

Music Box Films Presents

THE GUARDIANS



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PRESS NOTES

Publicity Contacts

New York/National:

Sophie Gluck & Associates

Sophie Gluck
sophie@gluckpr.com
212-595-2432

Aimee Morris
aimee@gluckpr.com
212-595-2432

Los Angeles:

Marina Bailey Film Publicity

Marina Bailey
marina@marinabailey.com
323-962-7511

Dina Makhoul
pr@marinabailey.com
323-962-7511

Regional/Marketing:

Music Box Films

Becky Schultz
bschultz@musicboxfilms.com
312-508-5360

Theatrical Bookings:

Brian Andreotti
bandreotti@musicboxfilms.com
312-508-5361

Kyle Westphal
kwestphal@musicboxfilms.com
312-508-5359

Music Box Films Contacts

Marketing/Social Media:

Becky Schultz
bschultz@musicboxfilms.com
312-508-5360

Exhibition Materials:

David Cook
dcook@musicboxfilms.com
312-508-5363

SYNOPSIS

An affecting human drama of love, loss, and resilience unfolds against the backdrop of World War I. The women of the Paridier farm, under the deft hand of Hortense, the family's matriarch (Nathalie Baye,) must grapple with the workload while the men, including two sons, are off at the front. Hortense reluctantly brings on an outsider, the hard-scrabble teenage orphan, Francine (Iris Bry,) to help her daughter Solange (Laura Smet, Ms. Baye's real-life daughter). New tools allow the women to triumph over the land, newfound independence is acquired, yet emotions are stirred especially when the men return from the front on short leaves. Beauvois revels in the mysteries and beauties of the French countryside, here unravaged by war, with painterly images bathed in natural light, yet keeps his focus on the intricate drama that plays out against the upheaval of the Great War.

INTERVIEW WITH XAVIER BEAUVOIS

How did *The Guardians* project come about?

[Producer] Sylvie Pialat had sent me the novel by Ernest Pérochon about five years ago. It spent quite a while on a corner of my bedside table. Sylvie and I talked about it every time we'd meet. When I finally read it, I found it very compelling. What I liked most about it is that its heroes are women.

Who was Ernest Pérochon?

Pérochon was a schoolteacher in the Deux-Sèvres. He was a soldier during the First World War on the front, but had a heart attack and was demobilized. In 1920, he won the Prix Goncourt for *Nêne*, another novel about a farm and women. That made it possible for him to give up teaching and concentrate on writing. *Les Gardiennes* was published in 1924. During the Occupation, Pérochon refused to collaborate with the Germans, which got him into trouble and he hid from his family. In 1942, he had a second heart attack and died at the age of 57.

In *The Guardians* we focus on subjects that you are fond of, such as a community – a peasant one in this case – committed to the survival of an ideal come hell or high water. But this is the first adaptation in your career.

That is true... That did raise some difficulties. I liked Pérochon's book, but some things were not right for me. I thought there was too much misery, disease and death... I changed some of that. And then Pérochon includes many children. How do you do that in a movie, when you plan on telling a story that takes place over three or four years? It's impossible, unless you cast a family with lots of kids to have their children play the different ages. That is the superiority of the novel over film. There are things that are easy to write that you cannot film. In short, I can say that when adapting the novel, I never once hesitated to betray it completely! It was the only way I could remain faithful to it. And I think that, ultimately, the essence of the novel comes through in the film.

And you worked with a co-writer?

Yes, I worked with Frédérique Moreau. As I said, many things changed between the book and screenplay, and then again between the screenplay and film. All my films are like that. I see to it that the screenplay is as good as it can be. But that is not where I invest myself the most. A screenplay is just a point of departure. Everything is up for grabs once I set foot on location. That is where the

excitement begins, where the film comes to life.

The farm, run by Hortense (Nathalie Baye) in the absence of all its men, is obviously very important. And it is your main location. How did you find it?

The farm is actually the main character in *The Guardians*. We looked at an unbelievable number of houses before deciding. First of all, we had to decide which region to shoot in. I would have liked to film in the Pas de Calais, a region I love. But that was the site of the front, and the front is not the subject of *The Guardians*. On the contrary: the film is about the women behind the lines, taking care of everything in the absence of their men until they return home. I then thought of La Rochelle and the Limousin. That is where the Americans landed during the First World War. Things went rather quickly then: the region looks like nothing has changed in the last century! There are still many farms left in the bocage, something that hardly exists any more, since the phenomenon of land consolidation. The set did not only have to be historically correct, it also had to make me believe it, to feel it. There are locations that look perfect on paper, but all you have to do is go there to realize that something is off... But here I immediately felt the right vibes: This was the right farm, the farm I wanted. It was in pathetic shape when we discovered it. We arrived just in time to tell its owner: don't touch a thing; we'll restore everything for you! He thought we were going to do it "for show", but our production designer, Yann Mégard, told him that it is often cheaper to restore things for real.

Did shooting a film with more or less one single set bother you?

On the contrary, working on a set like this gives you a similar configuration as a studio, but in the real world. When you shoot on a different set every day, you must adhere to a precise schedule. I am entirely free to choose where we film, depending on my desires and inspiration. What if today I don't feel like shooting the letter scene, and would rather shoot the cows being led out to drink? I do it. And what if I suddenly feel that the scene with the American soldiers, written to take place in the kitchen, would work better in the barn? No problem. And what if I suddenly feel like shooting a scene in the vestibule, simply because we haven't used that location yet? It's possible. Working with just one location lets you constantly change things. I keep coming back to Truffaut's belief: the shoot is a critique of the screenplay, and the edit is a critique of the shoot. Things need to shift constantly. A film is living matter. When I'm shooting, I create and recreate scenes. I think about them in my sleep. I rewrite them, I re-imagine them. If it is

important for a film to inhabit a space, it also has to permanently inhabit you. There was also another reason for those modifications: my screenplay was too talky. I know country people. I live in the country. They're taciturn, they don't speak much. And so I ripped out entire pages of dialogue.

For this film you brought together an impressive cast, made up of famous actors, some of whom you have already worked with – Nathalie Baye, Olivier Rabourdin, Xavier Maly – and some newcomers. The revelation is Iris Bry, who plays Francine, Hortense's hired help. *The Guardians* is Bry's first film. How did you choose Iris Bry?

When I saw Iris, I realized that I was standing in front of a bomb. All I did was give her the room she deserved. She was able to turn Francine into the embodiment of women at the beginning of the twentieth century... To find her, we had casting sessions with unknowns, beginners... I was looking for someone to play a peasant in the 1910s. One day our casting director, Karen Hottois, ran into Iris, as luck would have it, at the door of a bookshop. She stopped her and asked her if she would come in for some tests. It was all a matter of a few seconds: a little earlier, a little later, and the encounter would never have taken place, and Iris, who is a miracle, would have never been in the movies!

Who is she?

She is 23 years old, and she's just got her diploma in library science. Until now, she never thought she would be in the movies. For her screen test, we asked her to read the scene where she has decided to keep her child, that the child will bear her name, that he will protect her. It took barely twelve seconds and I was stunned. I called Sylvie Pialat. She immediately agreed with me. Even though Iris was not planning on a career as an actress, I could tell that she very much wanted this role. Then she came to my place in Normandy. She was tense. I showed her Truffaut's *Day for Night*, to give her an idea of how a film set works. I told her that it was both nothing like that and exactly like that! From Iris' first scene, when she arrives at the farm in a horse and buggy, she was perfect. She immediately found a way to sound like people of the time. She quickly understood how to behave with the crew, with others, at the canteen... Since it was the first time that I shot a movie digitally, it was also the first time that I got video feedback that corresponds to real lighting. There were several times I had to tell Caroline Champetier (the Director of Photography): "But she's all you see!" And Caroline said that there was nothing she could do about it. Iris ate up all the light!

Another interesting aspect of your film with respect to actors is that you used Nathalie Baye and her daughter, Laura Smet.

I think they were very happy not only to work together, but simply to spend some time together. This is the third time I've worked with Nathalie Baye, after *To Mathieu* and *The Young Lieutenant*, but the first time I've worked with Laura Smet. The idea had been floating around for some time, but it took a while for it to take shape... Laura has the same capacity for concentration as her mother. She gets into a character very quickly. It's a delight to shoot with her. I call her Miss Finesse.

Opposite them, brothers, sons... how did you find the Sandrail family, and especially the actor who plays Henri, Hortense's brother, whose weathered hands provide the film with one of its most overwhelming shots?

I was looking for someone older to play Hortense's father. Then I met Gilbert Bonneau. I liked him so much that I decided to change the character from Hortense's father to her brother. In all his life, Gilbert has hardly ever traveled more than 25 kilometers from his farm. He once went to Paris for a farmers' demonstration. The second time was for insurance purposes related to our film! As for Cyril Descours, Nicolas Giraud, and Olivier Rabourdin, one of the novel's flaws is that no one returns home on leave, and I was determined to have one. So their characters were drawn up very quickly. Their own challenge was to immediately find a place in this tangle of women that had developed!

You have always been interested in war films. But this is something different: here you show the background, with only a few spurts of warfare, most often in dreams...

I have always felt that *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* is a genuine war film: not showing the war itself, but its effect on those who participate indirectly. I also wanted to show some corpses. When we filmed Georges' dream, in which he finally realizes that he is fighting himself, I asked Caroline Champetier to shoot some images of corpses on the ground. And that is how Marie-Julie Maille – my editor, who is also my wife – and I decided to open the film. The scene is silent, there is something gentle about it, but at the same time it says what it has to say very clearly. That is one of Jean Douchet's lessons: the subject of a movie should appear in its very first frames.

How were you able to reconstitute authentic gestures that have practically disappeared today, such as plowing, sowing, etc.?

We did research, we worked with historians... Nathalie Baye and Laura Smet did an internship in the country to learn. But they didn't learn too much, because they were meant to be performing some of those chores for the first time.

THE GUARDIANS is a kind of western... Which films inspired you?

Whatever the project, people are always advising me to see many films, or to see them again. I generally prefer not to. I want to remain free and able to follow my own instincts. In this case, it's true, I did think a lot about westerns. *The Guardians* is a western; it's just that instead of a ranch, we have a farm. And there aren't any cowboys, just cowgirls. I also looked at a lot of paintings, such as the ones by Van Gogh from the period when he was still very much influenced by Millet. But I wanted to avoid making a film that was too overtly pictorial. You may spot some references, but not that many.

Why did you decide on digital cinematography?

Generally speaking, I'm not the type to experiment with new technologies. I prefer to concentrate on the film. I had the impression, however, that things were now technologically settled enough for me to try my hand at it. It allowed me, for the first time, to shoot two takes one after the other without any breaks. With film, there is always some little thing that forces you to start all over again. Digitally, you can shoot as long as you like beyond the time of the take, which can provide some very stunning results. Francine's smile at the camera at the very end of the film is nothing more than Iris' smile at the crew at the end of the shoot. I wouldn't have been able to catch that on film.

XAVIER BEAUVOIS FILMOGRAPHY

- 2017** THE GUARDIANS
Toronto International Film Festival
- 2014** THE PRICE OF FAME
Venice Film Festival
- 2010** OF GODS AND MEN
Winner: Best Film, Best Supporting Actor, Best Cinematography-
César Awards
Winner: Best Foreign Language Film-National Board of Review (NBR)
Winner: Best Foreign Language Film-London Critics Film Awards
Winner: Best Foreign Language Film Fipresci Prize-Palm Springs
International Film Festival
Winner: Best Film, Best Actor-Lumiere Awards
Winner: Grand Prize of the Jury-Cannes International Film Festival
- 2009** NOTRE AMI CHOPIN – *Short*
- 2005** LE PETIT LIEUTENANT
Winner: Best Actress-César Awards
Winner: Label Europa Cinemas-Venice Film Festival
- 2000** JOÃO MATA SETE - *Co-Director*
- 2000** TO MATTHIEU
Venice Film Festival
- 1995** DON'T FORGET YOU'RE GOING TO DIE
Winner: Jury Prize-Cannes International Film Festival
- 1991** NORD
- 1986** LE MATOU - *Short*

NATHALIE BAYE FILMOGRAPHY

2017	THE GUARDIANS Toronto International Film Festival
2016	IT'S ONLY THE END OF THE WORLD (d. Xavier Dolan)
2014	SK1 (d. Frédéric Tellier)
2012	LAURENCE ANYWAYS (d. Xavier Dolan)
2009	FACE (d. Ming-liang Tsai)
2008	A FRENCH GIGOLO (d. Josiane Balasko)
2006	THE ANT BULLY (d. John A. Davis)
2006	TELL NO ONE (d. Guillaume Canet)
2005	LE PETIT LIEUTENANT (d. Xavier Beauvois)
2003	FEELINGS (d. Noémie Lvovsky)
2002	CATCH ME IF YOU CAN (d. Steven Spielberg)
2001	ABSOLUTLEY FABULOUS (d. Gabriel Aghion)
2000	TO MATTHIEU (d. Xavier Beauvois)
1999	AN AFFAIR OF LOVE (d. Frédéric Fonteyne)
1999	VENUS BEAUTY (d. Tonie Marshall)
1998	BEWARE OF MY LOVE (d. Jeanne Labrune)
1990	UN WEEK-END SUR DEUX (d. Nicole Garcia)
1987	ENGAGEMENTS OF THE HEART (d. Robert Enrico)
1985	DÉTECTIVE (d. Jean-Luc Godard)
1984	NOTRE HISTOIRE (d. Bertrand Blier)
1983	J'AI ÉPOUSÉ UNE OMBRE (d. Robin Davis)
1982	THE RETURN OF MARTIN GUERRE (d. Daniel Vigne)
1982	LA BALANCE (d. Bob Swaim)
1981	STRANGE AFFAIR (d. Pierre Granier-Deferre)
1980	A WEEK'S HOLIDAY (d. Bertrand Tavernier)
1979	EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF (d. Jean-Luc Godard)
1978	MON PREMIER AMOUR (d. Élie Chouraqui)
1976	THE LAST WOMAN (d. Marco Ferreri)
1973	DAY FOR NIGHT (d. François Truffaut)

LAURA SMET FILMOGRAPHY

2017	CARBONE (d. Olivier Marchal)
2015	FIRST GROWTH (d. Jérôme Le Maire)
2014	YVES SAINT LAURENT (d. Jalil Lespert)
2010	PAULINE ET FRANÇOIS (d. Renaud Fely)
2008	FRONTIER OF THE DAWN (d. Philippe Garrel)
2007	TOWARDS ZERO (d. Pascal Thomas)
2006	LE PASSAGER DE L'ÉTÉ (d. Florence Moncorgé-Gabin)
2004	THE BRIDESMAID (d. Claude Chabrol)
2003	EAGER BODIES (d. Xavier Giannoli)

C R E D I T S

CAST

HORTENSE
SOLANGE
FRANCINE
GEORGES
HENRI
CLOVIS
CONSTANT
MARGUERITE

Nathalie Baye
Laura Smet
Iris Bry
Cyril Descours
Gilbert Bonneau
Olivier Rabourdin
Nicolas Giraud
Mathilde Viseux-Ely

CREW

Director
Screenplay

Xavier Beauvois
Xavier Beauvois
Frédérique Moreau
and Marie-Julie Maille

Based on the Novel by
Original Music
Producers

Ernest Pérochon
Michel Legrand
Sylvie Pialat
Benoît Quainon

Co-producers

Pauline Gygas
Max Karli

Associate Producers

Gilles Sitbon
Jonathan Blumental
Caroline Champetier (A.F.C.)

Director of Photography
Assistant Director
Production designer
Sound

Alain Artur
Yann Megard
Christophe Giovanonni
Loïc Prian

Costumes
Editor
Casting
Continuity
Location manager

Damien Boitel
and Éric Bonnard
Anaïs Romand
Marie-Julie Maille
Karen Hottois (A.R.D.A.)
Agathe Grau
David Lemenan (A.F.R.)

Production manager
Post-Production Director
Coproduced by

Patrice Marchand
Toufik Ayadi
Les films du Worso, Rita Productions,
Pathé, Orange Studio, France 3 Cinéma,
KNM, Versus production, RTS Radio
Télévision Suisse

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5, Cinéfeel 3

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Première Guerre mondiale and the
Caisse d'Épargne Ile-de-France, Tax
Shelter of the Belgian Federal
Government, Inver Tax Shelter,
Cinéforum and the Loterie Romande
Pathé and Orange Studio
Music Box Films

Distribution
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