

Chaz Productions
Present



AN IMPOSSIBLE LOVE

A film by
Catherine Corsini

with
Virginie Efira
Niels Schneider

135 min – France – French – 2018 – Scope – 5.1

International Sales

Le Pacte

5 rue Darcet
75017 Paris, France
www.le-pacte.com

SYNOPSIS

At the end of the 1950s, Rachel, a young office clerk living in a provincial town, meets Philippe, a well-educated man from a wealthy family. They share an intense but short-lived romance, from which a daughter is born. Over the next 50 years, their lives will be shaped by the unconditional love between a mother and her daughter, overshadowed by the impossible love of a woman for a man that rejects her, and of a daughter for an absent and abusive father.

Based on the acclaimed novel by Christine Angot, « Un Amour Impossible » (2015).

INTERVIEW WITH CATHERINE CORSINI

Which aspects of Christine Angot's book made you decide to adapt *Un amour impossible* for the big screen?

I hadn't read any of Christine Angot's books for a few years, and it was my producer, Elisabeth Perez, who drew my attention to *Un amour impossible*, insisting that it could be my kind of material. So I read it. She hit the mark, but I shied away from it, saying it was impossible to adapt for several reasons. I wondered how you could retrace almost an entire lifetime in two hours; whether the role of the mother should be played by several actresses, or by a single actress aged by make-up; and how to tackle incest from the point of view of a mother who can't see it's happening.

The material was scary in its scope, but I was fascinated by this woman who is at once modest yet strong, and by the mystery of her blindness in the face of a perverted man. In fact, from the very first lines, I wanted to film this story from end to end. During the writing, the question was raised of cutting it down, but I didn't want to. I wanted to take on everything which seemed difficult about it, like filming the passing of time. Rachel's life is a whole world in itself. It recounts something social and political about the periods it traverses. That's why making this film was a challenge that I found terrifically exciting. And what's more, my childhood resembles Christine Angot's in certain aspects.

Which elements did you think were like you?

Like her, I grew up surrounded by women at the turn of the 1960s, in a modest environment, in a time when society did not readily tolerate women who did not marry. I remember my aunts, who were burning in anticipation for love – one in particular, who spent her life waiting for a man who mistreated her. I remember those torn apart by unhappy relationships. My mother was a widow, and despite that, it was frowned upon to raise her daughter alone. Due to their environment and their education, these women did not feel allowed to live freely, and my generation emerged from that impediment.

Rachel is a resolutely modern woman. She is not ashamed about her daughter – which was rare at the time. She takes full responsibility for raising her alone, under the judgmental gaze of provincial society. From Rachel's point of view, her daughter has a father and is a child born out of love, which is what gives her the strength to fight so that Philippe would acknowledge paternity. It is this struggle that she pursues for years which subsequently becomes her blind spot. Once he acknowledges paternity, she doesn't realize, or cannot see, that she is offering her daughter to him. It is absolute perversion on the part of Philippe. The incest starts from this acknowledgement. There's something of a tragedy in the narrative,

but also of a thriller. It is utterly fascinating. At the moment Rachel thinks she has won, that's when she loses everything.

At the heart of the book is the mother-daughter relationship, a theme that I have wanted to tackle for a long time. In *Summertime*, I already touched on this complex relation, but it wasn't the core of the film. Here, it is central.

So you went there...

And strangely, it all happened quite quickly. My co-writer Laurette Polmanss and I thought it was best to handle the book like one would a film when you start editing, when you find yourself with all the rushes. We got stuck into all the material, then defined three main segments: the romance between Rachel and Philippe; the solitude of a woman getting back on her feet, continuing her life raising her daughter alone; and finally, the revelation of everything she hasn't seen, that horror which corrupts everything, including the relationship between mother and daughter.

Christine Angot is reputed for her radical style of writing, and yet *Un amour impossible* has a romantic side. It's a film about what happens and the results of choices past and present. About the layers of time, the ages of life. It seemed natural to opt for a certain "classicism", which allowed me open it out wider. Classicism also implies the refusal of making the spectator an emotional hostage, leaving them free to make up their mind. The events are already so complex to deal with.

I wanted to use the dryness of Christine Angot's writing to serve an apparently more classic film narrative, but which nonetheless preserves something of Angot's cleanness: cleanness in the cuts, the ellipses, the situations.

Did Christine Angot read the adaptation?

I was very flattered that Christine Angot agreed to sell us the rights to the book. She had seen *Summertime*, and some of my previous films. The contract that we signed included a clause granting her the right to read the script; we spent a day together reading it and discussing the choices we'd made. She was very respectful and left us totally free. She allowed me to correspond with her mother, Rachel, whom I did not want to meet for fear of being influenced by her appearance or personality. I don't know if she's a brunette, blonde, or redhead. I mainly asked her some questions about details of costumes or sets. She has a very clear memory of everything. There's no doubt about it, Rachel really was quite a character! You can tell from her writing. I showed her messages to Virginie and they helped us a lot. One can detect the rectitude and the dignity.

This woman whom I did not know, even after reading the book and the adaptation, remains a mystery; she inspired me and I did not want to betray her. Through her, I saw the destinies of many women.

Rachel is played by Virginie Efira. How did you cast her?

While writing, I didn't have any actress in mind. I hadn't thought of Virginie Efira, who I had never seen act. I met her at a festival where she was presenting *In Bed with Victoria*. There were two surprises; seeing her on screen, and talking to her. She impressed me with her intelligence. She had read the book and liked it, and was very surprised that I was offering her the part. I think she was looking for a role with that scope. Since Rachel is intelligent, with a very practical side, the challenge was finding not only an excellent actress to portray her, but also a partner with whom I could work hand in hand. As a result, we had a great deal of discussion about the character. Rachel does not give anything away, only showing any visible emotion on one single occasion, when Philippe says he's married. By contrast, she is paralyzed when she finds out her daughter is being abused by her father, and that is something that's very difficult to portray on screen. Virginie never falls back on facile emotions, her acting is very subtle. She sometimes reminds me of the heroines of Ozu – women making a sacrifice, yet who draw magnificent strength from it and who are always aware of this. Virginie maintains the character at the right distance, without the intimacy created with Rachel undermining this woman's exemplary dignity. When I offered her the role, I didn't yet know if Rachel would be played by one or two actresses. I was undecided about this for a long time. Transforming Virginie's face to that of a 70-year-old woman was not only a long and difficult task – six or seven hours in make-up every day – but was also a very random and high-risk process. I had to entrust the face of my leading lady to people who were going to transform it, and I was anxious to know if I would believe in it, if I would still want to film this new face. I realized that I was dreading seeing her; I was afraid you wouldn't be able to see the person behind the mask of make-up. Even during the editing, I put off working on the final part as long as possible.

Talking about that final scene, how did you approach it?

In the book, the explanation between mother and daughter runs over three days. It's epic. This posed the question of how to bring this explanation scene to life. There is the mother summoning her daughter, an explanation, a speech, and then a reconciliation. I wanted this to take place in a public space, so that one could feel the surrounding possibility of other lives, other secrets, other dramas. One listens differently in a café, it's a special kind of exchange, there's intimacy mixed with a public space. I remember some 20 years ago, in a bistro near Place de la République, I was surprised to inadvertently overhear a conversation between a mother and her daughter, the first telling the second: "He abused me." I thought it was unusual to make this confession in a public place, but this resonates now; with time, and having read the book, I understood there are some things you can only talk about when "protected" by the outside world.

I chose to film them very close-up, dissociating them through a shot/counter-shot, then isolating them in the space. That's why Virginie's make-up was so important, I had to be able

to get close to her. Then the camera moves around them to reunite them. In that scene, the daughter manages to get her mother to talk, whereas she has never said anything up till now. It seems absurd that this silence lasted so long. After all those years, Rachel finally manages to talk about her immense guilt. Chantal explains to her mother that she's not responsible for anything, and that by abusing her, he was also attacking the mother. At that point, it's not a settling of scores, but rather the social dimension of the drama that is revealed. This profoundly intimate story has its roots in class relations. These two women are both victims of the same narcissistic pervert. This is a key scene, one which is primordial: To escape the nightmare, they have to theorize their pain, and find meaning. It is not only an explanation; in a way, Chantal breaks out of her anger and offers her mother an olive branch. Rachel, who is at first like a child, looks at her daughter with concern, then gradually seems to work it out and understand. One can also imagine a more ambiguous reading of the scene, which I saw during the editing: Rachel recognizes the father's intelligence in her daughter, which injects a rather dizzying aspect into their discussion.

How did you come to cast Niels Schneider as this narcissistic pervert?

It was complicated, since some actors may well have been wary of such a role. Niels is an actor who likes to take risks. After giving him the script to read, I changed my mind, thinking he'd be too young for the role. But since he'd read the script, he wanted to do the screen tests. He'd worked on capturing the authenticity and ambiguity of the character. He did several scenes with Virginie, and each time, what was striking was the sense of evil hiding behind beauty which he managed to bring to the character. That brought a power to their relationship. During filming, he's the kind of actor who is anxious but almost religiously involved in his character. He would say to me: "I like working with you, and with Virginie, but this role, I want it to be over, it's atrocious." At the same time, he had to appear likeable on screen, Rachel had to be bewitched by him. Niels has a roguish side that the real Philippe – who in reality was called Pierre – no doubt did not have, at least not so much. The film is never on the side of this man; from start to finish, he only exists from Rachel's point of view. That's one of the reasons why there are no sordid scenes in the film. The only scene with the father and daughter in which there's a feeling of unease is when he goes into her hotel room to help pack her suitcase. You can sense his strange gaze weighing on her, and in the next shot, the teenage girl is dazed. Filming incest would have meant subjecting these women to violence twice – that wasn't what I set out to do, and is absolutely not my point of view.

How many actresses did you use to play the daughter?

Four, not counting the babies. I came across Estelle, who plays Chantal as a teenager, when she was six. She was the daughter of a friend who I had remarked, but then completely lost contact with until she showed up at the casting session. She had just turned 14 and surprised me with her maturity and sensitivity. I could talk openly with her about incest, which wasn't

the case with all the adolescent girls. Getting a teenager to play a young girl abused by her father without her understanding the implications put me in a morally untenable position. Estelle was an ideal partner in terms of her concentration and that teenage way of being so involved. She was absolutely impeccable.

For Virginie, having to act by turns opposite each of these girls was a different kind of challenge, especially since the interpretations were not so much a series of portraits but composite characters, which is why we decided to go from one to another without anything on screen signaling the change of actress. This is the opposite of, for example, what Jane Campion did in *An Angel at my Table*, when she used the character's red hair so she could be easily identified, which helped going from one age to another. I wasn't looking for likeness, but believability. It's a choice of belief in cinema.

Jehnnny Beth, who plays Chantal as an adult, has a certain resemblance to Christine Angot, but that's pure chance and it's not why I chose her. I liked her straight away for the way she delivers her lines. She's a singer, and she's a fresh face. It was important for me that the role would be played by someone unknown; she has what I'd call a "domesticated savagery" which suits the character.

Were Jane Campion's films among your reference when considering how to tackle *Un amour impossible*?

Of course, I thought of the masters of narrative, especially Jane Campion's *Bright Star*, but also Todd Haynes and Truffaut. To tell a story that spans practically a whole lifetime, with obviously some jumps in time, some ellipses, and ruptures in the timeline, one had to draw on all the tricks of cinema. We used every technique in the editing. Editor Frédéric Baillehaiche and I played with fades, superimposing, letters shown on screen, actors speaking direct-to-camera. Using a voice-over was essential, since it allowed us to make some major ellipses, to compress time, to underline a detail, or to unpack events. The voice-over also delivered Christine Angot's text, which provided the dryness which the story needed. The film is broken up into several phases – the classical pacing of the start, the romance, then the disillusionment, and the waiting, the control, the painful phase, and the fragmented process of awareness, when things move forward in jumps. The voice-over is the daughter's voice telling the story from the mother's point of view, so there are moments which she doesn't know about, when she invents. She becomes objective when it's a question of proven facts, and the voice-over becomes that of an omniscient narrator.

The passing of time meant often changing narrative technique. The film is constantly drawing on what cinema has to offer. The closer it gets to modernity, the less the voice-over is used. I also thought about the voice-over that Campion uses in *The Piano*, and the passing of time. I allowed myself to film some shots which are homages to the cineastes I love, like Demy and Pialat.

There was also the idea that this woman, Rachel, becomes the heroine of a film that she might have seen in Châteauroux in the 1950s; the idea of offering these modest women from the first part a “classical” film.

An Impossible Love is a film produced by a woman, written by two women, based on a book written by a woman, directed by a woman and which tells the story of two women. Is it a coincidence that it was completed just as, in recent months, women’s voices are gradually being more widely heard?

I started working on the film two years ago, so the timing is just a coincidence. Moreover, I’ve always worked with women, but also with men, and I hope that one day we won’t have to ask these questions and that equality will become natural. What’s more, I didn’t wait for the Weinstein affair to talk about women, activism, and male domination. Alienation was already a theme in *Leaving*. *An Impossible Love* comes along right in the middle of this very encouraging moment, with young women today questioning the codes of power, the masculine club. In a way, Rachel and Chantal’s story is an additional justification to today’s combat, corroborating it, further reinforcing its legitimacy, but the resistance is tenacious. Knowing that women today can denounce their aggressor frees them from that feeling of guilt which holds them back.

Rachel and Chantal are women who overcome their wounds. They both succeed in not being crushed; it’s a wonderful example of courage and intelligence, because it’s thinking that saved them.

CATHERINE CORSINI

Director and co-writer

Biography

Catherine Corsini directed three short films in the early 1980s, all of which won awards. Her first feature-length film, *Poker*, was released in 1988. She then directed *Interdit d'amour* and *Lovers* starring Pascal Cervo and Nathalie Richard, which was presented in the Cinema in France section at Cannes in 1994. The following year, *Youth without God* also screened in the same Cannes selection. Corsini became known to a wider public with *The New Eve* in 1999 starring Karin Viard. *La Répétition*, starring Emmanuelle Béart and Pascale Bussières, screened in Competition at the Festival de Cannes in 2001. Her next film was *The Very Merry Widows* with Jane Birkin and Émilie Dequenne. In 2007, she reteamed with Karin Viard, who starred opposite Éric Caravaca in *Les Ambitieux*. Her seventh film, *Leaving*, starring Kristin Scott Thomas, Sergi Lopez, and Yvan Attal, was a hit both in France and abroad. *Three Worlds* starring Raphaël Personnaz and Clotilde Hesme, which screened in Un Certain Regard in 2013, won the Bayard d'or award for best screenplay in Namur. *Summertime* won the Prix Variety de la Piazza Grande in Locarno, and its stars, Cécile de France and Noémie Lvovsky, were both nominated for César awards in 2016. Her latest film, *An Impossible Love*, adapted from Christine Angot's latest novel, starring Virginie Efira and Niels Schneider, will be released in France this year.

Filmography

Feature Films

2018	AN IMPOSSIBLE LOVE
2015	SUMMERTIME
2012	THREE WORLDS
2009	LEAVING
2007	LES AMBITIEUX
2003	THE VERY MARRY WIDOWS
2001	LA RÉPÉTITION
1999	THE NEW EVE
1994	LOVERS
1988	POKER

INTERVIEW WITH VIRGINIE EFIRA

Had you read Christine Angot's book before Catherine Corsini offered you the role of Rachel?

I read it when it was published and was overwhelmed. But beyond its evident qualities, I was really struck by Angot's very moving approach. Why did she write this book? Why did she tell the mother's story? Why did she describe the mother's dreadful experience of incest? As I tried to understand and work it out, I discovered a wonderful declaration of love to her mother. But her inferiority complex chimed most with my own feelings. Rachel is blinded by it, which is why she can't see where her daughter's pain is coming from. Not feeling confident in oneself, in one's own judgement, having a strong enough feeling of intellectual inferiority that you accept some kind of humiliation was something I could relate to. Perhaps that stems from having come from Belgium to France or moving from TV to cinema and imagining people might perceive me as somehow inferior.

Were you surprised that Catherine Corsini thought of you for the part?

When I knew the book was being adapted, for the first time in my life I sent my agent a message saying that role was for me. I remember thinking that in doing that, I'd really become an actress. But at the same time, I thought I was probably too obviously healthy for them to offer me the part. I'm also pretty sure that if VICTORIA hadn't happened, Catherine would never have thought of me. After a screening of VICTORIA in a festival, she smiled at me for the first time. It also could be that my connection with Justine Triet, which is so obvious in VICTORIA, changed her mind about me: She was looking for a person as much as an actress, and told me as much. As a result, I was very confident testing for Catherine, and I really wanted it to work out.

Did you see it as a challenge for an actress to play a character through different times in her life?

One thing I know for sure is that you can't act what you don't understand. Not to mention that at first, I didn't know if I was also going to be playing Rachel as an old woman because Catherine hadn't yet decided whether she was going to bring in a different actress or not. But apart from that, yes, over time, the character evolves. Her appearance changes as the years pass, the vase takes some knocks and cracks appear, which we humans call wrinkles. Young Rachel certainly has a kind of candor, but that spontaneity gradually fades and disappears. This is a woman living in a world where men dominate, whose Jewish origins are sometimes a constraint, who comes from a modest background and who didn't go to university. She probably appeals to people who are quite capable of bringing her down. She's the type who might go looking for the bad guy. But whatever happens, you are allowed to judge the guy she picks and say that he acted badly. Very badly. With Catherine and Niels

(Schneider), who plays Philippe, that's how we worked – by trying to understand what draws her to him, to guess what happens between them on an intimate level. It seems Rachel has no sex life outside of him. He's not like any other man she knows: He's perverted and manipulative, and yet she doesn't go looking for someone else. For Niels, it was about finding that intimacy without which he wouldn't have been able to grasp the character. That said, the biggest victim in the story is the daughter, much more so than her mother. I read all the emails Catherine exchanged with the real Rachel, who writes in an extremely humble way. She knows the meaning of words and she chooses them with care. She exudes intelligence and demonstrates true kindness without affectation. I wrote her to tell her I was thinking of her, and she replied. She didn't say she wanted to meet me, and that was fine: people need to know how to free themselves from events, whilst striving to understand them. Rachel is a decent person, she holds herself upright, and our physical attitude always reflects our mental state. Once I'd intimately understood the character, I had to start thinking about how people spoke in the 1960s, and how they behaved in different circumstances. On set, Catherine, script editor Bénédicte Darblay, DP Jeanne Lapoirie, and I were constantly talking, experimenting without worrying about digressing, discussing, and starting again. In reality, everything gradually came together. I felt a real bond with Catherine, and I actually said to her after one take that I'd delivered my line like Virginie Efira would have done and not how Rachel would have. Such harmony is rare on a shoot, and until now, I'd never experienced it outside of VICTORIA.

The role required you appear aged on screen. Does one perform differently when one looks different?

Without wanting to complain about my lot – on the contrary in fact – I first have to say that make-up like that requires six hours of work by the make-up artists, and that means six hours of sitting still for me, and all that before the eight or ten hours of shooting. It makes me truly grateful that radio was invented! Apart from that, seeing an aged version of myself didn't really bother me that much. It was just one idea of old age among others, and it could have been worse! True, you feel like you're wearing a mask, and everyone is staring at you all day like you've just had really bad plastic surgery. But you also have to use that discomfort in your performance. I was careful to walk very slowly until I realized 65-year-olds don't actually walk that slow. To be honest, I was warier of the scenes where Rachel was young. I was worried about the vanity of being 40 and playing a 20-year-old. How can you build a character on that? I think one shouldn't try to be an actor. You just have to act. And in any case, there's no such thing as a mask of youth.

VIRGINIE EFIRA

Selective filmography

CINEMA

- 2018 **AN IMPOSSIBLE LOVE** by Catherine Corsini
SINK OR SWIM by Gilles Lellouche
KEEP GOING by Joachim Lafosse
LA PREMIERE SEANCE by Justine Triet
BLESSED VIRGIN by Paul Verhoeven
- 2017 **NOT ON MY WATCH** by Emmanuelle Cuau
- 2016 **HALF SISTER, FULL LOVE** by Marion Vernoux
IN BED WITH VICTORIA by Justine Triet
UP FOR LOVE by Laurent Tirard
HER by Paul Verhoeven
- 2015 **CAPRICE** by Emmanuel Mouret
THE SENSE OF WONDER by Eric Besnard
UNE FAMILLE À LOUER by Jean-Pierre Améris
- 2013 **DEAD MAN TALKING** by Patrick Ridremont
IT BOY by David Moreau
LES INVICIBLES by Frédéric Berthe
COOKIE by Léa Fazer
TURNING TIDE by Christophe Offenstein
- 2011 **LA CHANCE DE MA VIE** by Nicolas Cuche
MON PIRE CAUCHEMAR by Anne Fontaine
- 2010 **KILL ME PLEASE** by Olias Barco
L'AMOUR C'EST MIEUX À DEUX by Dominique Farrugia and Arnaud Lemort
LE SIFFLEUR by Philippe Lefebvre

NIELS SCHNEIDER

Selective filmography

CINEMA

- 2018 **AN IMPOSSIBLE LOVE** by Catherine Corsini
SYMPATHY FOR THE DEVIL by Guillaume de FONTENAY
LE CAHIER NOIR by Valeria SARMIENTO
CURIOSA by Lou JEUNET
ONE NATION, ONE KING by Pierre Schoeller
- 2017 **SLEEPING BEAUTY** by Ado Arrietta
DALIDA by Lisa Azuelos
- 2016 **POLINA** by Valérie Müller and Angelin Preljocaj
DARK INCLUSION by Arthur Harari
César of Most Promising Actor 2017 and Jury Prize 2016 at Beaune Film Festival
KOKORO by Vanja d'Alcantara
- 2014 **GEMMA BOVERY** by Anne Fontaine
- 2013 **YOU AND THE NIGHT** by Yann Gonzalez
- 2012 **ATOMIC AGE** by Helena Klotz
- 2010 **HEARTBEATS** by Xavier Dolan
- 2009 **I KILLED MY MOTHER** by Xavier Dolan

CAST

Rachel	Virginie Efira
Philippe	Niels Schneider
Chantal – Adult	Jehnnny Beth
Chantal – Teenager	Estelle Lescure
Chantal 3/5 yo	Ambre Hasaj
Chantal 6/8 yo	Sasha Alessandri-Torrès Garcia
Gaby	Iliana Zabeth
Nicole	Coralie Russier
Franck	Gaël Kamilindi
Alain	Simon Bakhouché
The grand-mother	Catherine Morlot
The doctor	Pierre Salvadori
Philippe's father	Didier Sandre

CREW

Director **Catherine Corsini**
Screenwriter **Catherine Corsini**
Laurette Polmans
Based on the novel of **Christine Angot**
Original Score **Grégoire Hetzel**
Cinematography **Jeanne Lapoirie**
Editing **Frédéric Baillehaiche**
Sound **Olivier Mauvezin**
Benoît Hillebrant
Christophe Vingtrinier
Settings **Toma Baqueni**
Costumes **Virginie Montel**
Assistant director **Romarc Thomas**
Production manager **Christophe Grandière**
Producer **Elisabeth Perez**
Co-producers **Patrick Quinet**
Anne-Laure and Jean Labadie
Production **CHAZ Productions**
Coproduction **France 3 Cinéma**
Artémis Productions
Le Pacte
VOO & BETV
RTBF (Télévision Belge)
Shelter Prod
With the participation of **CNC**
France Télévisions
Canal +

Ciné +
La Région Île de France
La SACEM
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Tax Shelter du Gouvernement Fédéral de
Belgique
In association with **Indéfilms 6**
Cinémage 12
Cineventure 3
Sofitvcine 5
French Distribution and International Sales **Le Pacte**