

BERNADETTE LAFONT AND GOD CREATED THE FREE WOMAN

A FILM BY
ESTHER HOFFENBERG



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SYNOPSIS

A journey in the company of Bernadette Lafont, French Cinema's most atypical actress. Tracing her career from pin-up girl, to New Wave model of sexual freedom, to drug-dealing granny in the film *Paulette*, by way of *La Fiancée du Pirate* and *Les Stances à Sophie*, this film pays tribute to her extraordinary life and artistic odyssey.

Her grand-daughters, Anna, Juliette and Solène, revisit the dreams of Bernadette, in the family home in the Cevennes region where they, like her, grew up.

Her close friends, Bulle Ogier and Jean-Pierre Kalfon, reminisce on their artistic and human complicity.

Throughout the film, Bernadette Lafont in person, with her inimitable character actress voice, re-evokes a life in cinema marked with insolence, courage and freedom.



INTERVIEW WITH ESTHER HOFFENBERG

BY SERGE KAGANSKI

What spurred you to make a film about Bernadette Lafont?

La Fiancée du pirate, in which Bernadette embodies a new kind of woman – at once free, rebellious and funny – was a major film of my youth.

I met her in 2011 when I was preparing my film on Violette Leduc. She was interested in how the writer had described her paranoia. It was a subject that touched her deeply. Bernadette's natural, warm and caring personality inspired me to do a filmed portrait of her.

The tragic irony is that Bernadette Lafont passed away shortly after your meeting and your desire to do this film.

We met quite a few times from 2011 to 2013, the year of her death. During that period she was reading the screenplay of *Paulette*, a movie she really wanted to do. Bernadette's death was a terrible blow to her family, and for me too, so I put the filmed portrait project on hold. Then, a year later, I began working on it anew. I felt that Bernadette Lafont deserved a film devoted to her life, now from a historical perspective. Bernadette had introduced me to the many lesser-known films that she felt very strongly about, such as *Les Stances à Sophie* by Moshé Mizrahi, the films of Pierre Zucca, those of her husband (the sculptor Diourka Medveczky), or first films like Marion Vernoux's *Personne ne m'aime* or Olivier Peyron's *Les Petites vacances*.

In *Les Stances à Sophie*, she co-stars with Bulle Ogier, an actress with whom she worked quite often and a key figure in your film...

They were a bit like mirror-twins. Bernadette had become very famous at a time when Bulle was not, while Bulle was very avant-garde at a time when Bernadette was not. They had met thanks to *Les Idoles*, the play by Marc O' – later made into a movie – and it was the start of a life-long friendship between them, along with Jean-Pierre Kalfon, who also features in my film. Bernadette and Bulle were both muses of the French New Wave, yet they were both very different and embodied two different ways of escaping the traditional destiny mapped out for women of their time: Bulle, by way of a kind of evanescence, Bernadette through a mixture of eroticism and mischievousness.

Bernadette and Bulle had something else in common, the tragic loss of a daughter. How did you deal with such a delicate subject?

That was indeed a very difficult passage, but I really wanted it to be in the film. They had both been muses to women's freedom and in this regard they were both ill-treated by a certain section of the media in the wake of these tragic deaths. I wanted to underline the fact that they were in no way to blame. As well as wonderful actresses, they had also been wonderful mothers. I chose a piece of archive footage in which Patrick Poivre d'Arvor asks Bernadette: «How did you



manage to deal with such media hounding?» to which she answers: «I almost left France.» Which pretty much says it all.

How did you go about choosing the film excerpts from such an abundant filmography?

Over and above major films and key directors, I chose films that were more emblematic of Bernadette and her time. The idea was to tell the story of a woman who was really in touch with both cinema and the emancipation of women. *La Maman et la Putain* is a pure symbol of the late sixties. Yet in her private life, Bernadette was quite removed from the events of May '68, while epitomizing its spirit. I chose *Une Belle fille comme moi* from the point of view of the relationship between Bernadette and Truffaut, who was quite jealous when he saw her in *Les Stances à Sophie* and immediately wanted to do another movie with her. I also chose to show a lot of TV archive footage and used my sound interviews with Bernadette so that her voice could constitute the backbone of the film.

Was the real Bernadette different from the image she put across in her films?

Different, insofar as I met her later in life and the image I'd had of her was that of her youth. And I feel that was compounded by the fact that there was one «Bernadette» before the death of her daughter Pauline and another afterwards. Bernadette undoubtedly lived up to her sexy

woman image until she hit fifty. After that, it became more complex. She wanted to break with the sexual clichés people persisted in labelling her with. But her whole life long she remained open to others, curious and fond of genuine encounters. We shot a lot of the scenes in her family home in the Cevennes where her son and daughter-in-law now live. There, one can feel their family philosophy: a mix of simplicity, freedom and great purity of spirit.

What role did Bernadette Lafont play in the socio-political and especially feminist advancements of the sixties?

She wasn't a militant. She was brought up in a very free manner, especially by her mother, who gave a taste for independence. What's more, her milieu was one that encouraged reading. She cultivated herself by dipping into her parents' library. She simply had the assertive personality of an only girl reared as a boy. She embodied freedom quite naturally, in her way of being, rather than through rhetoric or militancy. Nothing could hold her back from making good her dream of being in the movies. She used to say that she was wedded to cinema. She had been a free woman before the height of the feminist movement in both her life choices and her career.

In a pre-feminist era of male domination, she had understood the rules of the game and respected them, while nonetheless following her own path and affirming her feminine freedom.



Her grand-daughters are present in your film. Was one of your underlying intentions to make her known to the younger generations?

Of course! She was so beautiful, so intelligent, so gracious and so caring. I hope this documentary will help restore her to her rightful place in cinema and introduce her to others, beyond the knowing circle of cinema-lovers. She is remembered of course for her leading roles in the films of the New Wave with directors like Truffaut, Eustache, Garrel and Rivette, but she also acted in a lot of mainstream movies, in the films of Jean-Pierre Mocky, in TV films and so on, which is a whole side of her work that film buffs tend to frown upon. Personally, I love the diversity of her filmography. I also hope that this actress, who embodied women's emancipation and freedom will strike a chord with the youth of today, because freedom can never be taken for granted.

Where would you place Bernadette in the movie actress pantheon?

Her strength was her androgyny. She had the body of a Bardot, but it was she who decided, not men. I'd compare Bernadette to Italian actresses of character, those assertive brunettes like Silvana Mangano, for example. But at the same time she was incomparable! She was rebellious by nature, she often reinvented her image. She played with her femininity, her image, with a taste for travesty. She had a vital need to act, to change her persona. So why this deep-seated need to be another? What was her intimate relationship to herself? That remains a mystery. But I feel one mustn't try to explain everything. On the contrary, one must preserve an element of mystery. In the words of Denise Glaser, the closer you get to people, the deeper their mystery becomes.





FEATURING

ANNA MEDVECZKY-LAFONT

Bernadette Lafont's granddaughter, daughter of her son David, grew up in the family home in the Cevennes. Intelligent, beautiful and out-going, with a physical likeness to her aunt Pauline, Anna's personality is in the true «Lafont» mould. Thanks to her passion for cinema, she grew very close to her grand-mother with whom she had a special relationship. Now a budding film-maker and producer, she also has a special bond with her grandfather, Diourka Medveczky. Anna speaks fondly of the affection and support that Bernadette gave her whole life long to Diourka, the father of her children, a talented sculptor who became a film-maker, and who retired from the world of cinema in 1972.



FEATURING BULLE OGIER

BULLE OGIER was first of all the young actress who fascinated Bernadette with her performance in Marc'O's pop musical *Les Idoles* in 1966. Yet from this meeting onwards, Bulle was to become her acting accomplice and faithful friend until the very end.

The film is structured with excerpts from the films they did together *Les Idoles*, the film version of the musical by Marc'O, *Pièges* by Jacques Baratier, *Les Stances à Sophie*, a major film, much overlooked, by Moshé Mizrahi, shot through with the radical feminism of Christiane Rochefort, and *Personne ne m'aime*, a first film by Marion Vernoux from 1994, in which they play two offbeat mothers, causalities from May '68.

Young mothers in real life, at a time when the pill didn't exist, Bulle and Bernadette embodied the most subversive forms of revolt and freedom anticipating May '68 and Women's Liberation. They were mothers ahead of their time, rearing their daughters with love and freedom in equal measure.



FEATURING JEAN-PIERRE KALFON

JEAN-PIERRE KALFON, a super-talented actor, still has a hint of the «rocker» look he first sported in Marc'O's *Les Idoles* alongside Bulle Ogier. Bernadette admired him immensely before going on to shoot with him and become his friend.

He reminisces about Bernadette and Diourka Medveczky while watching a home projection of *Paul* – Diourka Medveczky's one and only feature film – in the company of Anna Medveczky. In the film, Kalfon played Bernadette's husband, guru of a vegetarian sect. This was one of Bernadette's darkest roles and prefigures the wryness of *La Maman et la Putain*, in which she co-starred with Jean-Pierre Léaud.



FEATURING MICHEL DEMONTEIX

Michel Demonteix was 20 when he first met Bernadette, then just turned forty, on a TV set. She trusted him from the word go and their complicity grew into a friendship that lasted until her death.

Bernadette, unlike most of the leading actresses of her generation, changed both her look and her hairstyle quite a lot over the years. When she says: «I have a performance side to me...» what she is partly referring to is her flair for fashion and dressing up. With Michel's help, she created many different looks for herself, seeking the trueness of a role, her own truth, or simply for pleasure, as at Cannes.



BERNADETTE LAFONT (1938–2013)

BY OLIVIER PÈRE
HEAD OF THE ARTE FRANCE CINEMA UNIT

Bernadette Lafont was the «fiancée» of the French New Wave, one of the principal muses, along with Anna Karina and Stéphane Audran, of this wind of freedom and youth that swept through French cinema from the late fifties onwards.

This pretty young girl from Nîmes began her acting career under the wing of the maverick filmmakers who emerged from «Les Cahiers du Cinéma» whom she frequented upon arriving in Paris and who cast her in their first shorts and feature length movies.

In fact, it was François Truffaut who offered her first screen appearance in his famous short film *Les Mistons*, shot in Nîmes in 1957. She plays a sensual young woman on a bicycle, eyed up by the local rascals, alongside Gérard Blain, the new face in French cinema, (*Voici le temps des assassins* by Julien Duvivier starring Jean Gabin, released the previous year) whom she had just wed.

Although their marriage would last only two years, the couple did have time to co-star in another key film, *Le Beau Serge* (1958), Claude Chabrol's first feature. Bernadette Lafont worked with Chabrol once more on *Les Bonnes Femmes* in 1960. One of Chabrol's masterpieces, it was nonetheless slated upon release (considered to be misogynist and even Fascist). Bernadette Lafont, alongside Stéphane Audran and Clotilde Joano, plays to perfection the role of a salesgirl, Jane, a character that would long become her hallmark: that of a sexy, indolent and insolent young woman. Yet this racy brunette with the body of a pin-up girl and who idolizes Brigitte Bardot would paradoxically become the anti-star par excellence. Just like her male counterpart, Jean-Pierre Léaud, whom she was to team up with many times in front of the camera, Bernadette Lafont burst onto the scene with a body, and attitude and a sense of phrasing that were radically modern in the cinema of the 60s.

The young woman lays claim to a precious and explosive mixture of glibness inherited from the French popular actresses of the 1930s and nonconformist and anti-bourgeois rebelliousness, and undaunted, makes occasionally forays into the intellectual, poetic and avant-garde cinema that was flourishing at the time.

The New Wave filmmakers would remain faithful to Bernadette Lafont — and it was mutual — as she would continue to appear in their movies long after the movement had come to an end. François Truffaut offered her the lead role in *Une belle fille comme moi* in 1972, a year earlier she had taken part in the experimental adventure *Out 1* (a modern adaptation by Jacques Rivette of Balzac's *History of the Thirteen* — a partially improvised film some twelve and a half hours long) and she worked with Chabrol anew in *Violette Nozière*, *Inspecteur Lavardin* and *Masques*.

Bernadette Lafont, intelligent actress and avid movie-lover, played key roles in the films of many fellow travellers of, and heirs to, the New Wave, in particular in the movies of two of its most talented spiritual sons: Philippe Garrel and his sublime *Le Révélateur* (1968), a silent film poem from the director's Zanzibar period and *La Maman et la Putain* (1973) by Jean Eustache, a definitive masterpiece of the post-68 generation. A leading presence in French Auteur Cinema, whether

general public (*L'Effrontée* by Claude Miller) or underground (for example *Paul* by Diourka Medveczky, the actress's second husband), Bernadette Lafont whose comic repartee and sense of fantasy were inexhaustible, did not shy away from playing in more popular productions (for which she was in great demand until her death). Her greatest personal success was perhaps *La Fiancée du pirate* (1969) by Nelly Kaplan, a social comedy with anarchist and feminist overtones that dovetailed with her own ideas and personality. In the late '70s and during the '80s she «fleshed out» her filmography with wacky, quite forgettable, comedies very much in vogue at the time, whose titles really smack of the B-movie genre: *Le Trouble-fesses*, *Chaussette surprise*, *La Frisée aux lardons*, *Nous maigrirons ensemble*, *Arrête de ramer t'attaque la falaise*, *On n'est pas sorti de l'auberge...* Yet these monuments of cheesy humour did not in the least dim her credibility and popularity with moviegoers.

In the humour and farce department, it was perhaps Jean-Pierre Mocky who used Bernadette Lafont's talents to the full in a series of dark and cynical comedies, which, as always with Mocky, were pretexts for outstanding actorly performances: *Le Pactole*, *Les Saisons du plaisir*, *Une nuit à l'assemblée nationale*, *Ville à vendre*.

AWARDS :

CÉSAR AWARD FOR BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS – *L'EFFRONTÉE*, 1986

HONORARY CÉSAR AWARD FOR HER LIFE'S WORK, 2003

CÉSAR AWARD NOMINATION FOR BEST SUPPORTING ACTRESS – *PRÊTE-MOI TA MAIN*, 2007

GLOBE NOMINATION FOR BEST ACTRESS – *PAULETTE*, 2014



ESTHER HOFFENBERG

THE DIRECTOR

Esther Hoffenberg has been working as director and producer in France since 1980. With her production company LAPSUS she has produced over 60 documentaries, including films by internationally renowned filmmakers like Vitali Kanevski, Benoît Dervaux and Philippe Costantini, as well as film collections on art and design.

Since 2005, she has become increasingly involved in filmmaking, co-producing her own films.

VIOLETTE LEDUC, LA CHASSE A L'AMOUR (VIOLETTE LEDUC, IN PURSUIT OF LOVE)

Produced by Les Films du Poisson, ARTE-France, Lapsus and Vosges-TV
(France 2013 / 57')

Françoise Giroud Award for Best TV Portrait, France 2016

Best Documentary, Torino LGBT Film Festival 2014

Best Documentary, Some Prefer Cake, Bologna 2014

AU PAYS DU NUCLEAIRE (WELCOME TO NUCLEAR LAND)

Produced by The Factory and Lapsus (France 2009/74')

Special Mention, Festival International du Film de Santé, Liège 2012

DISCORAMA, SIGNÉ GLASER

Produced by INA/ LAPSUS (France 2007/ 67')

Star of la Scam, France 2008

LES DEUX VIES D'EVA (THE TWO LIVES OF EVA)

Produced by Les Films du Poisson, ARTE-France, Lapsus and Vosges-TV (France 2005 / 85')

Immaterial Patrimony Award, Cinema du Réel 2005

Best Documentary, Escales documentaires, La Rochelle 2005

COMME SI C'ETAIT HIER (AS IF IT WERE YESTERDAY)

Produced by Ping Pong Productions (Belgium 1980 / 86')

Co-directed with Myriam Abramowicz

Red Ribbon Award at the American Film Festival

Special Mention Femina Prize, Belgium



CREDITS

WITH THE PARTICIPATION OF:

BULLE OGIER, ACTRESS

JEAN-PIERRE KALFON, ACTOR

ANNA MEDVECZKY AND HER SISTERS **JULIETTE** ET **SOLÈNE**,

GRANDCHILDREN OF **BERNADETTE LAFONT**

MICHEL DEMONTEIX, A FRIEND OF **BERNADETTE'S**

LENGTH: **65 MINUTES** (FORMAT HD)

FORMAT DCP: **66 MINUTES**

YEAR OF PRODUCTION: **2016**

A FILM BY **ESTHER HOFFENBERG**

SCRIPT IN COLLABORATION WITH **CÉCILE VARGAFTIG**

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: **GERTRUDE BAILLOT**

SOUND: **BENJAMIN BOBER**

EDITING: **MURIEL BRETON**

SOUND MIX: **LAURENT THOMAS**

SET DESIGN: **HÉLÈNE USTAZE**

NARRATION: **ESTHER HOFFENBERG**

ORIGINAL SCORE: **DARIO RUDY**

LINE PRODUCER: **EMMANUELLE KOENIG**

GRAPHICS: **THOMAS FAGE**

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: **DELPHINE MOREAU**

COPRODUCTION:

LAPSUS (ESTHER HOFFENBERG)

INTHEMOOD (LAURENT ROTH, HUGUES LANDRY, PAUL CHAMPART)

IN COPRODUCTION WITH: **ARTE FRANCE**

UNITÉ ARTS ET SPECTACLES: **EMELIE DE JONG**

PROGRAMME MANAGER: **ISABELLE MESTRE CASADESUS**

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DÉPARTEMENT PRODUCTIONS AUDIOVISUELLES: **FABRICE BLANCHO**

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