

TRÉSOR FILMS AND CHI-FOU-MI PRODUCTIONS
PRESENT



OFFICIAL SELECTION
OUT OF COMPETITION
FESTIVAL DE CANNES

MATHIEU
AMALRIC

BENOÎT
POELVOORDE

VIRGINIE
EFIRA

MARINA
FOÏS

FÉLIX
MOATI

SINK OR SWIM

GUILLAUME
CANET

JEAN-HUGUES
ANGLADE

LEÏLA
BEKHTI

PHILIPPE
KATERINE

ALBAN
IVANOV

BALASINGHAM
THAMILCHELVAN

A FILM BY
GILLES LELLOUCHE

COMING SOON

SINK OR SWIM

Directed by Gilles LELLOUCHE

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SYNOPSIS

A group of 40-something guys, all on the verge of a mid-life crisis, decide to form their local pool's first ever synchronized swimming team – for men. Braving the skepticism and ridicule of those around them, and trained by a fallen champion trying to pull herself together, the group set out on an unlikely adventure, and on the way will rediscover a little self-esteem and a lot about themselves and each other.

INTERVIEW WITH GILLES LELLOUCHE

After *Narco* and *The Players*, *Sink or Swim* is the first film you've made as a solo director. Did you have difficulty launching a solo project, or was it just a question of timing?

A little of both! Most of all, I needed to find a subject that really spoke to me and would enable me to make a film even more personal than *Narco*. As for *The Players*, that was a group project. I really enjoyed making both of those films, but neither was intimately linked to who I am. All of this took some time because after *Narco*, my "actors' films" were the center of attention.

How long has it taken to bring *Sink or Swim* to life?

Five years. In fact, it was eight years ago that I began writing a script that already contained a few of the ideas in *Sink or Swim*. I wanted to examine the weariness – or perhaps the somewhat latent depression – that I sensed in people of my generation or even more generally in France. In this individualist race we find ourselves trapped in, in spite of ourselves, we forget the collective, the drive, the appreciation of effort. There was already that "sharing in a circle" feeling that had made a big impression on me when I attended Alcoholics Anonymous meetings to prepare for Jacques Maillot's *Un Singe sur le Dos*, in which I played an alcoholic. I'd been amazed by the warmth, the dialogue and the supportiveness in those circles, and the lack of judgment. We live in a society where TV shows and discussions are filled with judgment and stubborn opinions about everything, and so I loved that bubble that was reserved for sharing. I began writing with that concept as a starting point, but a poetic and cinematographic dimension was missing. Hugo Selignac recommended that I watch this documentary on ARTE about a group of Swedish men who did synchronized swimming, and I knew I'd found my subject: a group of more or less disenchanted men who were chasing after their broken dreams. Then I asked Ahmed Hamidi, whose work I was familiar with and who'd been one of the main screenwriters for *Les Guignols* in its heyday, to write the script with me and, at a later stage, Julien Lambroschini.

There are at least 10 characters in *Sink or Swim*, and unlike what we usually see with ensemble casts, they all exist!

I have read many scripts that were intended for ensemble casts, but which in most cases left some of the characters underdeveloped, or without a story arc, at the side of the road. Comedies often suffer from a sort of comic-strip mentality. And so I spent nearly a year carefully developing just the story arc and the trajectory of each of my characters. I wanted them each to have their own existence and life experiences. And then, given that this is a relatively male-dominated film due to its subject, I wanted to devote a good deal of time to the female characters as well. It is because of women, and for women, that my protagonists succeed.

Was the goal also to bring together actors from different backgrounds?

Yes, it was something I wanted but it wasn't an absolute necessity. I didn't say "Hey, I'm going to create a cast with different types of actors." For me, it was above all that these actors were perfect for my characters. Mathieu I met on the set of Rappeneau's *Families*. I'd admired his talent since the Cours Florent drama school, so the idea of working with him had been in the back my mind for a

long time. As for Philippe Katerine, if he'd said no I would've been in real trouble, since he's the only one who could play Thierry without making him into a caricature of the annoying man-child. He has a certain spacey or surreal sense of whimsy that matched the character perfectly. And Anglade lives in the same neighborhood as me – I used to bump into him at the corner store. His poetry touches me enormously. I remembered him with long hair in *La Reine Margot*, which was perfect for my jaded rocker character. Poelvoorde was already in my first film, and for me he's an absolute genius who can handle any role but is especially good playing wily types. As I got to know Leïla in real life, I saw that she had a natural authority that'd never been tapped into in a film. She was the ideal actress to embody the rigor of athletics and *Virginie*, its philosophy. As for Guillaume, I was afraid the character might scare him because it's probably the least likeable, but he had the intelligence to see the character's beauty and flaws. It's often said that Guillaume and I are friends, but it's also very much a work relationship. And I didn't want to make a movie with my own group of friends. After a while that can become very inhibiting. I'm glad that I was able to take a distance from a certain group I'd been enclosed in, to enter new worlds and learn new ways of working.

Did you do any team-building activities before filming started, to help the cast get to know each other?

No. I drew inspiration from my own experience as an actor and remembered that when I began acting in films like *Little White Lies*, I didn't know Francois Cluzet, Pascale Arbillot or Valérie Bonneton very well. Same for Rappeneau's film. A diverse group of actors creates a certain energy and electricity that are very stimulating. So I avoided planning dinners or even holding group read-throughs. All the actors were very excited by the idea of acting with each other and I didn't want to interfere in that process by going faster than the music. During the locker-room scenes I could see they were open to each other, getting to know each other, and I didn't want to ruin that magical moment with too many rehearsals.

Especially since it's not a film where the actors are all friends.

Something that has always fascinated me are those guys who are able to travel 20 km on a Sunday night to meet up and play soccer in a city stadium when they don't even know each other. There's a dedication, a team spirit among these people who don't necessarily have anything in common but still go have a drink together afterward. They aren't friends, but they share this very specific time in their lives when something is happening that's bigger than the idea of sports, something like a team spirit and the absence of cynicism.

These actors are used to carrying an entire film by themselves, to being lone rangers of sorts. Did the bathing suits annihilate the ego wars?

Absolutely! It's like when you go to a costume party, the ice gets broken much faster! I was in fact quite apprehensive of ego conflicts, but there weren't any. They all had great respect for each other, so having ego problems would have immediately been ridiculous.

Half the time, they're in bathing suits, with swim caps and nose clips, which isn't necessarily very sexy. Did you have to deal with any bashfulness?

Not at all. I have to say, I didn't face the slightest vanity problem from the actors. They had to bare themselves from every point of view. I also wanted to make a statement about the body, the belly, physiques that are not necessarily graceful at a time dominated by ideas about the perfect appearance, which is a toned, muscular body. I wanted to show men between the ages of 40 and 50 who aren't athletes and who accept their bodies, their paunchy bellies, their body hair, scratching their knee.

Bertrand (Mathieu Amalric) is the only one who's really depressed. And at the same time, he's happy in his relationship.

Yes, I wanted to tell the story of a couple who were bonded and could weather any storm, who had their own language. I really have a soft spot for this couple. His wife (Marina Foïs) supports him and doesn't judge him. Between our youthful ideals and the realities of adult life, when we hit a few snags we can easily fall into a depression. This has happened to some of my friends, and as the eternal optimist, it upsets me.

Laurent (Guillaume Canet) is the angry boss who has made a success of his life, but is dumped by his wife and also by his mother at some level.

Without getting into an armchair therapy session, there's a bit of myself in every character. I had a difficult grandmother who was bipolar. She could be very nice one moment and unimaginably cruel the next. With Laurent, I wanted to depict a character who isn't likeable, who's strict, demanding, somewhat violent, even an asshole when you first meet him, and who turns out to have extenuating circumstances.

Thierry (Philippe Katerine) is the shy swimming pool employee who has barely dipped his toe in the water when it comes to women.

Yes, he's a bit asexual! I've always had a lot of empathy for those guys who go to restaurants alone and laugh at the ambiance and the jokes others make. By proxy, they have a nice evening. I started with that, the idea of having a very solitary character, a man-child working for the city at the municipal swimming pool who probably has nothing else going on in his life and compensates by eating lots of chocolate bars.

Marcus (Benoît Poelvoorde) is the pool salesman in denial, whose company is going down the drain.

Marcus is an overgrown teenager who doesn't want to look reality in the eye and invents a "golden boy" persona for himself. I grew up in the 80s, a time marked by over-confident guys in ads telling you "you've gotta be a winner", which made a lot of people feel inadequate. These people are mercenaries of their own lives. They start a company, then close it, then open another one somewhere else. I experienced that at age 28. Having your bank call you every two days about your overdraft and lying to them, telling them money is due to come in soon.

Simon (Jean-Hugues Anglade) is the cafeteria worker, an acrobat who missed his hour of glory but still believes in his dream. He could come across as cheesy, but he's too touching for that.

Exactly. Some 15 years ago I saw a documentary about a rock group called Anvil that'd had its moment in the sun in the 80s and whose members became warehouse handlers. Because they'd had a glimpse of their dream, they were never able to let it go and resign themselves to doing something else, so they kept on doing shows at dingy venues, which I find to be a beautiful thing. That's how I had the idea for this character who has never given up on his dream, even though it has meant his wife leaving him, living in a trailer and facing the disdain of his teenage daughter, to whom he can no longer tell stories. Simon also provided the chance to look at the career of acting in a *mise-en-abyme* framework. An actor who doesn't work has no social standing, no existence. What do you do when you've bet everything on your dream, on red, and the ball lands on black?

There's also the unlikely duo played by Alban Ivanov and Balasingham Thamichelvan, who has his own unique way of communicating since Avanish doesn't speak French...

Yes, I found it really funny to have an exchange take place more with gestures than with words. That happens sometimes, when two people are able to understand each other when no one else can, and without words, and I find that very moving.

How did the training go?

The first session was a disaster! At the beginning, Julie Fabre, the choreographer of the women's Olympic synchronized swimming team, was skeptical. But after three weeks, she told me we were going to make it. We'll skip over the fact that Balasingham Thamichelvan, whom I'd found during a general audition, lied to me – in reality, he couldn't swim – and that Félix couldn't stand having his head underwater although he played the base of the pillar! Whenever you see legs sticking up out of the water, those were stunt doubles, because even after seven years of training, it's quite difficult. They trained like crazy for seven months, once or twice a week, and really amazed me!

Who was the most talented?

The most athletic was Guillaume. But for dedication and thoroughness, Mathieu is the winner! As for Benoît, he's an excellent swimmer but a bit distracted.

Did you have any films in mind when creating this? It makes people think of *The Full Monty*, which also features choreographed group therapy and embraces its "feel-good movie" identity.

I've never seen it the whole way through! And then especially once people began mentioning it to me, I didn't want to watch it. When I made *Narco*, I was so influenced by cinematic references that I recreated shots from other films without meaning to. For *Sink or Swim*, I didn't watch any films because I preferred to be free from all references, even though there are necessarily lots of unconscious ones.

Technically speaking, is synchronized swimming difficult to film?

Yes, because there's nothing more fastidious than underwater scenes, but the main problem when you film in a swimming pool is the acoustics – there's a crazy echo. But I found the technical challenges more exciting than discouraging.

The film is also quite musical.

Yes, I delved extensively into 80s music because my characters are from the 80s, so that's why it features music by Tears For Fears, Phil Collins, Imagination and so on. And then my dream came true when Jon Brion, who I'm a big fan of, agreed to compose the score. His work plays a big role in expressing the characters' sadness.

CAST

Bertrand
Laurent
Marcus
Simon
Delphine
Amanda
Claire
Thierry
John
Basile
Avanish
Thibault
Clem
Lola
La mère de Laurent

Mathieu Amalric
Guillaume Canet
Benoît Poelvoorde
Jean-Hugues Anglade
Virginie Efira
Leïla Bekhti
Marina Foïs
Philippe Katerine
Félix Moati
Alban Ivanov
Balasingham Thamilchelvan
Jonathan Zaccà
Mélanie Doutey
Noée Abita
Claire Nadeau

CREW

Director
Producers

Associate Producer
Productions

Written by

Cinematographer
Editing
Music by
Sound

Production design

Gilles Lellouche
Alain Attal
Hugo SÉlignac
VINCENT MAZEL
Trésor Films
Chi-fou-mi Productions
Gilles Lellouche
Ahmed Hamidi
Julien Lambroschini
Laurent Tangy
Simon Jacquet
Jon Brion
Cédric Deloche
Gwenolé Le Borgne
Marc Doisne
Florian Sanson