP** by Christian Duguay
César Award Nominee, Most Promising Actress
- 2011 **18 YEARS OLD AND RISING [J'AIME REGARDER LES FILLES]** by Frédéric Louf

AGATA BUZEK (SISTER MARIA)

- 2015 **11 MINUTES [11 MINUT]** by Jerzy Skolimowski
Venice 2015
PERFORMER by Lukasz Ronduda and Maciej Sobieszczanski
Berlin 2015
- 2014 **JEZIORAK** by Michal Otlowski
FOREIGN BODY [OBCE CIALO] by Krzysztof Zanussi
Toronto 2014
- 2013 **REDEMPTION** by Steven Knight
- 2011 **LENA** by Christophe Van Rompaey
Toronto 2011
- 2009 **REVERSE [REWERS]** by Borys Lankosz
Best Actress Award Winner, Polish Film Awards

AGATA KULESZA (MOTHER ABBESS)

- 2014 **ALL ABOUT MY PARENTS [PANI Z PRZEDSZKOLA]** by Marcin Krzyształowicz
Best Actress Award Nominee, Polish Film Awards
- 2013 **IN HIDING [W UKRYCIU]** by Jan Kidawa-Blonski – Busan
- 2013 **IDA** by Pawel Pawlikowski
Best Foreign Language Film, 2015 Academy Awards
Best Actress Award Winner, Gijón International Film Festival
Best Actress Award Winner, Les Arcs European Film Festival
Best Supporting Actress Award Winner, Los Angeles Film Critics Association
Best Actress Award Winner, Polish Film Awards
Best Actress Award Nominee, European Film Awards
- 2011 **ROSE [RÓZA]** by Wojciech Smarzowski
Best Actress Award Nominee, Polish Film Awards
SUICIDE ROOM [SALA SAMOBÓJCÓW] by Jan Komasa *Berlin 2011*

CREDITS

CAST

MATHILDE	LOU DE LAÂGE
SISTER MARIA	AGATA BUZEK
MOTHER ABBESS	AGATA KULESZA
SAMUEL	VINCENT MACAIGNE
IRENA	JOANNA KULIG
TERESA	ELIZA RYCEMBEL
ZOFIA	ANNA PROCHNIAK
ANNA	KATARZYNA DABROWSKA
LUDWIKA	HELENA SUJECKA
WANDA	DOROTA KUDUK
JOANNA	KLARA BIELAWKA
BIBIANA	MIRA MALUDZINSKA
COLONEL	PASCAL ELSO
GASPARD	THOMAS COUMANS
WLADEK	LEON NATAN-PASZEK
ZOFIA'S AUNT	JOANNA FERTACZ

CREW

DIRECTOR	ANNE FONTAINE
PRODUCERS	ERIC ALTMAYER
	NICOLAS ALTMAYER
SCREENWRITERS	SABRINA B. KARINE
	ALICE VIAL
ADAPTATION AND DIALOGUES	ANNE FONTAINE
	PASCAL BONITZER
STORY	PHILIPPE MAYNIAL
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY	CAROLINE CHAMPETIER
EDITOR	ANNETTE DUTERTRE
SOUND	OLIVIER MAUVEZIN
	FRANCIS WARGNIER
	JEAN-PIERRE LAFORCE
MUSIC	GRÉGOIRE HETZEL
PRODUCTION DESIGN	JOANNA MACHA
COSTUMES	KATARZYNA LEWINSKA
CASTING	WERONIKA MIGON
	PASCALE BERAUD
1 st ASSISTANT DIRECTOR	BOGUSŁAW BIELANSKI
SCRIPT SUPERVISOR	ANNA ZENOWICZ
LINE PRODUCERS	DAGMARA BONCZYK
	THIBAUT MATTEI
POST-PRODUCTION SUPERVISOR	PATRICIA COLOMBAT
CO-PRODUCERS	ELIZA OCZKOWSKA
	KLAUDIA SMIEJA

About Music Box Films

Founded in 2007, Music Box Films is a leading North American distributor of acclaimed international, American independent and documentary features along with the best in international television. Recent releases include **MERU** by Chai Vasarhelyi and Jimmy Chin, winner of the 2015 Sundance Audience Award for US Documentary that went on to become one of the top documentary box office performers of 2015.

Upcoming releases include **NORMAN LEAR: Just Another Version of You**, the latest documentary from Loki Films (*Jesus Camp*, *Detropia*) and a 2016 Sundance Film Festival premiere, and **THE INNOCENTS** by Anne Fontaine, the post-World War II story, based on actual events, of a convent that suffers unspeakable war crimes. Music Box Films is independently owned and operated by the Southport Music Box Corporation, which also owns and operates The Music Box Theatre, Chicago's premiere venue for independent and foreign films.