

A PINWOOD DIALOGUE WITH FRANÇOIS OZON

Throughout his career, the versatile French director François Ozon has made a wide range of films that display varying doses of outlandish comedy, transgressive sexual politics, and Hitchcockian suspense. While his movies are stylish and liberating, they also contain a poignant awareness of loss and unfulfilled desire. Ozon spoke at the Museum after a preview screening of his deceptively simple, profoundly haunting drama *5x2*, the story of a failed marriage told in reverse chronological order. Also screened at the Museum on the same day, at the conclusion of a retrospective of Ozon's films, were four of his early short works: *Bed Scenes*, *X2000*, *Truth or Dare*, and *Little Death*. In the discussion, Ozon is alternately playful and serious. One can see how his relaxed, open approach elicits such truthful, revelatory performances.

A Pinewood Dialogue following a screening of the short films *Bed Scenes*, *X2000*, *Truth or Dare*, and *Little Death*, and the feature film *5x2*, moderated by Chief Curator David Schwartz (June 5, 2005):

SCHWARTZ: Please welcome back François Ozon. (Applause) Let's just start by talking about the final—the final image is just so strong, because it's such a blend of optimism and the opposite, because of what we've seen. So could you talk about that, and also [about] the process of putting this story together, the process of writing this... I understand that you wrote the first scenes first, and then took a break.

OZON: Yes. For me, it was easier to begin with the divorce. Because—maybe because of what I was living at this time. So the first scene I wrote was the divorce and then I decided to go backward until the beginning. And the shooting was strange, because we began to shoot the divorce, the dinner with friends, and the birth of the baby. Then we stopped for five months, the actress lost weight, (Laughter) and we [continued to] shoot for five more months. And during this time, I wrote the second part of the film.

SCHWARTZ: Tell us a bit about the writing process. What's amazing to me about this movie is that there are shocking things that happen in it, in terms of what happens in the story.

OZON: I wanted very simple things, you know. I did not want to explain anything about...because I don't have the answer. It could be about how to succeed in my [inaudible]; I would be very happy. But it's not reality. So I just tried to put some scenes and to tell questions, because I don't have all the answers.

SCHWARTZ: The idea, for example, of a couple having a divorce and then sleeping together, or what happens at the hospital. These are shocking things that happen—and on the wedding night, what happens. But it feels naturalistic, it works, in a way. I'm wondering how you came to some of those [events].

OZON: I think for the beginning—I think it's very difficult when you finish a story, and sometimes you want to try something again. That's what I wanted in the scene at the hotel after the divorce. Try to see how people who are divorcing might try to touch each other. Can it work? And actually, it doesn't work. And I think what interested me in this scene was to show that the woman is able to turn the page [more] easily than the man. And the man, it's very difficult for him, and his only way to support the situation is to commit a rape, because he's not able to say what he's feeling. I wanted to show their different behavior in such a situation.

SCHWARTZ: I want to go into your work with the actors here, because these are amazing performances. And [I] want to ask how they

interpreted the material. What I'm driving at is that the actor in the scene said that he felt that the character was dealing with his homosexuality. That was an interpretation.

OZON: Yes, it was his interpretation, not mine. (Laughter) No... The thing which was difficult [was when] the actors began to shoot the divorce scene and they hadn't known each other before. So it was very difficult for them. And we didn't know how they met. So they had only to be in the present, in the situation. It was good, I think, because very often, the actors ask so many questions—psychological questions—and this time, I could answer, "I don't know. You just have to play the situation." I think that's why they are so present. They had a very good relationship together.

SCHWARTZ: There's a kind of chemistry that they have that's really interesting. Because I think as you're watching the film...

OZON: But the first day of shooting, they were in the bed naked. (Laughter) So they have to be... (Laughter) It was easy for them to know each other after. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: I see. (Laughter) Okay, that's a good directing tip.

OZON: Yes. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: You feel so much history between them, as the film develops. I'm wondering if you could talk about casting these actors, how you arrived at that; you had made a film before that with very famous actors, internationally famous actors [*Eight Women*, with Danielle Darrieux, Catherine Deneuve, Isabelle Huppert, Emmanuelle Béart, Fanny Ardant, Virginie Ledoyen, and Ludivine Sagnier], and here is a decision—you made a different decision.

OZON: For this film, the first idea for the cast was to choose big stars from France. And it was—I can say this now, because it was a long time ago—it was Sophie Marceau and Vincent Cassel. I don't know if you know them here in America. And actually, they didn't want to shoot together; and I had no script, I had only the idea of the film;

and Sophie Marceau didn't want to have sex [with another man] the night of her wedding, because she's very moral. (Laughter) So it didn't work. And actually, I thought it could be better for the film to have actors we don't know too much; people we can identify with. So I decided to choose Valeria [Bruni Tedeschi] and Stéphane [Freiss]. I made a lot of tests for the casting with a scene of [Ingmar] Bergman's. I don't know the title...

SCHWARTZ: Oh, *Scenes from a Marriage*?

OZON: Yes.

SCHWARTZ: Okay. They were reading *Scenes from a Marriage*?

OZON: They play—they played the text. And I made many tests with different couples, with different options, with French actors. When I saw them [Valeria and Stéphane] together, it worked. I needed to find the right couple, one you can believe in at first sight. Because when they are in the scene of the divorce, they are together and you have to imagine they could have been together before. So it was important to find the right person.

SCHWARTZ: How much did they need to understand about the past? There's a sort of cliché with American actors, that you need to explain everything, or explain the motivation.

OZON: But the actor, Stéphane Freiss, is like an American actor. He wants to know everything, but I couldn't answer. Valeria is a director, too, she had made a film. And now she... She's an actress first, but she has made a film. So she knows how to direct, and she knows my position. She understood what I wanted to do. And I think actresses are more sensitive and more—how do I explain that in English? They feel better things and they believe more in the situation than in the direction. For Stéphane, it was very—he was very afraid of his character. And because he's a father in life, he couldn't understand not to be there at the birth. It was a big difficulty for him. It was easier for him to rape Valeria than to be absent [at the birth].

SCHWARTZ: You've talked about trying to have different cinematic styles in the movie. One interesting thing about the movie is that, in a way, you're starting with the heaviest scenes and, in a way, you get lighter in tone towards the end; but because we know what's happening, there's a sadness, also. Could you talk about your approach to the styles of each section?

OZON: I decided to choose five moments in the life of this couple. And I think in life, very often you have the feeling of spending a day [in] a [Steven] Spielberg movie or a[n Eric] Rohmer movie, you know? And I wanted for each scene to have this—a different tone. Not style, because I think it's the same style, but a different tone, a different mood. So it begins like a Bergman movie, and it finishes like a Rohmer movie, in a certain way.

SCHWARTZ: And I think you said that the wedding scene was—you had American movies in mind. Is that true?

OZON: Yes. The film by Michael Cimino. Because there is a wedding scene I love...

SCHWARTZ: *The Deer Hunter*.

OZON: ...in *The Deer Hunter*, yes. I think it's beautiful.

SCHWARTZ: I wanted to ask you about the Jane Campion film, *Two Friends*, because I think you said that that was an inspiration for you.

OZON: Yes. I saw this film a long time ago, and I thought it was very powerful, because the story is very simple. It begins at the end of the relationship of two girls, and at the end [of the movie], you understand it's quite nothing which cut [sic] a relationship, a friendship, just the social context. And I like the idea to use backward construction, not to explain, just to ask more questions. I didn't want to—it's not a whodunit. At the end, it's a little bit deceptive, maybe, because you are waiting for something which maybe will explain. But actually, it doesn't explain anything. It just gives more "deep"? Can you say that? "Depth."

SCHWARTZ: *Truth or Dare*, we saw earlier today. We saw some short films today. And it reminded me of the scene—I love the dinner party scene. If you could just talk about writing that scene and constructing that scene, it's so interesting.

OZON: I didn't think about it, but it's like a game between the couples. Do they tell the truth or not? I don't know. When Stéphane Freiss is telling this story, is it the truth or not? In the script...

SCHWARTZ: About the orgy, about the...

OZON: Yes. What did you think? (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: I was sort of hoping it was true. (Laughter) Maybe exaggerated a little.

OZON: So in the script, it wasn't true. There was a scene I cut after, in which Valeria asks him, "Why did you tell this story?" He said, "Just for fun." And actually, it was not the truth. I'm sorry. (Laughter) But I decided...

SCHWARTZ: It's only a movie, it's only a movie.

OZON: Yes, but I decided to keep ambiguity in this scene.

SCHWARTZ: And so I started by asking about the last shot [of 5x2] because, having seen all your films now, there seems to be an interest in images of water: beaches, pools. That seems to mean something to you. I don't know how conscious you are, in terms of what you tried to...

OZON: I think it's a pleasure to shoot on the beach, first. (Laughter) I like to see the bodies of the actors, and to be on the beach is the best way to ask them to be naked. (Laughter) But it's natural. And I think it's a story—to tell the story of two bodies. You know, you can see the body of Valeria at the beginning of the film. And at the end, she... I think it tells you who is the character, when you see the bodies. So...

SCHWARTZ: And she has said that you told her—one instruction that you gave her was to look beautiful, to think of herself as beautiful.

OZON: I think Valeria is actually beautiful, but in the parts she played before, she [wasn't] given the permission to be beautiful. Maybe because her sister is a very famous model in France, and she's the intellectual sister. In this film, I asked her, yes, to feel beautiful. And I think she is.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) What film directors do you feel the most kinship with?

OZON: Dead or alive?

SCHWARTZ: Dead or alive, right.

OZON: Fassbinder, for me, is... I adapted one of his plays [*Water Drops on Burning Rocks*].

SCHWARTZ: (After audience question) Well, the question [is] about mixing fantasy and realism. And maybe... So why do you like to confuse your audiences?

OZON: Did you like to be confused? (Laughter) It depends on the story. For *Under the Sand*, it was a story about a woman who tries to mourn, to accept reality. But actually, the reality is not acceptable, because she has not seen the body of her husband. So she—to accept this situation which is so difficult, she prefers to see him as a ghost. In this film, you are in her head, so that's why you see the husband as the reality; but actually, it's her fantasy.

Swimming Pool, it's about a woman who is writing a book. So it depends on your interpretation of the film. But for me, all the film is the book. No, not exactly all the film, but many parts of the film (Laughter) are the book. We should see it together; I can maybe explain. (Laughter)

It's a mix between what she is living and what she's imagining.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Was there any inspiration from Robert Bresson [in] your film?

OZON: I love him. (Laughter) I love his films, and I think he is one of the great French directors. He has invented a style... For me, he's an action director. And he's anti-psychological. That's

something I like, just to show the behaviors of the characters and their gestures, but not to explain things. I think in Robert Bresson, it's very... I don't know in French, it's... You understand?

SCHWARTZ: I... Yeah. And I think you do— (Laughter) because I think you do that in your films, too, that you have behavior...

OZON: Yes, not as abstractly as Bresson, I think.

SCHWARTZ: I would imagine this is a very difficult film, a film that really demands a lot of the actors, because...

OZON: But actors like to give... When you ask them something difficult, they like that. Very often, they have nothing to play, especially for a woman. So I think—I have no problem working with actors.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Could you talk about some of the music you chose here, some of the Italian love songs?

OZON: Yes. I didn't know at the beginning that it would be Italian songs. The first idea was to have piano, very classical piano, like Chopin. But it was so boring and so... (Laughter) so sad. And when you are editing the film, you try [a lot of different] music. One day I came up with Italian songs and it was such a contrast between the scenes. It was strong and it worked for me, so I chose some Italian songs. Because Valeria is Italian, too; and because the beginning of the story is in Italy; and because I think for French people, Italy is the most romantic place. All the French [will] have a love affair in Italy one day. (Laughter) So it was good with the story.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) How many short films did you make before you made your feature films?

OZON: About ten. Ten. But I made [more] before I was a student.

SCHWARTZ: A student, a film student.

OZON: No, before. When you are not a student, what are you? School?

SCHWARTZ: Well, high school.

OZON: Ah, yes. I made many short films in Super 8mm.

Que les courts métrages, c'est comme faire ces gammes, en musique.

SCHWARTZ: [Making short films] is like doing scales [in music].

OZON: And actually, before making my first feature, I wanted to try many different things, to experiment. The good thing with short films, especially in France, is there is no financial sanction. It doesn't have to be commercial. If the film is not good, it's okay, because you can do another one. For a feature, it's more difficult. So I took my time experimenting with different things.

SCHWARTZ: And you've been experimenting with your—you've made many different kinds of feature films, also. You've worked in different styles and approaches, as well.

OZON: Maybe because I make a film a year, I need to have desire. If I have the feeling of always doing the same thing, I don't feel a challenge.

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Okay, *Swimming Pool*, why did you choose to make that in English?

OZON: Because I wanted to work again with Charlotte Rampling, who is English, and because it's about a British writer. Actually, in France, we don't have this kind of writer. It's very English, this woman who writes about murder, about mysteries. (Laughter) In France, we have more writers writing about feelings. Like Françoise Sagan and Marguerite Duras. It would have been another film. (Laughter)

SCHWARTZ: (Repeats audience question) Were you directing in French when you were on the set?

OZON: No. I directed in French, because Charlotte can speak French fluently. And Ludivine [Sagnier] is French. And you can hear my English, so... (Laughter) It's better to speak in French. But the

language is not important when you direct actors, I think.

I think it's easier for me to make a film about women because I'm a man. I have more distance; I have the feeling of being more lucid on women; and maybe it's easier to love women in movies than men in movies. I don't know why. Maybe my personal life, I don't know.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Was it difficult to get Catherine Deneuve and Fanny Ardant to kiss each other?

OZON: No, they loved that. (Laughter) No, it was not a problem. They are very clever. And they had fun, it was fun to do. But I think they didn't realize it was perverse for me to do that. Because you know, the two actresses had a love affair with François Truffaut. So the two together... I think François Truffaut, in his grave, was laughing. (Laughter) Or maybe it was his fantasy! It was a tribute to him. (Laughter)

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Has the advent of the DVD changed the production standards in France, as it's done here?

OZON: Not really, but for France, yes. I know, because for me, it's... The fact [that] you can put on the DVD the cut scenes.

SCHWARTZ: Mm-hmm, outtakes.

OZON: It's easier to edit, because sometimes it's difficult to cut a scene you like, but it doesn't work in the film. But to know now [that] you can put it on the DVD, it's easier to do more with these kind of things.

SCHWARTZ: Okay. I think that's a good ending, now that we've wrapped that up. So I want to thank you a lot for being here today.

OZON: Thank you. (Applause)

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