

*Strand Releasing presents*

# BEING 17

**A FILM BY ANDRÉ TÉCHINÉ**

***Starring Sandrine Kiberlain, Kacey Mottet Klein,  
Corentin Fila and Alexis Loret***

## **PRELIMINARY PRESS NOTES**

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Berlin International Film Festival  
Frameline Film Festival  
Outfest Los Angeles*

**Country of Origin:** France  
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**Sound Format:** 5.1 Surround Sound  
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**Genre:** Drama  
Not Rated  
**In French with English Subtitles**

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## **SYNOPSIS**

BEING 17 is a moving exploration of adolescent sexual awakening from renowned French director André Téchiné (*Wild Reeds*) with a script he co-wrote with director Céline Sciamma (*Girlhood*). Damien and Thomas are French teenagers from very different upbringings who go to the same high school but can't stand each other. When circumstances bring Damien's mother Marianne (played by Sandrine Kiberlain) to invite Thomas to live with them, the young men are forced to coexist and work through their emerging attraction and complicated desires.

### **Of Monsters and Gods**

“... The salient feature of the absurd age I was at--an age which for all its alleged awkwardness, is prodigiously rich-- is that reason is not its guide, and the most insignificant attributes of other people always appear to be consubstantial with their personality. One lives among monsters and gods, a stranger to peace of mind. There is scarcely a single one of our acts from that time which we would not prefer to abolish later on. But all we should lament is the loss of the spontaneity that urged them upon us. In later life, we see things with a more practical eye, one we share with the rest of society; but adolescence was the only time when we ever learned anything.”

**- Marcel Proust**

## **A JOINT INTERVIEW WITH ANDRÉ TÉCHINÉ & CÉLINE SCIAMMA**

### **Why did you want to work together?**

**André Téchiné:** I knew that the film was going to be about two adolescents, and the choice of Céline seemed immediately obvious. With “Water Lilies”, “Tomboy” and “Girlhood”, she is the only person in France to have taken a new look at adolescence.

**Céline Sciamma:** After “Girlhood”, I didn’t think I would ever make another movie on the subject again. But I still do like to talk about it. André’s proposal was an opportunity to go on talking about it, but without being obliged to continue in a same vein. As a screenwriter, it was also a genuine challenge to work with a filmmaker who is as ambitious as he is about the stories he tells. I discovered his films very early on. They truly marked my encounter with auteur cinema.

### **What was the point of departure for this scenario?**

**AT:** We started with the idea of a triangular relationship between a mother, whom we wanted to be an important character, and two teenagers who discover and explore their desires during the three terms of a school year. Just one thing guided us: the physicality of the story. Writing as physical a movie as possible, in which each scene represents a moment of action; during which the characters are constantly on the alert, and react without understanding what is happening to them; without knowing how to respond and, especially, how to put it into words. It was out of the question that Tom and Damien express their emotions as adults would.

**CS:** In “Water Lilies”, there was already a desire to avoid dealing with characters who know who they are and proclaim it to the world. I wanted to capture that moment in which desire rises from the gut to the heart, and just barely grazes consciousness. André and I were truly on the same wave length here. We shared the same desire to make a very physical movie.

### **Tom and Damien are two lonely boys. We are far removed here from your typical teen movie...**

**AT:** We couldn’t imagine them as part of a group. We wanted them to keep to themselves: although we see, fairly soon, that each of them plays on a high school basketball team, we get the feeling that the others tend to forget about them – they hold back a bit and live in a kind of solitude that is not, by the way, tinged with melancholy. They just tend to keep to the side a little.

**The violence that inhabits them is, at least in the beginning, the only language they share. How do you explain their animosity?**

**AT:** They don't know where it comes from. Maybe it's because of their different milieus. Tom has to trudge through the snow for an hour to catch the school bus; Damien, tied to his mother's apron strings, gets dropped off at school. The gap between the everyday lives they lead distances them from one another, and separates them. Damien shows off, reciting Rimbaud. Tom is more in tune with nature, as it is evoked in the poem. They feel incompatible. That is what gives the story its action-movie aspect. When the mother asks the two boys to shake hands after being called in to the principal's office, it is obvious that neither of them wants to make peace. They want to go on, unaware of where they are headed. They behave like explorers, adventurers.

**Their first fights seem to break out without their knowing why. Then, little by little, we get the feeling that they have almost become some kind of chivalrous.**

**AT:** I didn't want those scenes to be repetitive. Each one had to erupt in a different way, and out of the blue. But they necessarily called for revenge, and the only moment a truce is finally called is during their duel in the mountains. There they are surrounded by nature and sheltered from the world, and they can take their violence to its logical conclusion.

**CS:** The violence between them increases, until it becomes a story unto itself. The more it grows, the more it blossoms and the dramaturgy of the relations between Tom and Damien evolves and becomes more sophisticated. It never stagnates, it is a dialogue. It gradually allows them to understand what is disturbing them and changing them.

**While Damien, who is on the ground, is ready to keep on fighting, Tom refuses and suggests a truce.**

**AT:** It's a first step. They smoke a joint in the cave in silence. It's a sensual moment. Time stands still. And then Tom dives into the icy waters of the lake. For Damien, that is no doubt the moment things click. He feels an erotic shock, and everything finally begins to make sense.

**Tom's desire arrives much later.**

**AT:** His is more indeterminate. He needs to overcome his fear of physical contact with Damien. Once he senses Damien's attraction to him, he has to keep his distance from him. He resists Damien's desire forcefully, violently. Things go as far as the head-butt. There is a streak of homophobia in him that he is unable to vanquish. He is engaged in a very dubious combat. Prejudices are not abstractions. They run deep.

### **Tom is a bit of a wild child...**

**AT:** Aside from his parents, his bond with the world of humans is very distant. The mountains are his territory. His relations with them are instinctive and powerful. He knows them inside out, he knows their smallest caves. As the film goes on, he tries to pass that knowledge onto Damien, and then to Damien's mother. The mountain has a salutary effect on them. It channels a mythology "of monsters and gods" that strikes me as being related to childhood. It was important to me that my characters never outgrow it, that they continue to have adventures, like the heroes of a *Bildungsroman*. I had Heathcliff in mind, he was also biracial and adopted in Emily Brontë's "Wuthering Heights", the teen novel *par excellence*. Tom is haunted by the mountains, as Heathcliff was by the moors.

**CS:** The mountains are not just a location. They are the generous embodiment of the characters and the relations between the two characters. I insist on the adjective generous because it refers to something spectacular. There is something very impressive in these landscapes, which one may think reflects the souls of the characters. It is a movie, after all!

**AT:** I filmed Tom's treks through the snow just like combat scenes. They are action scenes, with Tom having to fight nature, inch by inch.

### **Despite their differences, Tom and Damien have some points in common. They both live with a loving family and have very close relations with their mothers.**

**CS:** We had the idea of a mother-son duo even before laying out the plot of the film: a very contemporary duo, not a story about the control an adult has over a child, or about some kind of dispute arising from the desire that precedes his or her taking flight.

**AT:** Maybe in reaction to mothers who are often contentious and possessive. Our character was meant to be unique, a prototype of tranquil and total maternal love, with no strings attached.

### **Damien's relations with his mother are both very mature and playful.**

**AT:** There is a strong complicity. She isn't short on fantasy. She suggests that they arm wrestle, and she appreciates her son's cooking. We wanted to show them happy. Moments of happiness are tricky in the movies, if you want to avoid mawkishness.

### **Without wanting to, the mother encourages the boys' future relations.**

**AT:** It's not Damien who notices Tom's beauty. She is the one who brings it up. And she is also the one who talks to Tom about Damien's feelings for him.

**CS:** She does not want to create a twosome. She only causes the bond because of her relationships with both of them. She sees both of them. She stands in the middle. She is not in control of the situation. She is in fact completely overwhelmed by events. When she suddenly notices that the two boys have continued to fight, she simply decides to send Tom back to his parents. She is totally unaware of what is going on under her own roof.

**She is very hospitable – like Tom’s family too, for that matter. She takes care of herself and her entourage...**

**AT:** ‘Taking care of’... that is the crux of the matter. A family exists when one person takes care of another, and when that care makes it possible for a life to go on. In their third and last semester, Tom takes care of Damien and his grieving mother. He is no longer an object of curiosity, desire or compassion. He becomes a subject. That makes him grow up.

**Everything changes dramatically for each of the characters after a bereavement.**

**AT:** War had remained off screen. It was neutralized by Skype. Now bursts into the film. History intrudes on private lives. The cards are reshuffled. When the adolescents are confronted with a real war in the world of adults, the film takes on its true dimensions.

**The two boys will then truly change.**

**AT:** As much as it traumatizes him, and perhaps in order to come to terms with it, his father’s death gives Damien the strength to declare his love to Tom, other than with his gestures and his gaze.

**CS:** That is where the construction of the film becomes so singular: we are really in the time- frame of a movie about growing-up - not in a chronicle of summertime distress, nor, once again, in anticipation of what is going to happen. The reactions and the evolution of the characters are as unexpected as the unpredictable twists and turns - war, Tom’s mother’s late pregnancy, Nathan’s death... Everything remains mysterious and unsettled. During the writing, André and I were obsessed with the idea of inventing living characters that were themselves surprised, as opposed to characters who are themselves surprising.

**The scene and dialogues in which Damien’s mother talks to Tom about life and death in the mountains and in the middle of the fog are deeply moving.**

**AT:** I almost took it out during the edit. I am always obsessed about being too wordy. I finally left it in, because that is the significance of the scene itself: is it better to talk or not to talk? The silence, and Tom’s listening, prompt her to confide in him...

### **Did you immediately think of Sandrine Kimberlain to play the part?**

**AT:** She is gutsy, playful, and has to ride an emotional roller coaster in this film. I chose her because of her many registers. She is supple and subtle, she moves ahead, strong as a reed. A little like Marie Poppins in the beginning, with her green duffle-coat, her purple hat and her doctor's bag, only to become a crazed sleepwalker in the cemetery scene.

### **The scene in the cemetery is very unexpected.**

**AT:** And very different from what we know of her. Sandrine was really out on a limb there. I really wanted her to be keen, more Japanese than French, and that, incidentally, was the only scene which we prepared in advance. During the shoot, it was a little surrealistic... She can just as easily dig deep, as fly off into space...

### **Talk to us about your choice of Kacey Mottet-Klein and Corentin Fila.**

**AT:** It was important to me that Tom, the adopted son, be biracial. Inasmuch as I wanted him to have a Southwestern accent, I began looking in the region of Toulouse, but I finally found Corentin Fila in Paris. His beauty strikes you immediately. He is a very physical actor. He looks robust and mysterious. A little bit Martian. In the full-moon scenes in the mountains, he was able to morph into a creature of fantasy. He was also able to play childlike innocence, in order to bring across Tom's lack of experience in interpersonal relations.

### **And Kacey Mottet-Klein?**

**AT:** Kacey is the opposite of Corentin, just as Damien is the opposite of Tom. He is blond, a Mama's boy, and a spoiled child. Kacey is a spirited actor. He stood out during our very first tryouts. They had to create a couple with contrasts that create a dynamic. I was very sensitive to their reactivity. The camera captures the electricity between them.

### **How did they prepare for their roles?**

**AT:** During auditions, I had them walk, move, perform, and then I soon handed them over to a stuntman who coached them in fighting. Corentin Fila did an internship on a farm to learn the everyday gestures of that milieu - hoisting haystacks, tending to animals... They became their characters, completely.

### **How do you work with such inexperienced actors? Readings, rehearsals?**

**AT:** Neither one nor the other. I like to leave my actors considerable elbow room, to keep them off balance and prevent them from getting stale - and all the more so in this film in which there is so little dialogue. I always try to capture the

unexpected. Then of course I move in, and things become increasingly precise. But often, during the edit, I prefer the hesitations in the first takes.

**Tom and Damien's roles could be extremely troubling for young actors. How did they react?**

**AT:** Kacey, who was not even seventeen during the shoot, had a hard time with the first part of the film. He was very worked up by his character's homosexuality, very recalcitrant. I constantly had to coax him back into the situations and feelings that he had to play. I would repeat: "*You don't play homosexuality. Focus on the take; don't worry about homosexuality. No one is capable of playing a homosexual or a heterosexual; those categories do not correspond to anything.*" One day everything was fine, and the next day, the questions would be there again, fed by what others would think, the extras at the high school who said: "So, I hear it's a story about faggots?" And we again had to rectify things...

**Is it an additional difficulty to direct inexperienced people?**

**AT:** No, quite the opposite. I like it a lot. I think it's a lot simpler: they don't have any prejudices, they aren't proud of their great know-how. It's a lot more difficult to work with actors who constantly flaunt their technique, which does not necessarily send any sparks flying. Besides, great actors know very well how to forget their craft during a take. They have conserved their beginner's grace, and that is what is essential.

**Don't you risk losing that spontaneity after a certain number of takes?**

**AT:** I don't know if it's spontaneity. In any event, my takes are never alike. The blocking, the framing and dialogues can change from one to the next. I never aim at some kind of mechanical perfection. From one take to another, I try to go for something fresh. During the edit, I may have the choice between several takes in very different moods. It is no longer the success or failure of a performance that is in question.

**Did you have any difficulties in shooting the love scene?**

**AT:** It was a very difficult scene: it wasn't easy for Corentin and Kacey to become that physically involved in a sequence that is quite long. They had to get rid of their own inhibitions, and simultaneously play inexperience, clumsiness, but also, to a certain extent, impatience and appetite. I had talked to them so much about it during the first part of the shoot, that they were ultimately ready and willing when the day came. They had accepted the principle of the scene and went for it. The active/passive dichotomy was put to rest. In terms of erotic postures, they both finally did the same things, but in a very personal way, with gestures that were worlds apart. It took them a great deal of trust and complicity to manage it. In the end, I was the one who felt most uncomfortable.

**CS:** I haven't seen so beautiful a love scene for a long time now. And you can't write something like that. You simply jot down: "They make love." And you suddenly discover it onscreen.

**André, as always in your films, nature plays a very large role...**

**AT:** That originates with my memories of the Pyrenees, combined with Emily Brontë, who made the moors her main character. Landscapes provoke shocks: they contain powers with which you can connect. The Romantics felt very strongly about that in the nineteenth century. Americans know how to do it in their movies. I think for example of Gus van Sant's "Gerry"...

**Exactly, let's talk about your direction...**

**AT:** I'm not quite sure what the word means. Directing is something very instinctive for me. The mountains, the actors' bodies, Tom's walks in the snow, imagining how all that is going to fit together – these are elements of direction that take place before the shoot, but I refuse to strait-jacket things in a pre-established breakdown. What I can say is that I never shoot a scene on the basis of what has gone before, or of what is going to follow. All I care about is giving the sequence I am shooting the greatest fullness possible, as if it were a short subject, or as if it were for the first and last time.

**How do you go about writing as a duo?**

**CS:** André and I worked together, at a table, on the step outline. I then delivered a first script with dialogue – a kind of reinterpretation of what we had written. He went over the text alone, and then we worked together again.

**AT:** When you write with a screenwriter, you often come up with a rambling first draft that needs to be unified. Céline was on the contrary permanently concerned about concision. The first script with dialogue that she gave me was sinewy and tightly structured, virtually fleshless. That concern about disengaging the skeleton is no doubt what gives the film its dramatic punch. I feel that we always remained focused on that triangle, and that we followed it step by step, never jumping the gun, never anticipating.

**CS:** With the film being shot in two stages – one part in the winter and one in the summer, we redid the dialogue between the two shoots. It was a very rich experience.

**AT:** With the possibility of a second wind. Very few filmmakers can say that during the next shoot, they will improve on this or that scene, actually changing the perspective, or even replacing it with another.

### **Did you?**

**AT:** Yes. I reshot the interior scene in which Damien brings Tom some medicine in its entirety. It was much more developed in its first version, and shot outdoors. I realized that it was too talky, which emasculated it. I decided, once again, to work only with how they look at each other.

### **What impact did shooting in two stages have on the actors?**

**AT:** It was great, it allowed for assessing the effect that time had had on their behavior. At that age, actors change visibly from one season to the next. I exaggerate no doubt, but that's how I liked to look at things.

### **Did you ever happen to disagree during the writing?**

**CS:** There were no conflicts, but there were some discussions about issues of narration – How do we get there? Where are we going? Since we were concerned with action scenes, we seldom argued about the psychology of the characters. Our objections had to do with very concrete elements. But that means we were working.

### **Céline, isn't it a little frustrating for a director like you to stop at the screenwriting?**

**CS:** Not at all. Even if I do write and direct my films, I separate the two jobs very well. I love to write for others – and questions about direction obviously nourish my writing. I like to go back to editing afterwards.

### **Did you watch this one?**

**CS:** Not regularly, but I came by, yes.

**AT:** During one of her visits, Céline who, like me, is not the type to make compliments, told me jokingly: “But it's an epic!” Believe it or not, that's what I was hoping for.

**CS:** I discovered the romantic breadth that was obviously already there in an embryonic shape during our writing, but that only directing can bring to life; the war escalating off-screen in the second part, each character's own heartbreak and that certain exaltation – André would prefer the term elevation- at the end in the mountains.

### **André, it's hard not to compare this film with “Wild Reeds”...**

**AT:** Although the reference may appear to be inevitable, I don't like the comparison. Even though the characters are the same age, and are preparing for their baccalaureate, “The Wild Reeds” is not about ‘founding a family’, or ‘making

a society'. The only symmetry that I see between the two films is the presence of a war off screen that reaches the far corners of rural France: Algeria in "The Wild Reeds" and the operations abroad that are taking place right now in "Being 17". For me, this film resolutely takes place in the present.

**CS:** If I had to compare them, it would be for their generational aspect: twenty years on, André is again interested in adolescents. But twenty years have in fact gone by, and society has changed.

**André, despite the war and Nathan's death, "Being 17" stands resolutely on the side of life. That has not always been the case in your films.**

**CS:** Ever since its writing, and during all the stages, that has been one of André's obsessions. He fought against anything that risked weighing the project down.

**AT:** Going up to the mountain at the end of the film no doubt contributes to that feeling, but it's true, more and more, life has been winning the day in my movies. That is a very classic progression. The older you get, the less inclined you are toward darkness and melancholy. You want to prolong your melancholic youth with your films, but what you are actually doing, is calling out to life.

***Interviewer: Marie-Elisabeth Rouchy***

## CAST

<b>Sandrine Kiberlain</b>	Marianne
<b>Kacey Mottet Klein</b>	Damien
<b>Corentin Fila</b>	Tom
<b>Alexis Loret</b>	Nathan
<b>Jean Fornerod</b>	Jacques
<b>Mama Prassinou</b>	Christine
<b>Jean Corso</b>	Paulo

## CREW

<b>Directed by</b>	André Téchiné
<b>Written by</b>	André Téchiné, Céline Sciamma
<b>Director of Photography</b>	Julien Hirsch (A.F.C)
<b>Editing</b>	Albertine Lastera
<b>Sound</b>	Daniel Sobrino
<b>Set Design</b>	Olivier Radot
<b>Costume Design</b>	Christian Gasc
<b>Assistant Director</b>	Michel Nasri
<b>Script Supervisor</b>	Claudine Taulere
<b>Casting</b>	Nicolas Ronchi
<b>Studio Manager</b>	Sylvain Provost
<b>Post-production Supervisor</b>	Susana Antunes
<b>Production Manager</b>	Bruno Bernard
<b>Executive Producer</b>	Christine De Jekel
<b>Produced by</b>	Olivier Delbosc, Mark Missonnier
<b>Co-produced by</b>	France 2 Cinéma, Wild Bunch
<b>In Association with</b>	La Banque postale Image 8
<b>With the participation of</b>	Canal + France Télévisions Ciné +
<b>With the support of International Sales</b>	La region Midi - Pyrénées Elle Driver