

GAUMONT presents

Charlotte GAINSBOURG      Matthieu KASSOVITZ      Pierre ARDITI

Ben ATTAL      Suzanne JOUANNET

# THE ACCUSATION

A film by Yvan ATTAL

Audrey DANA      Benjamin LAVERNHE      Judith CHEMLA  
From the Comédie française

Screenplay by Yaël LANGMANN and Yvan ATTAL

Based On Karine Tuil's Book  
**« LES CHOSES HUMAINES »**  
Published By Editions Gallimard

Duration : 2h10

## **INTERNATIONAL PRESS**

Quentin Becker

Tél : +33 1.46.43.23.06

[quentin.becker@gaumont.com](mailto:quentin.becker@gaumont.com)

Lola Depuiset

Tél : +33 1.46.43.21.27

[lola.depuiset@gaumont.com](mailto:lola.depuiset@gaumont.com)

## **SYNOPSIS**

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A young man is accused of having raped a young woman. Who is this young man, and who is this young woman? Is he guilty, or is he innocent? Is she a victim, or just thirsty for revenge, as the defendant claims? The two young protagonists and their families and friends will see their lives, convictions and certitudes torn to shreds but... Is there only one truth?

## AN INTERVIEW WITH **YVAN ATTAL**

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### **HOW DID KARINE TUIL'S NOVEL "LES CHOSES HUMAINES" FIND ITS WAY INTO YOUR HANDS?**

The novel had just come out. I was interested in the author. I had already read some of her stuff. And then the subject: a young man accused of rape the day after a party.

The story bowled me over. I was moved by the defendant – in whom I could recognize my own son – and moved by the victim – in whom I recognized my own daughter – and I identified wholly with the parents of the two young people involved in this scandal. I modified the structure of the story – there is “him” and then “her”, and finally the trial – so that the audience has time to become fond of them. I wanted to know where they came from, who they were, how each of them remembered the evening before the drama; why she esteemed it was rape and he thought that she had given her consent. The subject is contemporary, the characters complex. And for the first time, this book offered me the chance to move away from comedy, to return to a movie genre that made me want to make a movie with elements I had never had the chance to film – a police station, a courthouse, a house search, etc.

### **ASIDE FROM THE MATERIAL IN THE NOVEL, DID YOU CARRY OUT ANY PERSONAL RESEARCH?**

While writing it, I met with investigating magistrates, police officers, and lawyers, to come as close as possible to their areas of expertise, and to how they see their profession. The novel furnished me with fabulous dramatic material, but I needed to steep myself in the system, in the arena in which each of them moves. The courtroom is what impressed me most: the silence, the overbearing tension. It is not a theater. The lawyers do of course at times “perform” theatrically, but their objective is to hit hard and convincingly, because the stakes are high.

I attended a trial for rape. There was no doubt about the man's guilt. But still there is a human being in the dock, and another among the victims. Several lives are at stake, and despite all your convictions, and all your emotions, you come out shaken.

Reading the novel would not have been enough. I needed to experience it. That is what guided my choices as a director: spending enough time on my characters, without indulging in anything superfluous!

### **WHAT PRESIDED OVER YOUR DIRECTORIAL CHOICES?**

Being true. As of writing the screenplay. When I write, I already know what I will shoot as a sequence shot, and what I will cut and edit. I don't like to rewrite the film on set or while editing. If the writing stage is done right, you can fiddle with it during the shoot, and if that works, fiddle with it even more during the edit. But if there are flaws, they show through at every stage.

A film is in fact a sum of choices – lens, frame, rhythm – that you make upfront, in the hope of making your dreamed results come true. But I remain flexible. If during the shoot a scene falls flat, I can change my mind. I was very lucky with this film. When you find a location at the last minute, you need to film with what that implies. Here I had them all before the shoot. And then there was the confinement. I stayed shut up with the courthouse set in mind. I had time to reflect and understand what I really wanted to do:

A rather chilling image. Linger on the characters. Especially during the trial. Wanting to listen to them. And then the choice of two formats. Scope for the entire film, but for the party – which we see in flash-back – a square 1/33 format and in 16 mm. With film that has grain. We wanted to convey the idea that unlike during the trial, when each person gives their own version of the evening, this is objective reality, or so seems.

## **DID YOU HAVE ANY REFERENCES THERE?**

Sydney Lumet, of course. His way of filming while always remaining true to his characters. His way of saying without saying, not wanting to deliver a message whatever the price. And his way of approaching serious issues, all the while making mainstream movies, movies for Everyman. But the police search, for example, was inspired by the way Woody Allen films sequence shots in apartments. I don't belong to any cenacles. I like *films noirs* just as much as comedies. What is important is to use my view of cinema to serve the story. I don't want my direction to be visible. Anything that distracts the audience from the film is detrimental.

That being said, I have always been a fan of courtroom dramas. It's a wonderful exercise in involving an audience; your direction and editing convey meaning. I watched and discovered many of them to see how directors cope with a single set, with speeches that go on and on, with static actors.

Twelve Angry Men influenced me most, because Lumet isolates himself with the jury in a tiny room and stays immobile to focus on human complexity.

## **HOW DO YOU CONVEY THAT HUMAN COMPLEXITY?**

Thanks to the actors.

## **HOW DO YOU FIND THE IDEAL ACTOR FOR EACH CHARACTER?**

When you make a movie, you want to work with people you love. First, I ask myself: "Is there a role for them? When I filmed "Le Brio", I didn't see my family for four months. This was an opportunity to share quality time together. I began by casting the role of the defendant's mother: a feminist essayist. Charlotte [Gainsbourg] was the obvious choice, thanks to her precision and her vulnerability. To embody the father, I thought of Pierre Arditi. There is something theatrical, chic and cultivated about him that resembles the character: a seductive star journalist. Then there was the problem of Charlotte's new companion. I immediately knew that I shouldn't play him. That would have given rise to confusion. For the role of the professor, Matthieu [Kassovitz] was perfect. I appeared in one of his short subjects more than twenty years ago. I was delighted to see him again and specially to film him. As the mother of the victim, I thought of Audrey Dana. She is just kooky enough to play this fanatical Orthodox Jew. As for the counsel for the defense, knowing that I would be filming his summation for the defense as a sequence shot, I needed an actor capable of reciting several pages of text. I looked to the theater and decided on Benjamin Lavernhe. They all said yes, and I am extremely grateful for that.

## **AND FOR THE ROLES OF THE VICTIM AND DEFENDANT... WAS IT FUNDAMENTAL THAT ALEXANDRE AND MILA BE PLAYED BY VIRTUALLY UNKNOWN ACTORS TO FACILITATE AUDIENCE IDENTIFICATION?**

Which actors 17-18 are very famous? There are none. It was not necessarily reassuring for me to start off with young actors in such heavy roles. I did some casting sessions and then some tests before choosing Ben and Suzanne. Four actresses stood out during the tests. It was Suzanne [Jouannet] who impressed me the most. Shot after shot, her emotion was there. Intact. I loved her acting. From start to finish. As for the boy, while reading the book, I immediately thought of Ben [Attal]. He already had a role in one of my previous films "My Dog Stupid". Back then I was reticent.

The casting director had to convince me: "You don't want to consider him because he's your son, but his try outs were the best." I had to admit it.

## **WHAT WAS DIFFICULT ABOUT ADMITTING THAT?**

Giving a role to your own son. How do you work with him? I am his father. I felt like I had a double responsibility. But then I figured, as a director, I am a sort of father for all the actors in my purview.

To embody the defendant– a young man arrogant at times, but also endearing –, Ben had a lot going for him. He is gentle, generous, and embarrassed about having the parents he has. He would have preferred to be born into another milieu. That complexity is touching. And then the camera likes him.

I never forgot my first theater class. We had to stay seated and silent for three minutes. Then after having observed us, the teacher told us: "You can learn how to act, but when people look at you, they see you subjectively. There is nothing you can do about that. So, accept who you are". There are actors who move you, others less, even if they perform well. That's the way it is! Ben moves me. So why bother looking for someone else, when I had already auditioned fifty actors for my last film. Ben approached his role the same way he did in *My Dog Stupid*. The only difference being that here he has a more important role to play. Probably the trickiest of them all. He spent confinement learning to play the piano and preparing for the film with me.

Then came the work with the rest of the cast. I organized a lot of read-throughs. We analyzed the text together and tried to determine what the truth means for each character. When are they lying, when are they being honest, to undermine the audience's certitude... We needed to strike the right balance.

The shoot is an essential moment, but the human side can also be revealed during the edit. It is so easy to direct the audience's point of view one way or another. Without even realizing it. We could have chosen to blacken Alexandre only to acquit him to provoke hostile reactions on the part of the audience. But that was not our objective. The entire sense of the film depended on our remaining neutral.

One obvious thing guided us: we know what transpired between the two. Furthermore, if you compare Mila and Ben's testimony during the trial, you realize that they are saying the same thing. The facts are indisputable. It is the way they each experienced them that changes everything.

### **YOU DID NOT NEGLECT THE PARENTS' STORY...**

While making this film I did not identify with the two protagonists, but with their parents.

### **FAMILIES REUNITE AND FALL APART. THAT IS A THEME THAT RUNS THROUGH MOST OF YOUR FILMS, FROM MY WIFE IS AN ACTRESS TO MY DOG STUPID...**

It's not my place to analyze that, but everything that calls into question family ties, blood relationships, and affection fascinates me. That is what overwhelms me about Charlotte's monologue at the trial, the bruised couples made up of Mathieu Kassovitz and Audrey Dana, Mathieu Kassovitz and Charlotte Gainsbourg about to explode, the way Pierre Arditi suffers in his own way over Charlotte's absence. Despite everything that separates them, some come together again to protect their children against the "other", the common enemy.

I love the scene in which Charlotte and Mathieu meet in the café. They haven't spoken for years. Their relationship is in tatters. This is a peaceful but painful parenthesis that illustrates the collateral damage of such an event. Much like the rather strange moment when Pierre Arditi begs Charlotte to come back home to him.

### **HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN THAT COURTROOM DRAMA, SO POPULAR IN THE UNITED STATES, HAS NOT BEEN EXPLOITED VERY MUCH IN FRANCE?**

What may scare people off is the static nature of the sequences. I too wondered: "How do you retain an audience's interest for over an hour, with one single location and characters who sit put?" Watching courtroom dramas, I realized that it makes no sense to move a camera when it doesn't need to move.

In the film when we enter the courtroom two years have gone by. We again meet with all the protagonists. Their lives have changed. But once the trial begins, they barely exist. When I film a witness – an expert, the victim, the defendant or their friends and relations – the camera remains on them. There is no reason to complicate things with the reactions of the other protagonists.

## **FROM THE WAY YOU FILM THE VICTIM AND THE DEFENDANT, WE GET THE FEELING THAT YOU WANT TO SHOW THEIR FRAGILITY...**

The value of a frame makes sense. I did not attend film school, but ever since my teenage years I have fed on other people's films. Every time I found one that I thought was super good, I tried to understand why there is a CU here, a wide angle shot there, why the camera moves forward or backward.

That's how I understood that cinema has a grammar, with tools you need to use as best you can if you want audiences to follow you.

## **HOW HAS YOUR EXPERIENCE AS AN ACTOR HELPED YOU TO WORK WITH ACTORS?**

I have not forgotten what a hard job it is. A performer must rely on the director. They cannot judge themselves. They may believe they're doing badly, when in fact they're doing good, or that they're doing well, when in fact their acting leaves a lot to be desired. When I'm acting, I don't like for the director to forget about me. If I do something wrong, I prefer for him to have the guts to say: "Let's try that again!" instead of: "Wow! Next sequence". Because when you see the film, you have regrets. You wonder why you didn't try harder.

On location I don't have any method. And even if I did, I wouldn't be able to apply it to all the actors. They don't have the same score, or the same experience. I try to understand who I'm working with, whether it's more effective to gain their trust or destabilize them. With Ben and Suzanne for example, the first time I yelled at them – despite myself –, I noticed that it unsettled them and was good for the film. So, I continued like that.

For me, an actor is one of many tools. Even if more fragile and trickier to use. Emotion is also conveyed by the image, of course, not only via dialogue and actors. What counts is that it sounds right. I don't want a line to offend my ears. Too many actors think that acting comes free. All they need to do is get into a costume and recite some lines. What is beautiful, is when their masks fall. Without vulnerability, there is nothing.

## **WHEN THEY ACT, ARE YOU ABLE TO SEE YOUR WIFE AND SON AS SIMPLE ACTORS?**

Completely! And that's what bothers them. Since I know them, I don't have to handle them with kid gloves. I am impatient and often blow my top. It's true! Even though I most often lose my temper with myself. People don't realize how alone a director is, constantly harrowed by time. If one morning the shoot suffers a delay, the whole day is in danger. I know what that involves. At night we all go home, thinking: "I hope the movie will be good". But for a director, that is not an option. It is vital. That weakens you and encourages you to blow a gasket. The stakes are even higher when I am also acting in the film. Everywhere you read: A film by... I am talking to you today. I will be the one showing it to audiences.

The crew helps me, nurtures me, and suggests ideas, but in the end, I am the one who makes the choices. And you need to take responsibility for them. All of them! And that is a burden.

## **SINCE THIS IS THE FIRST FILM TO TALK ABOUT RAPE SINCE THE RISE OF THE ME TOO MOVEMENT, WEREN'T YOU A LITTLE SCARED?**

No! I am only beginning to feel a certain pressure today. I always knew that this moment would come, but I refused to think about it during the shoot. I figured: "This story is powerful, it touches me, so I'll tell it". At this hour of liberated speech, the film has obvious political and societal significance. It is an important subject to address, without being Manichean. And then the film is based on a novel written by a woman. And I live surrounded by women – my mother, my mother-in-law, Charlotte, my two daughters. I can't help but be a feminist, and even more so since I feel more comfortable with women than with men. That said, I was aware that I was making a divisive film. Some are reconciled with it; others have opened a debate about it. Debate means contradiction.

## **WHAT DID YOUR EDIT BRING TO THE FILM?**

Its definitive form. Otherwise, it is in every way the film I had in mind. What is interesting is what you have mastered, not what has escaped your grasp – apart from the acting, where some incidents here and there can trip you up. The directors who have influenced me all possessed a mastery. Mastery means having a vision and using every possible means to reconstitute it.

Although it went quickly, the edit was very complex. We had to be careful to balance the points of view of the defendant and the victim. I very much appreciated my editor Albertine's advice.

## **ONE GETS THE FEELING THAT THE SEARCH FOR A POINT OF EQUILIBRIUM WAS YOUR GUIDING LIGHT. WHEN WRITING, DIRECTING, AND OVERSEEING THE SOUNDTRACK...**

Yes! When writing the screenplay, I wondered: "Who is this boy? Who is this girl? What makes them so touching and what prompts us to have our doubts about them. How do their parents, their upbringing, play in or against their favor? Everything was in fact a question of equilibrium. Trying to systematically counterbalance what we thought about them.

The challenge consisted of making a non-Manichean movie without it being interpreted as a betrayal of the cause of women/victims.

## **WHAT DO YOU SAY TO THOSE WHO MAY REGRET THAT YOU DID NOT TAKE THE VICTIM'S SIDE?**

I could indeed have made a film with a violent defendant who is clearly guilty. But what interested me, was to put the audience in the place of the jury in a case where it is one person's word against the other's. With the boy, I wanted to emphasize the touching aspect of his personality, despite the violent act he is accused of. And for the girl, even though we feel immediate empathy with her, I wanted to instill a modicum of doubt regarding her testimony. Not to make her antipathetic – that was out of the question – but to train a spotlight on the difficulty of judging such a case.

Let me repeat, to prepare the film I attended the trial of a man accused of rape and who admitted his guilt. I looked at the big bruiser sitting in the dock without any empathy, the way you stare at a caged animal. Then the investigating magistrates recalled his past, to understand what had brought him to this pass. I realized that my emotions had made me forget that there remains something human even in a hardened criminal who has committed a horrendous crime. The tension in that courtroom was dramatic. A man's life was at stake, and the task of deciding the fairest punishment for him was incumbent on men and women called on to judge one of their peers.

## **FINALLY, WHAT DOES THE FILM HAVE TO SAY?**

That each case is complex. When you do not possess all the requisite elements, your vision is distorted. Only an investigation and trial allow for confronting the various versions. But even in those conditions, with a dossier that required months of investigation, it is difficult to work justice. And to do it otherwise...

## **WHAT DO YOU WANT TO SHARE?**

Emotions. I never forget that whenever someone enters a movie theater, whatever their tastes, they want only one thing: being carried away by a story, a generous film that moves them, makes them laugh or think.

## CAST

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Charlotte GAINSBORG  
Matthieu KASSOVITZ  
Pierre ARDITI  
Ben ATTAL  
Suzanne JOUANNET  
Audrey DANA  
Benjamin LAVERNHE  
Judith CHEMLA

Claire  
Adam  
Jean Farel  
Alexandre Farel  
Mila  
Valérie  
Maître Celerier  
Maître Ferre

## CREW

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A film by  
Screenplay

Image  
Editing  
Original Soundtrack  
Sound

Production Designer  
Costumes  
Casting

First Assistant Director  
Stage Manager  
Production Manager  
Post Production Manager  
Executive Producer  
Associated Producer  
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