

HEADING SOUTH

(VERS LE SUD)

A FILM BY LAURENT CANTET

Starring: CHARLOTTE RAMPLING, KAREN YOUNG, LOUISE PORTAL,
MENOTHY CESAR

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HEADING SOUTH (Vers le Sud)

Director Laurent Cantet follows up his critically acclaimed "Time Out", set during an austere wintertime in France and Switzerland, with "Heading South," set in Haiti during the late 1970s. Based on stories by Dany Laferriere, the heat comes not only from the summertime tropical setting. Charlotte Rampling, Karen Young, and Louise Portal head a group of single middle-aged women who have come for sun, fun, and romance. They desire the solicitous attention of attractive young Haitian men, and teenaged Legba (Menothy Cesar, winner of the Marcello Mastroianni Award at the 2005 Venice Film Festival) is an especially prized companion for whom the women vie. But in this difficult and economically devastated land, Legba has other demands on him as well..... "Heading South" received the Cinema for Peace Award at Venice.

Director's Note

On this subject, I'd rather let Dany Laferrière who wrote the stories this film is based on, speak, and quote from an interview he gave when his book came out :

“Physical desire and sex, as a political metaphor, seemed to me to be the fundamental element, something extraordinary, because, in a society where the relationships between social classes are so terrifying, where the gap between the rich and the poor is so huge, where humiliation, disdain, contempt for others is so intense, the only thing that can bring one particular person closer to another is physical desire. I'm not describing an innocent form of sexuality, but sexuality as an instrument of political, social, or economic power. We're dealing with a small group of very rich people who can buy anything, or who think they can buy anything, people or objects, and with others who are ready to sell the only thing they possess, their youth and their body. I wanted to find out if in this exchange, in this trade, where flesh meets flesh, there wasn't something more.”

Interview with Laurent Cantet

I discovered Haiti by chance in January 2002. I went there to meet someone for vacation, never dreaming that I would make a film. I stayed one week and left with the certainty that I would be back. It was a very short stay, just enough time to set off a multitude of powerful emotions, ranging from fascination to revolt, from this sort of peaceful bliss to extreme dejection faced with the misery seen there. All the paradoxes that rapidly make your status as a foreigner embarrassing.

On the return flight I read Dany Laferrière's book, “La Chair du Maître.” The short stories take place in the 70s, but I was able to relate very well: the proximity of such absolute beauty and the unacceptable, of nonchalance and tragedy. The fact that the book often raises the issue of foreigners who discover this country for the first time certainly made these tales more accessible to me.

I don't really like generalities. I did not want to create an imaginary country, an entity that would be the South, and another one, women from the North. It is important to name a country, define a framework and a period in time. I didn't want this to be a contemporary fable. Which is why we did everything in our power to shoot part of the film in Haiti, even though this meant postponing the film for one year because of the events that took place there during the winter of 2004 (the fall of Aristide), which made the presence of a film crew impossible.

From novel to screenplay

It was the structure of the novel that initially caught my attention. It is made up of individual narratives by different characters. Tales told in the first person, more like confessions than dramatic monologues. This design is not very cinematographic, it is true, but it left me enough room to construct a scenario. The film could be born without being the copy of the novel. I also drew inspiration from two other short stories in the same collection, “La Maîtresse du Colonel” and “L’Après-Midi d’un Faune.”

The idea of maintaining the monologues was clear from the start. It gives each woman the opportunity to talk about her relation to men in very direct terms, and in her own words. When Brenda tells us about her first intimate encounter with Legba, we sense how hard it is for her to do this, to find and pronounce certain words. But we also hear the pleasure she experiences when she succeeds. A pleasure that sends her back in time (and us as well) to the pleasure she felt on this afternoon that was so important for her. It is more unsettling to hear her talk about it than it is to watch the images of it.

The literary aspect of these confessions interested me as well. It goes “against the grain” of the rest of the film, which I wanted very raw, stripped of all the prettiness that the paradisiacal setting, the torrid atmosphere, and even the cast could easily generate. Language is an important element in the film. The different levels of language, the blend of languages, are indications of this “otherness” that the film observes, clues to deciphering the power wielded by some over others. The outline of the dialogues and the type of language used are often more significant than the dialogues themselves.

Women’s desire

The desire of women is not often talked about in cinema, especially if it concerns women over forty. Here, not only do we talk about it, we listen to the women themselves talk about it. Through these monologues, in confidence made to the camera (to the spectator, an investigator?), the women’s personalities become clearly defined. It was a question of efficiency too. Instead of presenting the characters, we discover them as the film develops, based on what they wish to say about themselves. This is the first time that the main characters in one of my films are women. Thinking from a feminine point of view, writing dialogue from a feminine point of view, was a real pleasure.

Resonance and trajectories

When Legba interrupts Eddy's dance with Brenda, the child contests his authority, "You're not my father!" When Ellen offers to bring him to Boston with her, Legba replies, "You're not my mother!" This is just before he goes to visit his real mother. The film is constructed around situations and phrases that rebound from one scene to another.

This resonance also holds true for the characters. There is a link between the young girl at the airport, whose mother wants to give her to Albert, and the girl in the limousine. And there is especially a real correlation between the trajectories of Brenda and Ellen, as if Brenda, at the end of the film, sets out on a path that Ellen, far ahead of her, has decided to end by going home.

Intimacy and society

The intermingling of intimacy and society has always intrigued me. This subject was explored in "Human Resources" and "Time Out" and we find it again in "Heading South." But the intimate is even more intimate here, for we are dealing with the notion of the couple itself. Which obviously raises the questions of one's relationship to the body, desire and sexuality, and even politics in a more general manner (dictatorship, violence, North/South relations). The film denotes the social misery of some and the sexual misery of others, then observes what can happen when the two converge.

This is what interested me from the start in the novel: you do not have poor victims on the one hand, and the bastards who manipulate them on the other. In the story "Heading South," Dany stresses the fact that everyone gets something out of it. This hotel is a small bubble where Americans come to forget the reality of their lives, which are filled with frustration, and rediscover their power of seduction. As for Legba, the hotel is the only place he can go to escape the harsh reality of this country and find a bit of affection. When he's hungry, someone will give him a sandwich, when he's thirsty, someone offers him a drink. But moreover, it is the only place where someone will listen to him, where he feels like a human being, a feeling systematically denied to him in the outside world. So there is really an exchange between the women and him. I know that the subject of sexual tourism will frequently arise in relation to the film. I would prefer for people to talk about "love tourism".

Ellen and the utopia of love

Ellen talks about life at the hotel as if it were some sort of dream world where no one belongs to anyone else, where exchanges are completely free. A kind of utopia that only exists somewhere out of this world, far away from all rules. This explains the shock she experiences when she discovers the naked corpses of Legba and his childhood sweetheart on the beach. The outside world, which she does her utmost to avoid, comes flying back in her face. I am not convinced that they were making love - nothing seems to indicate it - but it is important that this is what Ellen sees. This cruel moment enables her to realize that Legba was not only what she wanted him to be. It also enables her to better understand her own role in this story.

My place is not here

I do not judge my characters. If there is a common thread with my previous films, it is in these beings, who have not found their place, who are acutely aware that they are uprooted. They try and make do with the tragedy of their lives. We wrote the line, "What am I doing here?" very early on, but it was only much later that it began to resonate with the line at the end of "Human Resources," "And where is your place?" The situations are not comparable but the question remains. For to my mind what makes a character exist is his own awareness, often very painful, of his exclusion and solitude.

From this point of view, Brenda is by far the most optimistic character of all my films. Her place, she finally seems to find it. I do not judge the fact that she overcomes her pain so easily, that she visits other islands, happily citing their names as if she were talking about her next lovers. It is a real opening. She finally has a reason to live, a path to follow. Of course, there is nothing to stop us from thinking that she could in turn lose herself, taking over where Ellen left off.

In Dany Laferrière's short stories the endings are always terse. A single sentence that concludes with an opening. In my films I always try to keep the endings open, something I have often been reproached for. In this film, I like the abruptness of the last shot, its lack of premeditation, all of the questions it poses as to Brenda's future.

Looking for Legba

I spent more than two months in Port-au-Prince, looking for Legba, walking all day long in the streets. I think I know every basketball court and soccer field in the city, every school yard, every place where young people gather. I met about 200 boys between the ages of 16 and 22, and did a screen test with each of them. I must admit I was really discouraged. And then, a boy I had met the day before arrived with his cousin, Ménothy. As soon as he came through the door, I knew it was him. He had the grace I had been looking for the whole time, combined with the necessary shyness to be Legba. There was just one problem: Ménothy didn't want to audition, he was just there to be with his cousin. My first job was to convince him to do a screen test. At the first improvisation, my intuition was verified: the way he spoke was real, he was comfortable in his body. He also had a very impressive sense of rhythm, he was able to be quiet, wait, look, which is very rare, at the beginning for a non-professional actor.

Later on, we had to push back the shooting for one year and I lost Ménothy. No more telephone, his friends pretended they didn't know what happened to him... It took me a month of investigation to finally find him. Stubbornness sometimes pays!

'Tourists never die

One particular scene sums up the essence of the film: the one where the inspector, who has come to investigate the death of the young couple, refuses Ellen the right to play any role in this story. It is terrible for her. She says that she and Legba argued, that she feels responsible for his death; she claims a role that the inspector denies her. It is impossible for her to have any importance whatsoever in this country that turns its back on her, that will not recognize her. The words that the inspector says in Creole, and which Albert translates for Ellen, I heard them from the mouth of Dany Laferrière. At one point we were afraid of going to Port au Prince to shoot and he said to us, «Go ahead, tourists never die.» We rewrote the scene with the inspector while we were there to include this line. It really is a terrible blow, it forces the tourist (the spectator) to acknowledge his condition as the eternal observer who will never have the possibility of taking part in the story that is unfolding, even when he has the feeling he is living it.

This reminds me of when we were shooting in Port au Prince, and the market scene in particular. People would walk by, only inches from the camera, without even acknowledging its presence. There was no aggressiveness towards us. More like a negation of our presence, comfortable, yes, for shooting, but quite astonishing to experience. When you do not exist in the eyes of others, you feel as though you no longer exist at all.

About the Director:

Laurent Cantet, 44, made his debut as a short film director with TOUS A LA MANIF (1994) and JEUX DE PLAGE (1995). He directed LES SANGUINAIRES (1997) as part of the series “2000 seen by”. Following on from RESSOURCES HUMAINES “Human Resources”, (César for First Film 2001 and Best First Film San Sebastian Film Festival 2000) and L’EMPLOI DU TEMPS “Time Out” (Lion of the year at the Venice Festival 2001), directed VERS LE SUD, shot in the Caribbean, with Charlotte Rampling (SOUS LE SABLE – “Under the Sand”), Louise Portal (LES INVASIONS BARBARES – “The Barbarian Invasions”) and Karen Young (THE SOPRANOS).

Cast

ELLEN	Charlotte RAMPLING
BRENDA	Karen YOUNG
SUE	Louise PORTAL
LEGBA	Ménothy CESAR
ALBERT	Lys AMBROISE
EDDY	Jackenson Pierre OLMO DIAZ

CHARLOTTE RAMPLING

Selected Filmography:

ANGEL (2006)
LEMMINGS (2005)
THE KEYS TO THE HOUSE (2004)
SWIMMING POOL (2003)
I'LL SLEEP WHEN I'M DEAD (2003)
UNDER THE SAND (2000)
THE CHERRY ORCHARD (1999)
THE WINGS OF THE DOVE (1997)
HAMMERS OVER THE ANVIL (1993)
DOA (1988)
ANGEL HEART (1987)
ON NE MORT QUE DEUX FOIS (1985)
THE VERDICT (1982)
STARDUST MEMORIES (1980)
FAREWELL, MY LOVELY (1975)
THE NIGHT PORTER (1974)
ZARDOZ (1974)
'TIS PITY SHE'S A WHORE (1971)
SEQUESTRO DI PERSONA (1968)
GEORGY GIRL (1968)

KAREN YOUNG

Selected Filmography:

FACTOTUM (2005)
THE SOPRANOS (TV) 2004-2006
LAW AND ORDER (TV) 2001-2004
JOE THE KING (1999)
PANTS ON FIRE (1998)
THE WIFE (1995)
TORCH SONG TRILOGY (1988)
HEAT (1986)
BIRDY (1984)

LOUISE PORTAL

Selected Filmography:

THE BARBARIAN INVASIONS (2004)
SERAPHIN (2002)
THE DECLINE OF THE AMERICAN EMPIRE (1986)

Crew

Director..... Laurent Cantet
Script..... Laurent Cantet & Robin Campillo
Based on three short stories by Dany Laferrière published by Le Serpent à
Plumes

Director of Photography..... Pierre Milon
Sound Claude Lahaye
Art Direction..... Frankie Diago
Costumes..... Denis Sperdouklis
Hair/Make-up..... Manuela Taco
..... Marie-Angèle Breitner
1st Assistant Director Sylvie Peyre
Editing..... Robin Campillo
Sound Editing..... Valérie Deloof
..... Agnès Ravez
Sound Mixing..... Jean-Pierre Laforce
Post Production Manager..... Christina Crassaris
Production Manager Jacques Ahrex
Associate Producers..... Barbara Letellier
..... Jean-François Casamayou
Co-Producers..... David Reckziegel
..... John Hamilton
..... Valérie Lonergan
Producers..... Caroline Benjo
..... Carole Scotta
..... Simon Arnal
US Casting..... Forensic Film
..... Robin O'Hara, Scott Macaulay
..... Kerry Barden
..... Paul Schnee
Haitian Casting..... Maria Totaro
..... Rachèle Magloire
..... Carl Lafontant
Canadian Casting..... Lucie Robitaille
..... Barbara St Philippe
Dominican Casting & extras..... Michele Soria
..... Yssis Castillo

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Prizes:

Marcello Mastroianni Award—Venice Film Festival 2005—Ménothy Cesar
Cinema for Peace Award—Venice Film Festival 2005—Laurent Cantet

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1:85

35 mm

Dolby SRD