



ILLEGAL

A film by Olivier Masset-Depasse

"[A] fascinating study of perseverance in the face of subhuman treatment." – Boyd Van Hoeij, *Variety*



**Belgium-France | 2010 | Psychological Drama | In French and Russian
with English Subtitles | 95 min. | 1:1.85 | Dolby Digital**

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SYNOPSIS

Tania is a former teacher from Russia, living illegally in Belgium with her son, Ivan. One day she is stopped for a routine check by the police and is arrested. Separated from Ivan, who manages to escape, she is placed in an immigration detention center for women and children. While utterly refusing to face expulsion, Tania thus begins a fight to preserve her dignity, identity and humanity, as well as be reunited with her son.

FESTIVALS AND AWARDS

Cannes 2010 - Directors' Fortnight (World Premiere)

WINNER – SACD Prize for Best French-language Film

OFFICIAL SELECTION

London Film Festival

Venice Days, Venice Film Festival

AFI European Union Film Festival

Pusan Int'l Film Festival

Jerusalem Int'l Film Festival

Warsaw Film Festival

BIOGRAPHIES & FILMOGRAPHIES

OLIVIER MASSET- DEPASSE

Director

Starting with his first short films, *Chambre froide* (2000) and *Dans l'ombre* (2004), Olivier Masset-Depasse has filmed women characters who are determined and ready to reach their goals at all costs. With his two shorts, Olivier has received about sixty prizes in festivals around the world. *Cages* (2006), his first feature film that tells the story of a passionate but destructive love, appeared in many international festivals including Toronto, Rome and was received with great enthusiasm by the Belgian public. *Illegal*, his second feature film, is a psychological thriller with a social commentary background.

Filmography

- 2009 **Illegal** (feature)
- 2006 **Cages** (feature)
- 2004 **Dans L'ombre** (Short)
- 2000 **Chambre Froide** (Short)

ANNE COESENS

Tania

After having studied at the Royal Conservatory of Brussels and the National Superior Conservatory of Dramatic Arts in Paris, Anne Coesens worked essentially in theater with, among others, Philippe Adrien, Eric Vignier and Michel Didym.

She played her first major movie role in "The Secret" by Virginie Wagon, and has since worked with Joachim Lafosse, Eric Guirado, Chantal Ackerman, Taylan Barman, Ursula Meier, and Olivier Masset-Depasse.

She has also worked in television, in particular in the Canal+ series "Reporters," directed by Gilles Bannier.

- 2009 **Illegal** by Olivier Masset-Depasse
- 2008 **9mm** by Taylan Barman
- 2008 **Free Student** by Joachim Lafosse
- 2008 **664 km** short film by Arnaud Bigeard
- 2007 **Bunny Games** short film by Delphine Noëls
- 2006 **Cages** by Olivier Masset-Depasse

2004 **L'ennemi Naturel** by Pierre Erwan Guillaume
2004 **Tomorrow We Move** by Chantal Ackerman
2004 **Dans L'ombre** short film by Olivier Masset-Depasse
2003 **Quand tu Descendras du Ciel** by Eric Guirrado
2000 **The Secret** by Virginie Wagon
2000 **Chambre Froide** a short film by Olivier Masset-Depasse
1997 **My Life in Pink** by Alain Berliner
1986 **La Puritaine** by Jacques Doillon

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

by Mattieu Recarte

Tania, the main character, is a Russian “illegal alien,” as the authorities say. Shouldn’t the French title have used the feminine spelling for illegal immigrant?

No, because it’s the “System,” a masculine word in French, that I consider “illegal,” not Tania. The administrative detention centers found in our countries, which supposedly respect human rights, are illegal. The vast majority of illegal immigrants held in these centers have had to flee extreme poverty, dictatorship, war etc., and when after an often trying and dangerous journey, they end up in our countries; we welcome them by putting them in prison. They are treated like criminals.

In fact, Belgium has already been convicted four times by the European Court of Human Rights for inhuman or degrading treatment. That shows you to what extent my country lives up to its ideals.

Most of the film takes place in an administrative holding center.

Many films have shown what people are ready to endure in order to stay here, in our countries. I wanted to show what WE make them endure so that they will return back to their countries.

One day I found out that I was living about fifteen kilometers away from one of these holding centers. I wanted to learn more about it. With the help of a journalist from the daily newspaper *Le Soir*, Hugues Dorzée, and a legal counselor from the Belgium Human Rights League, Pierre-Arnaud Perrouty, I carried out an investigation. We were often in the field, meeting illegal immigrants but also speaking with female guards and the police. We were able to visit a center. It was important to allow myself this objectivity.

The holding center seen in the film is scenery. Shooting in a real center was out of the question, it’s even more complicated than shooting in a prison. We discovered this building after four months of searching.

The film’s 111bis center is both real and imaginary. I wanted to clearly convey the feeling of governmental premises that are old and dilapidated, yet I wanted them to retain a film-like quality.

I liked the fact that the only link with the exterior world is the telephone, an object that one literally hangs on to, an object that dominates the corridor; and the fact that this corridor symbolizes the tunnel in which Tania finds herself.

You could have made a documentary film but you chose fiction...

It allows for a deeper exploration of the different characters’ subjectivity, reaching for something that is more universal. Besides, I wanted to approach the subject in the form of a psychological thriller. I thought a great deal about *Midnight Express* during the early, conceptual stages of *Illegal*.

To avoid being Manichaeian, or falling into a leftist agenda, I wanted the film to be realistic and well-researched: everything that is seen in the film has happened at least once in real life. I tried to show how the guards, and certain members of the police, are also victims of the system.

You speak about a psychological thriller. This tension is also due to the fact that there is nothing to do in the center, the slowness of the passing days that is at times broken up by unexpected accelerations.

The prisoners are rarely warned in advance for a summons. They are rarely told where they are going. It is very difficult for them to have access to their files...I wanted the viewer to feel Tania's precarious position, to feel the arbitrary nature of it all.

The movie is shot with a hand-held camera, very close to the faces.

I wanted to work on the subjectivity, catching sensorial reactions so that the viewer would enter the film, be close to the character. The hand-held camera contributed to this organic aspect, making it real. When a body vibrates, the frame moves.

For this film, I wanted to use essentially medium and long focal lengths in order to never lose sight of Tania, to always be with her "intimately." I played with wide long shots using long focal lengths to create the feeling of a documentary, and close-ups for the subjective aspect.

You show police violence in a very crude manner.

I also show that the police aren't all pit bulls. They are also caught in this perverted system. In fact, in the film, I tried to show that their violence comes from frustration and the difficulty of their work. This said, I make no excuse for barbaric behaviour. Obviously what happens in the film doesn't occur on a daily basis, but all the same there are numerous accounts of police violence, too numerous. The royal decrees explicitly say: these people should not want to return to our country. This opens the door to all forms of abuse of power. In the film, I show the police's coercion techniques, authorized methods (the deportations are filmed); it's adding fuel to the fire. And on top of it the transfer police teams have no relation with the illegal immigrants they escort. They just see an endless stream of nameless faces go by.

All of Illegal's strength comes from it not being a film with a message, but a portrait of a mother.

The film is above all about a mother separated from her son. It was important to stick to this universal, clear and pure narrative line. The social commentary had to stay in the "background." Early versions of the screenplay were very hard-hitting; they integrated all of the terrible things that had been reported to me. Yet very quickly the mother's story became central. I took out everything that took us away from her story.

Tania is Russian, not African or Asian, as in other films that tackle the question of illegal aliens.

First of all, it is a reality. In Belgium, many of the illegal aliens are Russian-speaking. I wanted a character resembling us as much as possible, so the viewer could identify with the character. It is also for these reasons that I wanted Tania to be played by a Belgian actress, not by a real Russian. I want viewers to tell themselves: that could be me.

She's a very isolated woman.

When you live underground, it is very difficult to make friends. And then, that would have meant a support committee, demonstrations, etc. That would have taken us too far away from the framework I wanted: to be with Tania and her son. She doesn't have a man in her life either. She only lives for her child.

A third of the film is in Russian, how did you work in that aspect?

Anne worked for five months on Russian with two coaches: Youlia Zimina and Larissa Cholomova.

Youlia is a theatre director. She helped me enormously during the filming of the Russian scenes because, even if I had a feeling for when the tone was right or not, I obviously didn't understand the subtleties of the language.

Larissa is an actress. She taught Anna the correct pronunciation and the correct phonetics. For, obviously, Anna didn't have the time to learn Russian; she learned her text phonetically. They also worked on having a Russian accent in French, which ended up being much more complicated than the Russian itself.

Tania is a hard and silent character. In the beginning of the film, it's the separation from her son that makes her likeable. We do not immediately feel empathy for her.

Tania is a "fighter." She's perpetually in resistance. The character demanded that she be tough, without concessions, determined, ready for anything, paranoid. Tania isn't a likeable person straightaway. She becomes so through her combat as a mother.

Anne Coesens plays the particularly difficult role of Tania.

She's a Stradivarius. With such an instrument, you don't change a thing: play it and you never grow weary. I've made all my films (two shorts and two feature films) with her. I believe I know how to find what rings true in a role, but with Anne, I can really go very far. I'm a better actor's director with her,

than with the others. Our symbiosis brings a great deal to my films and to this one in particular.

INTERVIEW WITH ANNE COESENS

by Mattieu Recarte

You carry Illegal from start to finish, you are in every scene. How did you build the character?

I prepare a great deal before the shooting. I keep notebooks, sequence by sequence. It gives me markers. I associate text with music and emotions. During five months I learned Russian and created the character's past. But even before the screenplay, I already had the treatment in hand. I spent two years with this role. I lived it as if it were a gestation period. Living with the story a long time before shooting nourished me. I didn't have the impression I was working. When a role is beautiful, it's always easier. It's the role of an extraordinary woman, someone who is walking a fine line.

How do you avoid falling into pathos with such a role?

The character imposed itself, her entire struggle imposed it. Tania can only be restrained, she can't allow herself to let go, to give in to the pressure. She's beyond pathos, beyond pain. For her it's a question of survival.

She speaks very little; everything is communicated by her body, by the looks she gives.

That didn't bother me. On the contrary, when there is a lot of dialogue, I can at times lose the point, the sense of purpose. Here, the emotions are immediate, made clear by the writing...

It's your fourth film with Olivier Masset-Depasse. You make a real film couple.

In every role that Olivier has offered me, there have always been concrete challenges. In this film you're going to limp, in this one you speak Russian, in that one (*Cages*) you stutter. Paradoxically, this type of constraint helps me a lot. It keeps me from listening too much to myself, from thinking too much about the character's psychology. Moreover, Olivier is very direct, simple and concrete in his direction of actors. I like cinema or theater families. We work with confidence in one another, we can try anything, take more risks. It's a kind of laboratory, an enormous freedom. Afterwards, of course, we need to go elsewhere to recharge our batteries, renew ourselves and meet other people.

CREDITS

CREW

Screenplay and Direction:	OLIVIER MASSET-DEPASSE
Director of photography:	TOMMASO FIORILLI
Sound:	PHILIPPE KOHN, MARC BASTIEN, FRANÇOIS DUMONT, THOMAS GAUDER
Scenery:	PATRICK DECHESENE & ALAIN-PASCAL HOUSIAUX
Costumes:	MAGDALENA LABUZ
Make-up:	FABIENNE ADAM
Editing:	DAMIEN KEYEUX
Casting:	KADIJA LECLERE, TATIANA VIALLE, MICHAËL BIER, KATJA WOLF
Original Music :	LINGO - ANDRÉ DZIEZUK & MARC MERGEN
Producers:	JACQUES-HENRI & OLIVIER BRONCKART
Coproducers:	NICOLAS STEIL, ISABELLE MADELAINE, ANTONINO LOMBARDO, ARLETTE ZYLBERBERG

CAST

Tania	ANNE COESENS
Aïssa	ESSE LAWSON
Maria	GABRIELA PEREZ
Ivan	ALEXANDRE GONTCHAROV
Lieve	CHRISTELLE CORNIL
Zina	OLGA ZHDANOVA
Monsieur Nowak	TOMASZ BIALKOWSKI