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PRESENT



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FILM D'OUVERTURE

GÉRARD DEPARDIEU

DÉBORAH LUKUMUENA

**R O B U S T**

A FILM BY  
CONSTANCE MEYER

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# SYNOPSIS

George is an aging film star in decay. Aïssa, a semi-pro wrestler who earns a living as a security officer, has a hard time handling her love life. When George's right-arm man and only friend takes a leave of absence for several weeks, Aïssa is immediately appointed as his replacement. Between this pragmatic young lady bodyguard and our disenchanted renowned actor, a singular bond begins to take root. Despite their individual differences, life has shaped them in ways more similar than they thought.





# INTERVIEW WITH CONSTANCE MEYER

***Robust* is your first feature film, how did you come up with the idea for the film and how does it relate to the short films you made before?**

Like my short films, *Robust* explores the meeting of two characters, two worlds, two solitudes. As for the idea of the film, it originates in an image. I had in mind the image of a robust man fainting in the arms of a woman who carries him, saves him. Like an inverted gallant scene. It is this micro-situation - the abandonment of a man in the arms of a woman - that is at the origin of the film. It was then necessary to unravel this image to make a story out of it.

**You have directed short films with Gérard Depardieu and you were assistant on *Bellamy* (Claude Chabrol, 2009) and *Dumas* (Safy Nebbou, 2010). We imagine that it was during these experiences that you had the idea of a feature film with him?**

Actually, I met Gérard Depardieu before, when I used to work in theater. Then I studied for three years at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, where Spike Lee is the artistic director. It was an incredible experience, the school brings together a lot of people from different countries and cultures. There

are no departments there (directing, editing, screenplay...). We do everything in turn. We had to make a film of a few minutes without dialogue, that marked me a lot - telling a story without words. The second year we had to make a longer film and I wrote *Frank-Etienne Towards Grace* (2012), thinking about Marina Foïs and Gérard Depardieu - I was lucky enough to shoot with these two extraordinary actors. From there, a collaboration between Gérard and myself began. But the idea of *Robust* came much later.

**We can guess why you chose Depardieu: the greatest living French actor, a star, a sacred monster... What were your reasons for choosing Déborah Lukumuena?**

I wanted to film the meeting of two actors, Gérard and Déborah. I discovered Déborah through her films. I was struck by the intelligence of her acting and by what she exuded. I found a great sensuality in her that attracted me and made me want to film her in a different way. I'm very interested in the actors' bodies, in the way they move and in the emotion it produces. And then Déborah has a magnificent voice, very soft, very calm. I wanted to film this, this softness and this solidity.

**The fact that the character of Georges is quite close to Depardieu's experience, was it present from the beginning of the project?**

It came naturally. I asked myself: this actor who has played everything, what would happen if he played a character that resembled himself? I am struck by the relationship that Gérard has with death - his excess with life, of vitality, which is in a way, to have dialogue with death. This is one of the dimensions that inspired the character of Georges.

Georges is therefore impregnated with what I have observed of Gérard, but after passing through the filter of writing, and then through image and sound, what actually remains is an incarnation, a character. He is both himself and someone else.

When I watch Wajda's *Danton* or Ridley Scott's *1492: Conquest of Paradise*, I don't see Danton or Christopher Columbus, I see Depardieu playing, enjoying himself, inviting himself into the lives of these historical figures. And that is his genius. He does not try to stick to a reality, he constantly reinvents. Therefore, playing someone who looks like him or someone who is very far from him, I think it doesn't change much. It's acting, so it's fiction.

I find it very moving to see an actor exist to that extent. Gerard is self-documenting through all the roles that he plays. It doesn't go through the brain. He has total and absolute access to acting, just like a child playing a game. He goes from reality to fiction in a fraction of a second. He is an amphibian actor.

**We can feel that Déborah Lukumuena also gives a lot of herself in this film.**

Yes, I think so. If only because of the long physical preparation she went through for the wrestling sequences. Having said that, I was not really interested in the sports performance itself. What I liked about wrestling was the animal dimension of the face to face, these arched bodies that turn around. It's violent but very sensual. And it is also a very beautiful sound show: the rubbing, the breaths, the percussions of hands and feet on the carpet. What Déborah has given goes beyond this sporting investment. Before I met her, I listened to radio programmes with her and this influenced the character of Aïssa. Déborah's life is very different from Aïssa's, but there is a closeness between her and the character, perhaps in her way of mastering certain situations, of apprehending her body and the look of others. That said, Déborah is more volcanic than Aïssa, she reacts more strongly to things. For certain scenes I said to her «there you must be a little sweeter as in a dream, more in restraint...». I believe that in a certain way she reveals her softness in this character. One could say that, like Gérard, she has documented herself through this role.

**In this film you explored the eternal triangle of actor-person-character?**

Yes. The difficulty lies in doing this work with modesty. I like the actors to know what they are giving. I like the ambiguity that emerges from the underground dialogue between the actor and the role.

**Depardieu, we have the impression that we already know him well, even if you bring him into areas of vulnerability and intimacy, whereas we have the feeling that we are discovering Deborah, who is a newer face and therefore more mysterious than Gérard.**

It was very important for me that we get attached to Aïssa as much as to Georges, that a balance exists between the two characters. As with Gérard, I wanted to show Deborah in a way we hadn't seen her before. Déborah is an extremely technical actress with great endurance. During the shooting I saw her working, concentrating. I really admire that, that total dedication to the character. It was exciting to watch her and to see how the two of them played together. Déborah and Gérard are two strong personalities but they managed to really look at each other and make room for each other.

**Everything opposes Aïssa and Georges, with one exception that we will also examine. Did you want to make a film that was «inclusive» in terms of gender, race, social status, in line with the current state of French society?**

If this film questions the way we look at each other, and the way this look can evolve, then I may have succeeded in something. But I don't write with the aim of sending a message about society. My commitment is to love my characters as accurately as possible and to make them exist in all their complexity. I believe Chekhov said that a work is successful when it does not answer questions, but asks them correctly. What I like most is to film

characters who learn to watch each other, educate and elevate each other, and whose encounter leads them elsewhere. I like Aïssa and Georges to be the negative and the positive of each other, to reveal themselves in the photochemical sense of the word. I was dreaming to see Déborah in my film, without this desire necessarily becoming a political banner. An almost invisible recognition is woven between my two characters and for me it is stronger than anything else. When Aïssa says to Georges «you, you play, I secure perimeters», she teaches Georges to consider her correctly. I wanted Déborah to communicate this reply gently because Aïssa is sure of herself. It is also a way of sending Georges back to a reality that he may have lost sight of. The old world facing the new world.

**The common point between these two characters and actors is their corpulence, indicated in the title. Did you want to break the**

**dominant codes of cinema and society that equate beauty with thinness?**

This dimension comes into play, but once again, I don't make it a standard. One can see a breaking of codes, but it is above all a matter of taste - my taste in this case. Robustness is the theme of the film, but not necessarily robustness in the aesthetic sense. Of course, I wanted to show the grace that emanates from their bodies, but I was also interested in revealing the fragility behind their stoutness. The contradictions interest me and I said to myself «it's beautiful to see this man who seems to have lived 150 lives and to see this woman who seems to be so combative, who fights, and to realize that inside these two beings something else is at play». Their vulnerability - the feeling of love for Aïssa, the proximity to death for Georges: it is these flaws that interested me, rather than limiting myself to the observation of robust bodies that we don't see



enough of in the cinema, even if it is true.

**Robust is also about psychological robustness, that of the characters as well as that of the two actors?**

Yes, for me, robustness is the strength of life. At the beginning of the film, Georges is flirting with death and it is in his meeting with Aïssa that he comes back to life. Aïssa, on the other hand, comes a little closer to herself and to a form of maturity by leaving behind a love relationship from which she expected nothing, and by leaving aside the requirement of sports performance, of victory. Her body no longer needs to be useful, to win.

**How would you define their relationship: platonic love? modest friendship? familial relationship?**

None of the above. I have the impression that their relationship can only exist in a given time, which is the time of the film - the time of this professional, daily and, in the end, intimate encounter. Cinema allows to make the impalpable palpable, to make visible the small oscillations of the soul.

Melancholy, failure and the resulting humour, attract me more than successes and flamboyant dramas. In a way they get closer without necessarily kissing or sleeping together. We experience the turmoil that arises from this encounter, with the small shockwaves that come from it, but without necessarily making it a spectacular tsunami. Their relationship could be summarized as a re-learning for George and a learning for

Aïssa. I like to play with the fact that the film fills in all the expected boxes of the love encounter.

**At one point in the film, Aïssa saves Georges.**

Yes, let's say that she saves him symbolically. He abandons himself in her arms and at her touch he catches his breath. It is this scene that sealed the film for me. She helps Georges to breathe and in a way she grows through it.

**You wrote the film for Déborah and Gérard, but you had to convince them. Was it easy ?**

For Déborah, my producer sent the script to her agent, she read it, she liked it. We met in a café, and at one point I said to her, «Can you show me your hands?» because I love to film hands. She looked at me a bit puzzled... For me, it was a huge stake, because it was Deborah or nobody. Later, I introduced her to Gérard and we did a first reading: I didn't want them to «play», I just wanted to hear their voices, watch their gestures and movements. Déborah did not try to give everything, she came as she was, a little intimidated perhaps, but very much in her place, very much anchored. And that day I «saw» my two characters.

**Was Gérard worried or on the contrary touched that the role was so close to him?**

I would say a mixture of both... Gerard doesn't give his trust easily. He read the script, we talked and he must have sensed what kind of film I wanted to make, and that I wasn't going to use elements of his life and twist them in a voyeuristic way. When things

are worked out - written, staged; it no longer has a close relationship with reality, it is a collective work of fiction. And Gérard knows it, he feels it. Especially since we had already worked together.

**How did you work with Simon Beaufiglioli, the director of photography?**

I had seen his films (those of Yann Gonzalez and Justine Triet, in particular), and he had done many very different things, which I liked. He has an immense cinematographic culture and a great love of his craft. We shot with old optics that give grain and substance to the image. I had total confidence in his eye. Simon always works with the same team of grips and electricians and he is a very good camera-man, everything is thought out, thorough. For me it was essential to anchor the film in a fictional and aesthetically mastered universe, to leave no room for improvisation. All the more so since it is a film that is essentially shot indoors. I needed a cinematographer who knew how to create an atmosphere of suspense, a dreamlike atmosphere, a slight detachment from reality. Simon understood this dimension very well and gave me a lot of artistic input. With him, we worked two months beforehand on the cut, we dissected each scene. We found the setting of the house in the 16th arrondissement of Paris quite early on and that was a determining factor - there were windows everywhere, and this semi-circular living room. We re-worked the cut according to this very particular decor.

**How did you choose Anita Roth, your editor?**



She has edited all my short films! She has been my collaborator from the beginning. We log everything, even the unselected takes, and I choose every edit I like. Once we've done that work, she can then handle all the material freely. I usually don't do many takes, so we didn't have an inordinate amount of material. The main aspect of the editing work with Anita was to find the right balance between Aïssa's and Georges' universe, to experience the evolution of their relationship, and to lighten or purify the little poetic interludes that I call «vignettes.» (For example, there were suspended moments where the gardener was trimming trees, where Georges was walking on his treadmill in the night, and more wrestling practice for Aïssa).

**You chose BABX for the soundtrack. Can you introduce him?**

I love his work. He sings, writes, produces, and arranges, he's really a complete musician. A real artist. I don't think he had done any film music before. We talked a lot before the shooting, did some tests, and in the end, the music is only composed of voices. We wanted something pure and very emotional and intimate. So there is not a single instrument other than the voice in his compositions. David was inspired by some of William Blake's texts for the lyrics. Then he started to make a demo of the choirs with a special software that he kept and mixed with the voices of the singers that we recorded afterwards. At certain moments, as the scene of the aquarium, we kept the «false» voices of the software, which gives an even more

strange and dreamy aspect.

**Now that the film is finished, do you feel that it looks like what you had imagined when you wrote it?**

The film resembles a lot to what I imagined while writing it. The only difference is that there is less dialogue in the scenes, and three or four scenes cut in the editing. But in the rhythm, in the atmosphere, there is a similar progression of characters and their emotions. It is interesting to realize that after all this human, technical and artistic journey, we come back to the root of the film, as if the film already contained its own personality.



## CAST

<b>Georges</b>	G�rard DEPARDIEU
<b>A�ssa</b>	D�borah LUKUMUENA
<b>Eddy</b>	Lucas MORTIER
<b>Cosmina</b>	Megan NORTHAM
<b>Adeline</b>	Florence JANAS
<b>Lalou</b>	Steve TIENTCHEU
<b>Gabriel</b>	Th�odore LE BLANC

# CREW

Director	Constance MEYER
Screenwriter & dialogues	Constance MEYER in collaboration with Marcia ROMANO
Produced by	Isabelle MADELAINE
Photography	Simon BEAUFILS
Editing	Anita ROTH
Script supervisor	Clémentine SCHAEFFER
Casting director	Judith CHALIER
Assistant director	Nicolas GUILLEMINOT
Original soundtrack	David BABIN (BABX)
Set design	Julia LEMAIRE
Sound	Jean-Pierre DURET, Antoine BAUDOUIN, Agnès RAVEZ, Fanny WEINZAEPFLEN
Costumes	Carole CHOLLET
Production director	Cécile REMY-BOUTANG
Location manager	Sébastien DELEPINE
A production	DHARAMSALA
In coproduction	FRANCE 2 CINÉMA, SCOPE PICTURES
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