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COMPÉTITION
SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE 2023

THE POT AU FEU

A FILM BY TRẦN ANH HÙNG

SCREENPLAY, ADAPTATION AND DIALOGUES BY TRẦN ANH HÙNG

Duration: 2 hours 14 minutes

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Synopsis

1885. Peerless cook Eugenie has worked for the famous gourmet Dodin for the last 20 years. As time went by, the practice of gastronomy and mutual admiration turned into a romantic relationship.

Their association gives rise to dishes, one more delicious than the next, that confound even the world's most illustrious chefs. But Eugenie is fond of her freedom and has never wanted to marry Dodin. So, he decides to do something he has never done before: cook for her.

INTERVIEW WITH **TRAN ANH HUNG**

Talk to us about the origin of your film ...

I had been looking for a subject that has to do with gastronomy, both as a profession and an art.

I eventually found a magnificent book about gastronomy, *The Life and Passion of Dodin-Bouffant, Gourmet* by Marcel Rouff.

Marcel Rouff's novel begins with the sudden death of Eugénie Chatagne after her return home from the market. But you preferred to present her alive, alongside Dodin.

I preferred telling the story as a prequel to Marcel Rouff's novel. That gave me the freedom to imagine the relationship between Eugénie and Dodin Bouffant. And it was also an opportunity to explore something rare in the cinema: conjugality. And even rarer when it works.

There is in this couple an otherness and complicity unusual at the beginning of the twentieth century...

Yes, it is marvelous to see people their age, in their *autumn years* as Dodin would say, with a lust for life that I would describe as being classically French. No romance or burning passion, just something ordered and restrained in a calm relationship with the world and nature. I appreciate the *douceur* and *measure* found in French art and mentality. In that sense, I think that my film is eminently French.

The only thing that separates them is the marriage that Dodin proposes to Eugénie and that she refuses: a barrier that you practically elevate to the level of mystery.

The beauty of their relationship resides in that resistance. Dodin is still smitten with her after all these years because he feels that he has never possessed her in her entirety. A part of her still resists.

All that is only hinted at. I like to create moments where one of the protagonists – like the audience – hovers in suspense, with no definite answer. Those are the things that touch us most in life: moments when we are not quite sure what our interlocutor is trying to say to us. I am for example especially fond of the sequence in which Eugénie and Dodin share an omelet, just before her death. It is a very bizarre scene: Dodin has no idea what she is getting at.

On the other hand, once it is a question of food, they are in perfect communion. Is Eugénie Dodin's wife, or is she his cook? Eugénie decides : she is his cook... That is the source of their chemistry; it raises gastronomy to high art...

What is art other than an ability to enjoy? Gastronomy focuses on a sense foreign to the other arts: taste.

A gastronomic artist can differentiate between flavors that we are unable to distinguish so precisely; to blend, measure, balance flavors, scents, textures, consistencies, and temperatures...

It is a science, like the cinema... And so, we hear Dodin explain how and why egg whites beaten in a certain way will conserve the frostiness of ice cream in a dessert ...

Brillat-Savarin was the first to write a book about the philosophy of gastronomy. A marvelous book you absolutely must read. It inspired much of my film. We learn how at a given moment in time, France put order into gastronomy. It was the French who decided that a dish should be prepared in one way and not another. It was the French who decided how to set a table, what silverware and which glasses to use with each dish. And it was the French who advocated marrying flavors by complementing this dish with this or that wine. France has such a rich and varied *terroir*. It is no coincidence that French gastronomy remains the top-ranked in the world.

Dodin often refers to Antonin Carême, Talleyrand’s chef, as his model. And to Auguste Escoffier as well, who “makes us dream the future” ...

I thought it was important to give a precise idea of the succession of gastronomic geniuses in the period: only thirteen years separate the death of Antonin Carême and the birth of Auguste Escoffier who, with César Ritz and his grand hotels, built an empire of culinary art in Europe – first in Monaco, then in London and finally Paris. Escoffier and Ritz were the first to understand the importance of a beautiful venue, of lighting to highlight the cuisine. Even today, in the middle of an existential crisis, the greatest chefs in the world consult Escoffier’s tome to find inspiration and energy. His book is their Bible.

The first scenes take place at dawn in a vegetable patch while Eugénie gathers the vegetables to be used in the day’s meal. Above and beyond a love letter to gastronomy, the film is a true ode to life and the changing seasons...

I thought it was important for Eugénie to search for food at its source: and early in the morning for us to sense the farmer’s labor, the first prerequisite of a meal. At the same time, I thought it would be fun to show the bronze antenna topped with zinc that Eugénie finds in Pauline’s parents’ garden. It is a technique invented by French monks and that is good for the soil, much like today’s permaculture and organic farming. Farmers abandoned it long ago for pesticides. And of course, I needed exterior greenery to convey the serenity provided by nature and the changing seasons... Dodin is delighted to welcome winter with its own gastronomy and the presence of the people he loves.

Three-star chef Pierre Gagnaire served as consultant on the film. How did he become involved in the adventure?

We didn’t know each other. Patrick Rambourg introduced me to him. He was working on the screenplay as a historical advisor on the subject of gastronomy, and I asked him who he thought could do it. He mentioned Pierre Gagnaire. “Go see him, he said, *he’s delightful*”.

Pierre and I first met in his kitchen, where he invited me to taste a marvelous pot au feu on the menu that day. We began working together during preparation. He picked and chose dishes from the menus that Patrick Rambourg and I had drawn up: “*That’s good, not the foggiest what this is, forget this...*” And then the moment arrived. He had to cook the dishes so that I could see what they would be like to film. It was moving to see him at the stove: he tries, he may make mistakes, he begins again until he has found just what he wants. He is a dreamer; truly generous and sincere. We were all thrilled when Pierre agreed to play the role of the Prince of Eurasia’s culinary *officier de bouche*.

Did he participate in all the cooking we see in the film?

No, he was too busy. He prepared all the dishes that would appear in the film during pre-production. I had to understand the dishes and make sure that they were interesting to film. Once that was done, Michel Nave took over on location. Michel Nave had worked for Pierre for more than forty years and had just retired. Without Michel, Pierre would never have agreed to work on the film. He knew how much work would be involved on location. Imagine, just to film the pot au feu, Michel Nave had to manipulate forty kilos of meat: raw meat to prepare and cook, meat already cooked and ready to be sliced, ready to be plated... It was a colossal, endless task. At times even a balancing act. For the ortolan scene, in which he used miniature quails (ortolans being a protected species), he had to work behind our set in a dusty dilapidated hole in the wall, standing on a pile of rubble, one foot lower than the set, and on a butane stove! He loved it. He thought it was invigorating. *"In my life, he laughed, I've frequently complained about working conditions, but this takes the cake!"*

We've rarely seen food filmed like this...

You're right. Even the technical crew couldn't get over it. They'd never seen anything like this either. On film shoots, they usually use phony food, *relooked* as needed. Here everything was real.

Without playing on words, you can *smell* that...

Yes, and the actors got involved too. When I shouted *"Cut!"* during a meal sequence, they went on eating. The prop crew had to implore them to surrender their plates. *"We need them to reset the table"*, they'd say.

How do you film gastronomy in action?

That's very complex, even during preproduction. You need to synchronize all the comings and goings, from stove to sink, from one work surface to the next. To imagine what Violette, Dodin and Pauline are up to while Eugénie is arranging braised lettuce around a rack of veal for example. We need to know that when she moves, she will be carrying this or that utensil. That Dodin will be using another... Genuine choreography. And a real pain in the neck.

You shot with only one camera. How did you do that?

There are two kinds of directors: the technical director and the director who couldn't care less. My own cinematographic ambition is to belong to the first category. I like to plot my character and camera's movements, which helps me to create an interesting cinematic flow. Within that layout, in one shot you can pass from an extreme close up to a wider angle, from a fluid moment to a moment of rest, and so on. In a very musical manner.

It was particularly difficult, even nerve-wracking for the actors. When off frame, they had to watch for the right moment to enter the frame while the camera was moving. They determined the rhythm. I was in their hands. I was lucky to have such marvelous actors.

Did you immediately think of Juliette Binoche and Benoît Magimel for Eugénie and Dodin?

I immediately thought of Juliette. Benoît later. Juliette has unbelievable presence. Once she appears, everything becomes real, interesting, moving. Since she is a modern, committed woman in real life, she brings to the character an interior strength that makes her resistance to Dodin's desires all the more palpable. She may not be aware of it, but when she was with us, discipline improved on set. And to be honest, the film would never have been made without her help. She remained committed to the project through thick and thin.

Benoît came later, in the nick of time. He was a great stroke of luck. He is the most relaxed, amusing actor I've ever worked with. He has a great talent for relaxing and letting go. He is easy to work with. We occasionally reworked dialogues when he didn't feel comfortable with a line. I'd rewrite it a few minutes before filming, and we were off.

Bringing them together again after twenty years of not working together was something unique.

They needed to perform very precise gestures. How did you prepare them for that?

They were very busy and had very little time. Luckily, both Juliette and Benoît are sophisticated gourmets in real life. They both cook and proved to be extremely expressive and precise on set. They didn't need long preparations.

So, did everything take place on location?

We didn't rehearse a lot. We went straight to work. On the other hand, I think that due to the way I film, they were often carried away by my sequence shots when the musicality of the scene was in their hands. They took remarkable possession of the characters without much prompting on my part. They were very easy to work with.

Emmanuel Salinger, Patrick d'Assunção, Frédéric Fisbach and Jan Hammenecker are Dodin and Eugénie's four friends and dinner guests ... How did you choose them?

Each has his own tonality and temperament. I think Emmanuel Salinger was marvelous as a mediocre doctor but consummate wine connoisseur. Patrick D'Assunção's sense of humor put the group at ease. Frédéric Fisbach, who is also a filmmaker in real life, brought them all together. And I insisted on that foreign touch brought by Belgian Jan Hammenecker. His presence shows that people travelled back in the day. Jan is the curmudgeon, withdrawn and not necessarily very likeable. Dodin's friends play an important role in one of the two maneuvers to help him surmount his grief after Eugénie's death. The other is the promise made to Pauline.

All have very friendly relations with Eugénie...

Dodin's friends are likewise friends of Eugénie. They have enormous respect for her, as can be seen in their very precise report concerning the exaggeratedly rich and chaotic dinner offered by the Prince of Eurasia...

...which will trigger a counterattack on the part of Dodin. A man of four dishes, who invites him to a pot au feu made in his own way... in four beats.

That was my opportunity to show how strong Dodin's relationship was with Eugénie. He reads her the menu he would like for the Prince and asks her what she thinks. She listens and responds. We realize just then to what extent their passion for gastronomy unites them.

Along with the gastronomic arts, we also discover the art of conversation...

That's something that bowled me over when I first came to France. I was sitting at a table with a family conversing, even about what their fifteen-year-old was reading, and I was terrified that it would soon be my turn to talk about my latest interests. Would I be up to par? I thought it was marvelous, at one and the same time stimulating and frightening, that you could voice an opinion without being ripped to pieces, and then smile once you've expressed it, without the tone ever becoming aggressive. I thought that was extraordinary.

Talk to us about Pauline, who will become Dodin's apprentice...

Little Bonnie Chagneau-Ravoire is fabulous. When you put a child – or an adult – in front of a camera, the image suddenly gels or it doesn't, densifies or doesn't. Bonnie had that quality. Her other, formidable virtue is that she chews nicely. You salivate when you watch her chew. That was very important for the film.

Pauline represents the transmission of know-how. But also, from a narrative point of view, it is Eugénie's promise to Pauline to take her on as an apprentice that gives the friends the courage to propose a list of candidate cooks that Dodin had just rejected a moment earlier. To form Pauline, Dodin needs a talented cook.

This is actually a film about sharing and transmission...

I come from Asia, where people do not readily hand down their knowledge. We prefer taking it with us to the grave. After Eugénie's death, Dodin's friends become obsessed with helping him reconcile with life. Dodin is still in mourning and categorically refuses to hire a new cook. It is Eugénie's promise to take Pauline on as an apprentice that forces him to find a cook to form Pauline. And so, handing down knowledge to Pauline and Dodin's resurrection both proceed from the same narrative stroke.

THE POT AU FEU was filmed in a château in Anjou...

I had very little preparation time and was lucky to find it on the second day of recce. It had one essential quality: ease of circulation between rooms, to allow for hurried activity between the kitchen and dining room, between Dodin's room and Eugénie's, etc. Dodin walks through corridors and up and down stairs looking for Eugénie. In several scenes we see her fleeing from him.

Dodin Bouffant's dining room was known for its great refinement. The film's is extraordinary. Were you inspired by his descriptions?

No, I paid no attention to it. The crew and I wanted its beauty to proceed from historical accuracy. We wanted to approach the daily life of the period as closely as possible. Our set designer, Toma Baquéni (*SYBIL, OH MERCY, BROTHER AND SISTER*), did a great job in the little time available.

Do you use reference books when preparing your films?

I never use any in my work. On the other hand, the art and costume departments do as they like. They show me their choices and I validate them. I was lucky to have Tran-Nu Yên Khê as art director and costume designer. She has a great eye and immediately sees if something works or not. I relied on her totally during preparation. But I also took advantage of her eye during the shoot, keeping her next to me on the combo. She oversaw the balance of everything that appears on screen.

Jonathan Ricquebourg is the director of cinematography. How did you two work together?

He is a young DOP who comes, like me and many others, from the Ecole Louis Lumière. Working with him was simple. I told him: "Lighting creates beautiful images, and that's your job. But the framing is dramaturgy and depends on my blocking, on what I call technical direction". So, on location I spontaneously accepted any lighting that Jonathan suggested. On the other hand, we worked together a lot on framing.

What does editing mean to you ?

I would say that editing confirms seventy per cent of my intuitions while writing the screenplay. At the writing stage, I feel the film as a musical movement, as an animal walking in a certain, graceful way. That physical sensation stimulates me during the shoot. I watch images take shape on set, without anticipating anything. Editing confirms those intuitions.

And the other thirty per cent is then discovery. Editing reveals the true solidity of the edifice; how well you have used the specific language of cinema; how accurate you were in moving from one frame to the next, and not only in response to narrative or thematic necessity.

Mistakes can easily be erased during the edit. And then there is the pleasure of discovering nice things that pop up like the icing on the cake. It was during this phase, for example, that I discovered what a splendid actress Galat ea Bellugi, who plays Violette, is. I was so busy with Beno t and Juliette during the shoot that I suppose I let her go her own way. It was during the edit that I realized how right on the money, how inventive she was; how perfect her timing was. And what a splendid presence. The boom operator told me that she was the most enjoyable to record!

The other important part of editing is sound.

Other than the piano transcription of an excerpt from Jules Massenet’s opera “Tha is” at the end of the film, there is no music in *THE POT AU FEU*. And yet, one has the impression of hearing a genuine soundtrack: meat sizzling, the wind, birdsong...

I never before had to direct a film with as much substantiality as this, because of the gastronomic content. All those elements that our characters manipulate (raw and cooked meat, vegetables, feathers, fat, butter, earth, water, fire, wood, metal, etc.) naturally did away with the need for any music in the makeup of the film. All that material reality is so compellingly expressive, it firmly anchors our characters in daily life. Music would have undermined that.

But there was careful, inventive work on the soundtrack. I often tell my collaborators that they are providing the aroma too.

You hadn’t worked since 2016 and *ETERNITY* ...

I’d like to work more. Once every other year would be my ideal rhythm. I dream of the old studio system. You come to the studio every day, like going to the office. You work every day. I would love that.

“Hung came to lunch at my place for the first time. It was a winter day and I remember that I served him my version of pot au feu which was then on the menu. After all the compliments, Hung told me that he wanted to make a film based on Dodin-Bouffant – “A movie about pot au feu.” he said. “Will you help me?” I already knew his work as a filmmaker – his gentle demeanor, his rare elegance... I function on instinct: I enthusiastically said yes.

Time passed. It was time to get down to brass tacks. I had not gauged the scale of the project: there were tons of scenes with food! It only took three days to quash my doubts and cement my relationship with Hung and his crew. I cooked the dishes that Hung and I had chosen - the pot au feu, rack of veal, braised lettuce, the famous pear dessert – and the crew filmed. I was entirely at their service. Like them I was an integral part of the adventure. Strong bonds were the result.

Those bonds continued with Juliette and Benoît. They had little time during preparation, but during that brief time we worked and had fun: they both paid close attention to the gestures I showed them. Michel Naves, who has been with me for ages, handled things on location.

I have always loved cinema. I can appreciate a camera movement, I decipher subtleties like someone savoring a fine wine. I spend a lot of my down time in movie theaters, the only place I feel you can truly appreciate a film.

Are gastronomy and cinema connected in my daily life? I can't help but see a connection between them. Their rhythms are different, as hectic in a restaurant as it can be chaotic in the cinema. But in both disciplines, teamwork is vital. What could a director do without a DOP, without grips and financiers? And what could I do without collaborators, without sous-chefs... And both comport the same notion of stage direction. Because gastronomy – as Tran Anh Hung shows so well in his film – is also akin to showmanship. With its lighting, interior design and cast of characters, at each seating the restaurant dining room becomes a little theater in which each person has a role to perform in the show. The quality of a meal resides in more than just the dish you set before the guest. Its success depends on ingredients that are as subtle as those in a film. Look at Dodin's friends' emotional reactions to the meal that Eugénie has prepared for them – their reactions to that visually stunning vol-au-vent (my favorite dish in the film), and the joy that brings to the cook. The power of gastronomy is that it unites people, it creates bonds, it inspires emotion. Like good music, good painting, good cinema or good literature, it lifts your spirits.

Does that make it an art? A major art? I often think so. And if I think so, it has to do with words. I like the vocabulary applied to gastronomy. But other than for some earlier works, it was first in the 1980s that two men, Christian Millau and Henri Gault, truly began to apply words to it.

In *THE POT AU FEU*, Tran Anh Hung was kind – and mischievous - enough to offer me a role. He asked me to play the Prince of Eurasia's culinary *officier de bouche*. That was fun. But I will no doubt take a lot of kidding from my colleagues, considering how long and pedantic my menus were. It was great fun. But that's not my life. I love real life too much for that... A life à

la Dodin, with respect for the passing seasons, with being able to sit back and take your time. Hung's film is a hymn to that philosophy.

Pierre GAGNAIRE
Gastronomic director for *THE POT AU FEU*

Cast

Eugénie	Juliette BINOCHE
Dodin	Benoit MAGIMEL
Rabaz	Emmanuel SALINGER
Grimaud	Patrick D'ASSUMÇÃO
Violette	Galatea BELLUGI
Magot	Jan HAMMENECKER
Beaubois	Frédéric FISBACH
Pauline	Bonnie CHAGNEAU-RAVOIRE
Augustin	Jean-Marc ROULOT
Pauline's father	Yannik LANDREIN
Pauline's mother	Sarah ADLER

Crew

A film by	TRAN ANH HUNG
Screenplay, adaptation, dialogues	TRAN ANH HUNG
Art Direction	TRAN NU YÊN KHÊ
Director of Photography	JONATHAN RICQUEBOURG
Editor	MARIO BATTISTEL
Production Design	TOMA BAQUÉNI
Costumes	TRAN NU YÊN KHÊ
Gastronomic Manager	PIERRE GAGNAIRE
Culinary Advice	MICHEL NAVE
1 st AD	THIERRY VERRIER
Sound	FRANÇOIS WALEDISCH PAUL HEYMANS THOMAS GAUDER
Casting	GIGI AKOKA VALÉRIE ESPAGNE MARIE-PIERRE DELABRIÈRE
Production Manager	ANGELINE MASSONI
Location Manager	PIERRE PY
Postproduction Managers	ANNE-SOPHIE HENRY-CAVILLON SUSANA ANTUNES
Coproducers	BASTIEN SIRODOT and CÉDRIC ILAND
Executive Producer	CHRISTINE DE JEKEL
Associate Producer	ÉMILIE BIGNON
Produced by	OLIVIER DELBOSC
Coproduced by	CURIOSA FILMS GAUMONT FRANCE 2 CINÉMA UMEDIA
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