

Strand Releasing presents

ABUSE OF WEAKNESS

A film by CATHERINE BREILLAT

Starring Isabelle Huppert & Kool Shen

Official Selection:
Toronto International Film Festival
COLCOA French Film Festival
New York Film Festival

Country of Origin: France / Germany / Belgium

Format: DCP/2.35/Color

Sound Format: Dolby SR

Running Time: 104 minutes

Genre: Drama

Not Rated

In French with English Subtitles

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SYNOPSIS

Inspired by director Catherine Breillat's (FAT GIRL, ROMANCE) true life experiences, her latest film, ABUSE OF WEAKNESS, is an exploration of power and sex. Isabelle Huppert (THE PIANO TEACHER, 8 WOMEN) stars as Maud, a strong willed filmmaker who suffers a stroke. Bedridden, but determined to pursue her latest film project, she sees Vilko (Kool Shen), a con man who swindles celebrities, on a TV talk show. Interested in him for her new film, the two meet and Maud soon finds herself falling for Vilko's manipulative charm as their symbiotic relationship hurdles out of control.

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Abuse of weakness is a criminal offense. I used it as the film's title because I like the sound of it, but also because it has another meaning. Abuse of power. Yes, Maud has strength of character; paradoxically, it's her weakness. Being an artist means also revealing one's weaknesses to others.

I would have preferred Maud not to be a film director and the story not to seem autobiographical, since even the spectator (at least in intimate movies, and mine are) looks at himself in a mirror.

The viewer also adopts an autobiographical point of view through identifying with the fictional heroes. For me, that place is either silence or childhood. I want this film to be a return to childhood. This abuse of weakness begins in the hospital. The drama, the hemiplegia that grabs hold of her one night, leaves the soul intact: that's the adult side. Things only start to slip and slide afterwards.

Let me make this clear: I don't want the rehabilitation to be a demonstration of courage, but more the admission of a child's helplessness. She's become an adolescent by the time she comes home, because adolescence is a non-place where one isn't oneself yet, nor what one will eventually become.

I wanted her to be a film director because of its atmosphere of constant tyrannical game-playing – relentless, but not yet adult.

She sees Vilko. She wants him. Her assistant must go find him. Maud must go and look for him deliberately and instantly she sees him as “her” actor; Vilko is not a person but an imaginary possession. I don't want him to be diabolical except at the end, and yet he is caught up in the self-destruction of the repeat-offender. He will take possession of her, and she of him.

A serial offender is someone who only exists as a predator. It's a mandatory drive, a form of vertigo. I want this film to be like vertigo, like two people falling into a void together, but in slow motion. Vertigo is fear of falling, and if you have any pride, you prefer the actual falling to having to endure the fear of it. It's a story of pride.

Maud and Vilko are very similar. I don't want him to be a calculating predator from the outset. He's the result of his devastated childhood and youth; she, of having her body destroyed.

But what happened to Maud isn't a tragedy either. I don't want it to look like it takes immense courage to learn to walk again. I know from my own experience that it takes none. That's how it is: one night you go to bed as yourself, and the next day you wake up as Maud. And that's not the story I want to tell – it's about an inevitable return to childhood. Because immediately your body becomes work for others. It's also a body that gets carried, that is handled like a baby. Her hospital room, with its crib, is where her producer hugs her. It's not sad. It is a state of things where tenderness becomes

visible, where it takes shape. There is no compassion. I don't want the spectator to have any.

He or she should be plunged into the sweetness of being a child again, where relationships get established so naturally, because that's what happens throughout the story. This very childhood where all of Maud's relationships with others are necessarily perverted because their bodies grow closer. The disabled body is also the one which Vilko will tend to. It's not normal, but it's not perverse either. He is rarely perverse. What matters is the mandatory slippage of affection on the part of a healthy body; the body that carries on by carrying the destroyed body. Never mind the reality, since it's just a childhood game – they're lost in the orphanage of life, for different reasons... incarceration of the soul... incarceration of his body. Of course, there's the relentless and cynical duplicity of the con man. The spectators can only perceive it as a material deduction. Yet I want them to be haunted by the fear, not of the financial disaster that Maud is sinking into, but that this fragile bubble of naivety, and yet reciprocal poetry, may burst. It's a thriller about denial. "Let's live a dream," as French author Sacha Guitry said.

Yielding to vertigo is taking the fatal step, deliberately falling into the abyss in order to end the demeaning fear of falling into it. We all carry such vertigo within us; Maud and Vilko more than others, that's all... and yet, who knowingly plunges into the spectator's soul? We always show him ours as if it were his.

The film I want to make is spelled out in the story of the script, yet it's misleading to perceive it that way. Reading a script is linear: place, time, day or night, dialogue. However, I always film what is "not said" and what I don't tell myself. Call it "interdiction." Telling the audience, not myself. A film can now be in four dimensions, but its greatest dimension for me is the unmentionable vertigo of the soul – situations where every word rings true, but where the physical presences loudly question it. I have always felt that cinema is like an ideogram, a story with two separate meanings, each inscribed within the other, thus creating a self-evident third one. In this case, we're concerned with the intertwining of bodies, so a bit different, of course, from those which inevitably spring to mind. Me and Mr. Rocancourt. Those two don't concern us anymore, they were just a news item that was pitifully popularized. ABUSE OF WEAKNESS isn't that. It's far more incredible... and more "delicious."

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

When exactly did you get the idea for the film?

C.B.: Crazy as it may sound, it was while “He” was there, in that broken down baby doll bed. It was so funny, so weird – these were scenes from a film. I couldn’t let them pass me by. So, in the morning, I’d write down these “scenes” for a film – a different film for which I hadn’t yet come up with the story. I had absolutely no idea at the time what was going on, or that this film would become ABUSE OF WEAKNESS. But her name was already Maud and he was Vilko. I chose Vilko in tribute to Vilko Filac, my cinematographer on BLUEBEARD, who died in 2008.

When did your idea for a film become reality?

C.B.: When I went to see Olivier Nora to discuss the book, I told him I would also like to make a film. He let me retain the rights without me having to ask him. He’s a very classy man. From that point forward, writing the script was complicated because I was in a real state of confusion at the time. It took me forever. I was lost, incapable of distancing myself from what I’d experienced and yet dead set on turning Maud and Vilko into proper fictional characters. This screenplay took me two and a half years to write, whereas I usually have a rough draft within about three weeks. The reason was obvious: I was afraid to make this film.

Because of its autobiographical nature?

C.B.: ABUSE OF WEAKNESS was not at all cathartic for me, despite what some

people might think. I don’t need that. I repeat: for me this is a film like any other. On set I always referred to the two main characters as “He” and “She”. Never “Me”. That was totally off limits. I couldn’t have handled it. Obviously, Maud is me. But I’m in all of my films. I’m the heroine in 36 FILLETTE. I’m both sisters in FAT GIRL! I’m Fu’ad Aït Aattou and Michael Lonsdale in THE LAST MISTRESS, Caroline Ducey and Rocco Siffredi in ROMANCE... I’ve never written a single line in any of my scripts that didn’t correspond to something I’ve seen or experienced. I’ve never made anything up.

When did you think of Isabelle Huppert for Maud?

C.B.: Right away! I called her and told her if she wanted to make a film with me before I died, it was now or never! I’d wanted to work with her for ages. Beyond her immense talent, she’s both intellectual and childlike, a dichotomy that fits the character of Maud perfectly.

And how did Kool Shen get involved?

C.B.: Right from the start I wanted the physique of a rapper. I didn’t know a thing about rap, but instinctively, I felt I would find the energy and brutality of the character there. So I simply looked on the Internet and came across Kool Shen. I called him and we did some tests. To begin with, he had the powerful physique and presence I was looking for. I gave him an extremely long, complicated text to memorize. It was a seduction scene from FAT GIRL, a very bourgeois, literary scene, completely different from ABUSE OF WEAKNESS. He tested beautifully. He spoke without

seeming like he was acting. He emanated such intensity. He'd start over, and each time, he was perfect. I'd found Vilko. Throughout the shoot he consistently proved I'd made the right choice. I expected to encounter some difficulties, as one does with any beginner, but there were none. Isabelle was as blown away as I was. Kool Shen doesn't act from the gut the way inexperienced actors often do. He intellectualizes everything.

What was the trickiest part of the preparation process for you?

C.B.: Without a doubt scouting locations for the physical therapy room. Personally, I was very happy at the hospital. I'd accepted my condition. I just wanted to walk again, and that requires intense concentration and an unbelievable level of effort. The first step you take is like mankind's first step on the moon! But as someone who has always taken care of others, I was happy because finally people were taking care of me. As I was scouting those locations, all those moments came rushing back to me and I couldn't stop crying. Not because of the stroke or the memories of physical therapy, but because the hospital was where it all began. I'd gotten so attached to everyone who took care of me. And it just continued.

What was the first day of the shoot like for you? Was it particularly emotional as well?

C.B.: The first scene we shot was the one where Maud is in bed with her mouth all askew, which obviously made it impossible for me to have any distance. I was in tears. That's why I always like to throw in a little comic relief in the middle of an emotional scene. I'm constantly breaking the tension.

Actually, when I make a film, I'm someone else – even when I shot *THE SLEEPING BEAUTY* in the throes of a deep depression. Cinema is my passion, and nothing can stop you when you're passionate about something.

Which scenes frightened you the most on the shoot?

C.B.: Once I'm with the actors, nothing frightens me. There were just four days when I was unbelievably cruel to Isabelle. Afterwards I went to see her and told her I'd been wrong to behave that way. My anxiety had turned me mean and dictatorial. Our last confrontation took place during the scene where Vilko is at Maud's feet putting on her boots. I explained to Isabelle that, as Vilko is clearly not helping her close her suitcase and has the upper hand, Maud needs to shift the balance of power. And to accomplish that, I felt she should look him in the eyes for the first part of her line, then immediately turn her back to him and head for the chair. She didn't want to do it; she didn't think it was natural. I insisted, because if you want to dominate someone in real life, you must never let them get the power back with their gaze. She summons him to her feet. This scene wasn't written in advance. I like to come up with ideas on set.

Isabelle and Kool Shen understood that the film would have a comic side. It was a pleasure for me to see them suddenly so connected and joyful. This was their first scene together. It put a stop to my harshness towards Isabelle. I was reassured: the film was taking shape. In fact, from the moment I saw Isabelle and Kool Shen together, I knew the film would work.

How do you work with your actors on set?

C.B.: In general there aren't many discussions. I do a first take very quickly. The actors make it happen, not me. As opposed to the theatre, a film is not something you work on, it's something you do! I only ask for one thing from my actors: Surprise me! And I do multiple takes without interruption in order to get to my desired result.

What surprised you most about Isabelle Huppert?

C.B.: You have to trust Isabelle completely. You can't direct her with an iron hand. I was surprised by her amazing powers of observation. Without me realizing it on set, she managed to capture on screen the way I move and even certain gestures I make subconsciously, like the way I hold my finger up. When she did it for the first time, I had no idea what she was doing. I found it theatrical and grotesque. But I didn't stop her, and I was pleasantly surprised in the editing room. When the film was finished I asked her why she'd done that and she told me, "Because you do it all the time!" (laughter). My children backed her up on that. They were also immediately struck by the mimicry. In the end, Isabelle is both Maud and herself.

Did the editing change the film much?

C.B.: I cut a lot out. Especially in the physical therapy scenes, which I'd already streamlined considerably in the script. I also cut the second-to-last scene, and that really tore me up because Isabelle was so staggeringly good in it.

But you can't end a film on two powerful scenes. I had to sacrifice one of them.

During the editing process, were you able to maintain enough distance from your own experience?

C.B.: It was actually harder for my editor, because in her eyes, obviously, Maud was me. ABUSE OF WEAKNESS is quite tough on those who know me. But it doesn't get to me as much as it does them. I'm making a film. I'm telling Maud's story, not mine.

Today, can you watch this film as you would any of your other films?

C.B.: When I talk about the events that inspired this film, I cry. But when I watch ABUSE OF WEAKNESS, I don't cry. It's fiction, and it doesn't go into the details.

What is your biggest fear as you approach the film's release?

C.B.: That people will say I made ABUSE OF WEAKNESS to exploit what happened to me. This film is no more autobiographical than any of my other feature films. I want it to be seen for what it is: a film.

SELECTED DIRECTOR'S FILMOGRAPHY

The Sleeping Beauty (La Belle Endormie) 2010

Venise Film Festival 2010 - Orizzonti

An Old Mistress (Une vieille Maitresse) 2007

Cannes Film Festival 2007 - In Competition

Anatomy of Hell (Anatomie de l'Enfer) 2004

Rotterdam IFF 2004

Sex is Comedy 2002

Cannes Film Festival 2002 - Directors' Fortnight (Opening Film)

Fat Girl (A ma soeur!) 2001

Berlin Film Festival 2001 - In Competition

Rotterdam Film Festival 2002 - Audience Award

Chicago Film Festival 2001 - Golden Hugo for Best Picture

Romance 1999

Rotterdam IFF 1999

CAST

Isabelle Huppert
Kool Shen
Laurence Ursino
Christopher Sermet
Ronald Leclercq

Maud
Vilko
Andy
Ezze
Gino

CREW

Written and Directed by

Catherine Breillat

Producer

Jean-François Lepetit

Co-Producers

Nicolas Steil

Cinematographer

Alain Marcoen

Sound

Dominique Warnier

Set Design

Pierre-François Limbosch

Music

Didier Lockwood

Editing

Pascal Chavance