



60^e SEMAINE
DE LA CRITIQUE
CANNES 2021

A RADIANT GIRL

a film by
Sandrine Kiberlain



france•tv distribution



A RADIANT GIRL

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With: Rebecca Marder (from the Comédie Française), André Marcon, Anthony Bajon, Françoise Widhoff, and India Hair

SYNOPSIS

Irene is a young Jewish woman leading a vibrant life, in the summer of 1942 in Paris. Her family watches her as she grows and discovers the world around her, making new friends, finding new love, and her passion for theatre... Irene wants to become an actress and her youthful days go by without a care in the world.

FRANCE | 2021 | SCOPE / 5.1 / COLOR | LENGTH: 1H38MN

WE COUNT ON YOUR DISCRETION NOT TO REVEAL THE END OF THE FILM SO THAT THE AUDIENCE MAY DISCOVER IT FOR THEMSELVES.

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INTERVIEW WITH SANDRINE KIBERLAIN

What made you want to step behind the camera?

Sandrine Kiberland - The desire to express myself in a different way. I also waited until I had the right perspective on a story, to feel like I was telling it «differently.» With this project, I was able to tell the story of a young girl and capture a period in a very personal way. And the only way to tell a story like this is cinema, my favorite art of all. I wouldn't have undertaken this project if I hadn't felt «capable» to take this position. Having directed a short film, I knew I was very happy there, behind the camera, even though I had never planned on becoming a director. But when there's a story close to my heart, and I have a «vision» of this story, then I allow myself to stage it, and I use the means of cinema to tell it. In my career as an actress, I never locked myself in a dressing room. I've always been on set, with the crew. The collective work of a shoot, and the solidarity that exists between the different positions, has always fascinated me.

As the years went by, I realized that a movie could be ruined if one of the positions wasn't doing their job properly. I started seeing the importance of the whole team, down to the boom operator or the prop master. And by dint of participating in someone else's adventure, I started wanting my own. I observed directors a lot before I started, and I might subconsciously have stolen things from them...

I also remember directing, when I was at the Conservatoire, so I was always tickled by the idea of directing other actors, of glorifying them, and bringing them to a character. I've wanted to direct for a very long time, and *A RADIANT GIRL* is the result of this yearning. But it took many years before I finally felt ready to take the leap. The first films I ever saw were Hitchcock's *Notorious*, and the director's cut of Scorsese *New York, New York*: great movies, carried by great actresses. I wanted to be them; I wanted to become an actress! On the other hand, it's hard to tell yourself that you're going to direct when you've seen so many masterpieces. Directing seemed inaccessible to me. Once you allow yourself to direct, you also need a story to match our ambition, a story that justifies your decision. It wouldn't have felt right directing a film if I hadn't written a story that, in my opinion, was worth filming.

For a first feature, was it a real challenge to make a film set during the Occupation?

Because this historical context has already been treated so much on the screen, I had to find the right angle. I thought back on two stories that had a huge effect on me. The one my grandmother told me, and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. Today, with seventy years of hindsight, we know history, and the tragic fate of Anne Frank; but when she wrote her diary, she didn't know what the end would be, and would never get to write it.

In the first sequences of *A RADIANT GIRL*, we do not realize at all that it takes place in the 40s. Thus, your film seemed to me to be a mixture of an autobiography of your youth (and the realistic and fictionalized biography of your parents) and your "imagined autobiography," if you had been 18 in 1942. Is this how you imagined and wrote it?

Exactly. When we write, we're a bit oblivious to what appears on paper. I had the idea for the film, but I didn't know how to approach it, because I had never written a feature film. I wondered how the filmmakers and screenwriters that I admire proceed: how do you bring a character to life, for an hour and a half? Maybe because I'm an actress, I started by writing down the lives of each of the main characters, in order to find the story. And then, more or less consciously, you start writing about yourself. So I decided to make Irene a young girl who wants to become an actress. I fantasized about the daily life of my grandparents in 1942; that of my parents, all Jews, who also wanted to become actors, and it all got mixed up. In reality, I have a mother but no longer a father; I have a sister but no brother. And in my film, for Irene, it's the opposite. I really didn't want my mother and my sister to be characters in my film, maybe so it'd be easier to talk about myself and explore the meaning of family more sincerely, without betraying my loved ones.

In the film, one wonders why the mother is absent, and we're not given any answer. This unexplained absence is one of the beautiful mysteries in the film.

If the mother is not present, it's obvious to me that she shouldn't be mentioned, because this absence speaks for itself. This makes Irene a very responsible 18-year-old girl; she's very mature for her age. This also creates an immediate empathy with the characters: with the grandmother (who we guess was the mother of the missing mother,) with the father who lost his wife, with Irene who replaces her mother in running the household, and with the brother who is the most vulnerable child. I really liked the movie GIRL, which I watched while I was writing my script. It made me feel better about taking on the mother's absence without needing to explain it.

When we realize that Françoise Widhoff is playing the grandmother and not Irene's mother, it creates a gap in this family that is both tragic and mysterious...

Initially, I thought of casting Marceline Loridan Ivens [French writer/director who passed away in 2018] for the part of the grandmother, who is named Marceline. I only knew her for five years, but this encounter was memorable. She made me want an ageless grandmother. Marceline smoked, she drank shots... In the scene with the two grandmothers, where one smokes, I thought of Marceline Loridan Ivens and Ginette Kolinka whom I had seen together. And I also thought about a filmed scene where we see Marceline and Simone Veil sitting on a bed: Simone Veil was very contained and Marceline quite wild. So yes, initially, we think that Françoise Widhoff and André Marcon are a couple, that they're the parents of Irene and her brother Igor, then a single word is enough to make people understand that they aren't. I don't like movies to be too explanatory.

You mentioned The Diary of Anne Frank. The tone of your film is even more reminiscent of The Journal of Hélène Berr, which you include in the end credits.

Hélène Berr's life force and writing impressed me. That book nearly traumatized me, mainly because her youth spoke to me. Her youth makes it possible to measure even more acutely the horror of what's going to happen. Hélène Berr makes music, she talks about nature, and she has a boyfriend... It was this book, along with others (such as Gioconda by Nikos Kokantzis) that sparked in me the idea of talking about this period through the prism of a young girl. Hélène Berr's niece saw the movie and liked it, which was very important to me because feeling as though I was "betraying" this era would have been awful.

What's striking about A RADIANT GIRL is how austere it is, in its representation of the 1940s. It's very "uncluttered", you don't see the SS, Nazi flags, raids, and yet, you can feel it all. Was this stylistic restraint important to you?

Absolutely, and not only for budgetary reasons. From the start, I asked all the department heads to be as restrained as possible. I didn't want to make a re-enactment at all, but the opposite, and talk about the war without showing it. The idea was to avoid showing... so that you'd want to see. It was essential for me not to overdo it. If I had been asked to put an insert at the beginning of the film reading «Paris, 1942», I just couldn't have. That would have ruined the film! The idea of the film is to show that this family is made up of people like everyone else, that what happens to them could happen tomorrow, or in fifty years. I didn't want to provide too much of a temporal context. For example, the music in the soundtrack is from all eras. The girls are not overly styled or their hair done in the style of the 1940s. At the very beginning of the film, one may wonder: "What is this movie about?" And it only takes one line, «You have to put the "Jew" stamp on the papers,» to understand where you are. And as everyone knows what happened in 1942, there's really no need to add more by showing a German soldier or a German flag.

It seems that this desire for purity is also linked to Irene's point of view. She's this radiant girl, caught up in the impulses of her age, and who refuses to see too much of the looming darkness...

That's exactly it: Irene doesn't want to see what's going on. I didn't want to make her ditzzy either, and she knows very well what's happening. She can sense the monster lurking in the shadows. Her blackouts betray what she knows, but is trying to expel. It's her body speaking for her. She manifests the distress of the time through her fainting fits. So she knows what's going on, but I also wanted this character to be faithful to her age. When you're eighteen, even when faced to terrifying news, you can't wait to go to your acting class, and meet your boyfriend... you refuse to be locked in by what bothers you, you're living your life, first and foremost. When I asked Robert Badinter [French Jewish lawyer, politician and author who was a teenager during the Occupation] to read my screenplay so as to get his opinion, he supported me in this decision. He told me that in his youth, the more he and his friends were threatened, the more alive they felt. He liked the fact that in my script, I fully embraced this idea of an "urge for life." And it's through Irene's point of view that we perceive this era.

How did you go about conveying Irene's youth, vitality, and radiance?

Nineteen is an age when everything is possible. And for me, it's the age of rebirth because it was at that age that I discovered myself as an actress, and I started theater school. To that effect, I thought it'd be beautiful to show the passion of our protagonist, her perpetual drive... this way, you become attached to this "life force" and it's even more heartbreaking when it's cut short. Nineteen was my favorite age, and it's also when I discovered movies that I love. For example, I really projected myself into Sandrine Bonnaire's insolent protagonist in *To Our Loves*, by Maurice Pialat. I always wanted to capture this moment when one comes out of childhood and becomes a young adult, because it's a meaningful age, filled with everything: the first desires, the will to leave home, the fear to leave childhood, and the discovery of the person we're going to become. The scene where Irene rides a bicycle is symbolic: she goes fast, nothing stops her, and she could go to the end of the world. She ignores the tragic turn her life is about to take; she's just following this urge for life that she has. I also wanted to film

an actress of that age. I love filming an actress who's just beginning, and Rebecca Marder is a great actress in the making. I personally experienced this with Laetitia Masson and the film we made together in 1995, *To Have (or Not)*: she was becoming a director, and I was becoming an actress. Here, I'm directing my first film with Rebecca, who is playing her first big role in cinema, so it's as if we're starting a story at the same time.

Did you decide to capture Irène/Rebecca's vitality through nearly incessant movement when directing the film?

I made movement a point of honor in the film, and I immediately informed Guillaume (Schiffman, the cinematographer). Everything had to keep moving in the apartment. I wanted Irene to go fast all the time. The camera is always following her, in tracking shots and handheld. If I could have done just one long take of Irene, I would have loved to. The camera only settles when Irene is with the adults, because an adult is more mature, more... poised! But we had to express Irene's passion; it propels the story forward and makes us want to follow her. She slams the door, runs down the stairs... I wanted her to always be in the same momentum so that, as the realities of her time close in on her, her urge for life grabs us by the throat. I love this age because everything is intense; any small encounter can be your future great love, any small scene that you rehearse in theater class is important... Irene is an active young girl; she's like a bird taking flight. We filmed in the summer, to remain faithful to history, and also because it would be more powerful to film this tale during the season of the sun, which parallels Irene's own inner sun. This film is the story of a sun broken by a star.

The film features very keen observations on Jewishness, such as this scene during Shabbat dinner where everyone makes the rituals their own. Did you want to show that there are a thousand ways to be Jewish?

Exactly. The way I was brought up, I was free to proceed with rituals as I wanted. On Friday, I light my candle my way; some years I celebrate Yom Kippur, others I don't. The same for pessah (Passover), and I no longer know how to say the prayer, and I eat the honey on the apple but not always when you're supposed to... These rituals, even practiced disorderly, remind me that I'm Jewish, that this is my identity, my roots. My Jewishness is neither rigid nor religious, that's why I wanted this meal sequence in the film to be very lively. Shabbat or pessah is cultural rather than religious, like when we celebrate Christmas. This culture will never leave us, but everyone can experience it in his or her own way. My grandparents didn't go to the synagogue, and yet they told me a lot of stories about their youth, and the Jewish tradition. They did not go to the synagogue, but they did not forget that they were Jews.

André does not want to rock the boat; he obeys the laws, even the most appalling, while Marceline doesn't. This poses a crucial question, which was also that of the Jewish Councils: should one resist, with the risks that this entails... or obey, in the hope that things will settle down?

I had a grandfather who wanted to obey the laws, which was often the case among the fathers whose stories I know: they felt responsible for their families, and they were afraid to challenge the authorities. They thought they were saving their loved ones. The women around me had a more subconscious survival instinct, a different life force. My grandmother actually said this line that we hear Marceline say in the film: "if you do that, if you go to the town hall, I will jump out the window!" In doing so, she saved the family. Going to the town hall at the time was like throwing yourself in the mouth of the wolf. My grandmother got

pregnant with my mother because at that time, they weren't arresting pregnant women – in the end, they would round up everyone, pregnant women included. When a policeman came to arrest her, my grandmother stripped naked, to show him that he couldn't! Women sometimes have crazy courage. Marceline looks up the definition of the word «fear» in the dictionary. This word prevents us from living. Some people are more courageous and are able to put fear away. Ginette Kolinka told me she wasn't afraid because she didn't think about it! Today we know what the Shoah was like, but we have to place ourselves in the minds of those who lived at the time and didn't know. They lived normally, yet at the same time, they could no longer live normally. There was a dilemma between not wanting to believe that the worst could happen, and not having any other choice than believe it.

Your way of writing is very precise, especially the dialogue. You work around words like «fear», and «believe». At one moment, Irene cries out «but still, we don't have the plague!» You could have written «we're not contagious,» but you chose the word «plague,» and it's no accident...

I also think about the moment when Irene says, «I'm not going to start resting at my age...» The whole spirit of the film is contained in this line: it says it all, without further explanation. Same with the French title «UNE JEUNE FILLE QUI VA BIEN» (literally, "a young girl who's doing just fine"). As for my choice of the word "plague," it's obvious: the Nazis compared the Jews to rats. The word «plague» also says it all, no need for further explanations.

Rebecca Marder is breathtaking as Irene. Where did you discover her, on stage or on screen?

I had seen and noticed her on stage. We auditioned a lot of girls. And then Rebecca came into the casting office, simultaneously graceful and awkward, natural, lively, and talented. She had that very mixture of humor and seriousness that I was looking for in the character of Irene. After meeting Rebecca, I knew the part of Irene was now cast. We probably share the same acting «instinct» she and I; we didn't have to talk a lot to understand each other. She has this incredible mobility in her face, and reminds me of such magnificent actresses as Ingrid Bergman, Gene Tierney, Nastassja Kinski, or Anne Brochet. I fell in love with Rebecca.

As usual, André Marcon is fantastic; he acts with a real restraint, with a quiet strength, a superb voice and diction.

I love him; I wrote the part for him, even naming his character André! He was the first one I sent the script to, and he responded enthusiastically. He viewed the script like a poem, and he absolutely wanted to make this film. I'm an actress, and finding myself for the first time on the other side of the camera, I realized what a director's expectation is for an actor. I was worried that André would say no. With his modesty, he has always moved me. His performances are always spare, honest, and very human.

Françoise Widhoff's Marceline is mischievous and a bit dreamy, but also very clear-headed and resilient.

In real life, Françoise is talkative; she's almost more of an actress in real life than on a set. She likes to play with people, with situations; she's very young at heart, very quick-witted. That's

what I was looking for. I know her personally; we really like each other, and when I offered her the part, she said: «with you, I'll do it.» During the screen tests, I discovered another aspect of Françoise's personality, a certain depth that was important to the character. She can be whimsical, but she also has a more introspective and secret side. It was a gamble, as Françoise is not an actress, but a producer. She was very brave, and considering her age, it was not easy for her. She learned her lines by heart, she was very studious, and she never wasted our time. I never wanted to treat her any differently from the others. She embodies the grandmother I wanted, unique and free-spirited.

What made you choose Anthony Bajon?

I wrote the role for him. I discovered him in *Rodin*, in which he played the sculptor's son. Although he only had two lines, his childish side touched me. Then I saw him in the films of Cédric Kahn (*The Prayer*) and Hafsia Herzi (*You Deserve a Lover*) and my mind was made up. Anthony and his sensibility helped develop the character of Igor, the brother. He gives yet another perspective on that time; what it was like to be a boy, to want to be friends with those in power. He's into math, like his father, and he's a less talented artist than his sister. He's not as free-spirited as the two women of the house. I also wanted to explore this mixture of support and rivalry found among siblings. Anthony plays the part of the big brother, but he looks like a little brother, and I really like that.

You already mentioned India Hair, an actress who's also quite unique. She's fantastic here, once again, but in a rather dramatic role, when we usually see her in comedic parts.

Here we really take measure of her great talent for tragedy. I've known India for a while and she fascinates me. I also wrote the role of Viviane for her, and she accepted straight away. I needed a girl with no defined age, who mothers Irene at times, and is sometimes mothered by her. There's also a physical contrast between India and Rebecca; they form an interesting, almost comic duo. Viviane is not threatened in this story, and India nearly represents all of us: what would we have done if like her, we lived through such crazy times?

Can you say a few words about Florence Viala, who is in a couple of powerful scenes, including that of the Shabbat dinner?

Florence is my best friend and a great actress. We met at the Conservatoire thirty years ago. In real life, I see Florence as Mary Poppins. Her energy, her kindness, her generosity, and her ingenuity inspired me to create the character of Josiane, someone who comes to help this family, and someone who follows her heart. Josiane is secretly in love with André; we feel that maybe these two will have a romance... Florence is inherently nice, but in its strongest sense: she says what she thinks, without malice, like when Josiane says, «I like the Jews." I really like the moment when, after dinner, Irene says, «I like your shoes». You can really feel the mother's absence there, and it moves me. Florence has this maternal side. In films, I've always liked the so-called "secondary characters," who usually also have such a strong presence. Josiane also represents *The Just Assassins* by Albert Camus, to whom I wanted to pay homage.

Can you describe your collaboration with Guillaume Schiffman, the cinematographer?

We shot my short film together. Initially, he didn't want to work on a movie set during the Occupation. Then he read the script, and thought it would be possible. He understood perfectly what I had in mind. I didn't want the images to be too beautiful, and I didn't want the digital aspect to be obvious. I gave him plenty of art and film references. Among the most important ones, *Stolen Kisses*, and *Small Change* by François Truffaut inspired me in the staging and the color of the image: vivid, and definitely not sepia toned. We wanted to achieve a certain balance in the images, neither too cold nor too hot, neither outdated nor too modern. I also told him about Pialat's *Van Gogh*, which has nothing to do with my film, but which has very beautiful, very pure, very minimalist interiors. By the way, my production designer, Katia Wyzskop, worked on *Van Gogh*.

Your editor was François Gédigier, a very experienced technician. Did you actively collaborate in the editing phase?

I was there with him all the time. I chose him because he edited a lot of films that I like. I needed an editor who was sensitive rather than efficient. I sent him my script, we met, and right away, I felt that he understood the project. I asked him to edit the first rushes during the shoot, to reassure me. And afterwards, he just continued editing the film while we shot. He helped me along the way with details, shot sequences, and scene transitions that I was worried about lacking. Then he accompanied me in the sound mixing and the post-production stage; he was extremely invested. This was a very meaningful collaboration.

After this successful first experience, do you want to make other films?

Yes, I would love to. Making *A RADIANT GIRL* was one of the happiest times of my life, when I felt the best. I'm very happy and extremely lucky as an actress. I've had wonderful encounters, but during all this time, I've recited the words of others. Here I was finally able to share my vision of things, and my personal look at a story. For the first time, I did what I had in mind, I wrote and directed (some will like it, others won't...) but at least I did it. Writing has helped me; it made me feel less pretentious when I put on the director's hat. On the other hand, I realized that as a director, you are blind to what you do. I recently told François (Gédigier) that I would love to be able to see my film! All I know is I made the movie I wanted to make.

CAST

Irène
André
Igor
Marceline
Viviane
Josiane
Jo
Jacques
Gilbert

REBECCA MARDER (of the Comédie Française)
ANDRÉ MARCON
ANTHONY BAJON
FRANÇOISE WIDHOFF
INDIA HAIR
FLORENCE VIALA (of the Comédie Française)
BEN ATTAL
CYRIL METZGER
JEAN CHEVALIER (of the Comédie Française)

CREW

Director
Screenplay
Cinematographer
Editor
Sound
Re-recording mixer
Supervising sound editor
Composers
Production designer
Costume designer
First assistant director
Associate producer
Executive producer
Post-production supervisor
Production manager
Produced by
Coproductioin:

With the participation of
In association with
With the support of

SANDRINE KIBERLAIN
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GUILLAUME SCHIFFMAN
FRANÇOIS GÉDIGIER
JEAN-PIERRE DURET
CYRIL HOLTZ
GURWAL COIC-GALLA
MARC MARDER, PATRICK DESREUMAUX
KATIA WYSZKOP
EMMANUELLE YOUCHNOVSKI
HADRIEN BICHET
EMILIEN BIGNON
CHRISTINE DE JEKEL
SUSANA ANTUNES
CHRISTOPHE DESENCLOS
OLIVIER DELBOSC, PAULINE DUHAULT
E.D.I FILMS, CURIOSA FILMS, FRANCE 3 CINÉMA,
BNP PARIBAS PICTURES
CANAL + , FRANCE TÉLÉVISIONS, CINÉ +
CINÉIMAGE 15, SG IMAGE 2019
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