

**STRAND
RELEASING**

presents

SAUVAGE / WILD

A FILM BY
CAMILLE VIDAL-NAQUET

Starring Felix Maritaud, Eric Bernard

PRESS NOTES

*OFFICIAL SELECTION
Cannes Film Festival, Critics Week
New Directors Festival
Palm Springs International Film Festival*

Country of Origin: France
Format: DCP/2.35/Color
Sound: Dolby 5.1 Sound
Running Time: 99 minutes
Genre: Drama
Not Rated
In French with English Subtitles

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SHORT SYNOPSIS

Leo is 22 and sells his body on the street for a bit of cash. The men come and go, and he stays right here... longing for love. He doesn't know what the future will bring. He hits the road. His heart is pounding.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR

How did the film come about?

I started out with a character, an energy. A solitary young man who hits the road and wanders from one encounter to the next, longing for love, driven by an unquenchable capacity for love that keeps him going, regardless of the violent world around him.

I wrote a first draft of the script and went to meet young male prostitutes at the Bois de Boulogne [a well-known location for prostitution in Paris], by joining a charity. I meant to participate only in a few roams but night after night, strong bonds were forged and I ended up spending three years there. Meanwhile, all these encounters nourished the writing tremendously.

What's so striking about the film is that, despite all the violent things Leo has to go through, a profound gentleness emerges.

Leo uses tricks as a way to seize moments of sweetness whenever he can, to kiss someone, or to take a man in his arms. He doesn't share the cynicism or detachment of his fellow workers. Indeed, they reproach him for his attitude, which they perceive as a lack of professionalism. They are here to make money, whereas Leo takes his pleasure wherever he finds it.

Unlike the others, Leo says: "I do kiss". Leo doesn't crave money: He never counts the cash he earns, we never see him spending anything. It was really important to me to show that he isn't attached to anything material. He is elsewhere.

One of the rare things he doesn't give away is his first name...

From the very first draft, I wanted not a single young man on the street to be named. As if their secret identity was their most prized possession. Most of them think of prostitution as an actor playing a part: for a few minutes, they become someone else, in a role that is different for each client. Their first names are never given in the film, especially Leo's. When Claude, the client who lives in Canada, asks him his name, he just answers: "Call me what you want". At some point I considered using that line as the film's title.

Leo is a very lonely character. When he is offered a cellphone, he says he has nobody to call...

But that loneliness is also a strength. Leo enjoys absolute freedom, with all the scary and admirable aspects that come with it. Such freedom is like that of Kerouac when he wrote: "There was nowhere to go but everywhere". That freedom is like that of Mona in Agnes Varda's *Vagabond (Sans toit ni loi)*: by refusing to comply with social rules, by refusing anyone to impose anything on him, the character experiences tough life on the street as her own normality. In my film, Leo never complains about his work or his living conditions.

Leo is an enigmatic character, we don't know anything about his background...

The film doesn't invite you to try and understand how and why Leo has ended up here, but rather to live with him, to share the dizzying moments of his journey. It's a quite sensory experience: what I wanted was to reproduce head on and make the audience experience the feeling of bedazzlement and disorientation that comes with exclusion.

During the writing process, did you have other film characters in mind?

Besides Mona in *Vagabond*, I thought about Paul Newman in *Cool Hand Luke*: this dreamy guy, out of touch with reality, who finds himself in jail among real thugs. Luke is a misfit, a poet of sorts, but he is fearless, he puts up with violence and humiliations and always gets back on his feet. There is a radiant quality about him, he lights up that bleak environment. I was struck by this character who never loses heart. He looks frail, you wouldn't bet on him, yet eventually he holds on until the end, unlike the others, who don't have his stamina or his capacity for resilience. His strength comes from his humanity and the joy he spreads around him. Similarly, in *Sauvage*, Leo, with his innocence and his often childish behavior, is out of sync in this environment where everybody has toughened up and is fighting to survive. At first we think that he won't make it, but his radiance, his fortitude make him one of the toughest guys out there.

Leo and Ahd have a really special relationship, are they a couple?

Ahd, who is played by Eric Bernard, has evolved a lot in the screenplay, he has become more and more important. Ahd loves Leo like a brother. But unlike Leo, he is judgmental. To him, prostitution is a world against which he fights, from which he wants to run, that he wants to forget. He just wants one thing: to get out of it. When the female doctor asks Leo to stop crack and do something else, it's not that he disagrees with her, it's just that he doesn't even know what she is talking about. Leo has no moral judgement: he is just there. That's his life. He doesn't even know what "get out of it" means: get out of what, to go where? So Ahd sees Leo as the guy who is holding him back in a world he wishes to run away from.

The film addresses our relationship with our bodies: how we mistreat them, how we do them good, how we take care of them...

Bodies, skin, hands are ever-present in the film. Unlike the escorts working on the internet, the young men who live and prostitute themselves on the street don't have easy access to hygiene, food, not to mention sleep. Therefore their bodies are often in pain, damaged, lacking the necessary attention and care. Yet their bodies remain objects of desire. The challenge was to reconcile these two aspects effectively in the film.

The colour grading process played a crucial part here: depending on scenes we managed to precisely attune skin shades, warmth and textures, sometimes pushing characters to the edge of eroticism, or quite the opposite, going towards much rawer, almost sickly looking skins. The actors' skin says a lot about what they are going through in the film.

Moreover, I wanted to film nudity and make it seem normal, ordinary. These young men expose their bodies simply because they are their work tools. I have watched Paul Verhoeven's *Showgirls* and *Turkish Delight* again and again. I have always been impressed with the way Verhoeven directed his actors and managed to convey that sense of shamelessness and automatic freedom of the body. During the preparatory phase, before the shooting, I asked choreographer Romano Bottinelli to prepare the actors' bodies. Indeed the actors had to appear in perfect control, they needed to find a distance with their bodies, their intimacy. They had to learn, as fast as possible, to use their body as a tool, without showing any sign of embarrassment or hesitation. And above all, it was crucial that their body language should be different from that of the clients, who didn't receive any physical training before the shooting. Therefore, in the film, clients are much less graceful than street boys, their bodies look heavier, clumsier.

Leo's body is often mistreated, hurt, it shows how hard street life can be. Still his body often looks strong, powerful and free in the film. When he dances, sweating, in club scenes, we can feel his energy, his stamina, that inner living force. The shooting was extremely strenuous for Felix.

The film shows many different situations in the trick scenes: from a furtive blow-job in a car to a whole night spent with a client, without sex, just to keep him company...

I wanted to portray the daily life of street sex workers. And the pace of that daily life is set by a succession of sex acts. When we say "turn a trick", we avoid naming precisely the sex act. We know that his reality exists, without picturing it precisely. These young men are "invisible" workers, we don't want to see them, and the city excludes them violently, but cannot do without them. The film shows how life is for these young men whose sexuality has become their work. They are the ones who have to deal with city dwellers' violent fantasies, they know the sexual preferences of some clients, the absolute loneliness of others, the frustration, but also forms of sexuality that are never shown or talked about, like that of the disabled or the elderly, for instance.

Finally, the great diversity of tricks tells us a lot about Leo himself: they reveal his tenderness, his tendency to be moved easily, to give himself away, but also sometimes his recklessness, his lack of discernment, his childish side, that seems so out of place in his line of work. When he meets Claude, we see how he tries to look like some of his colleagues: he is cold, mechanical, cynical. At this moment, he is trying to be a "real" professional, like his fellow workers.

Was the casting process long before you chose Felix Maritaud, who carries the whole film on his shoulders from beginning to end?

I met Felix quite early on in the casting process. He had just finished the shooting of *BPM (Beats per minute)*, the editing was still on the way. I hadn't seen any image of the film. Our complicity was immediate. What impressed me the most about him is that he isn't afraid of anything. He can do anything, get completely lost in his character, whatever the scene, without watching himself play. Felix is a really instinctive actor; on set he throws himself into the scene, whereas I am careful, I move slowly, I hesitate... Yet, even though we took different paths, we always followed the same direction.

Your directing is quite heterogeneous, with at the same time fly-on-the-wall types of scenes, and others with a much more theatrical quality...

I wanted a form of primitiveness, of instinct to prevail at all times. I chose to work with Jacques Girault because I was much impressed by his precise hand-held camerawork, a device I had chosen for the whole film. We shot with a small crew. I wanted us to have complete liberty to shoot in every angle during takes. We had to feel that the camera was part of the gang, that it belonged somehow.

Then, in order for the image to be accurate, we wanted it to be organic, even rough sometimes, with a textured, swarming effect.

Yet, beside that "wild" way of filming, the writing of the film was really precise, there was very little improvisation during the shooting. I wanted the actors to say their lines without modifying them, and to pronounce them in a way that matched almost exactly the musicality I had in

mind. Moreover, we followed a really precise script construction, and our concern was to manage to reconcile that required level of meticulousness in the frames with slightly out of control outbursts of energy, and with my will to film accidents, sudden changes and actors' impulses.

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

With a master's degree in literature, Camille Vidal-Naquet directs an experimental short film in sign language, *Génie* (6 min), then a first fiction film, *Backstage* (24min), and *Heady Stuff* (28min). At the same time, he teaches film analysis. *Savage* is his first feature film.

MAIN CAST

Leo	Felix Maitaud
Eric Bernard	Ahd
Nicolas Dibla	Mihal
Phillipe Ohrel	Claude

INTERVIEW WITH FELIX MARITAUD

Tell us a little about Leo...

Leo is a young man who is really free and very much in love. In love with a capital "L". I'd go so far as to use "Agape", the term referring to unconditional love.

His freedom also involves a form of loneliness.

His freedom lies in the fact that his body is not bound by a productive system, be it higher education, a job, a mortgage, etc. His loneliness is due to his belonging to a section of society that is thoroughly marginalized and precarious. Today nobody lives in such a primal way. He doesn't need a cellphone to contact people, he gets by on his own with his body, his presence, his luck. With Camille we have worked a great deal on animality. Leo catches things almost as though it were always the very first time. The way he physically reacts is very direct, very much head-on. There is a kind of instantaneous consciousness about him, nothing is ever calculated, manipulated, or systematic.

Would you say that your character is always on the receiving end?

Yes, he is, but this does not necessarily have an effect on him. He merely happens to be there, much like a drop of water among the waves. He experiences such powerful things in a simple way. Therefore for him to feel an emotion, experiences must be very strong. And indeed, there are in the film some strong emotions, moments of huge distress. I think the character is able to withdraw himself from the world, from sociability, from empathy towards people, and yet, paradoxically, he gives himself relentlessly. No sooner do his eyes fall upon something than some goodwill, or even some naivety arise. Even when he is looking at his plants, he finds some love there. Anyway, this is what he instills and spreads around him.

How would you describe the complex relationship between Leo and his friend Ahd?

You can feel that they are bound together by the same story, they've known each other for a long time. Leo is in awe of Ahd, in a somewhat sickly way, whereas Ahd doesn't know what he wants. In some way they are opposite characters: Leo is always open and completely selfless, while Ahd keeps repeating he is not a faggot and is always in control.

How important are drugs in Leo's life?

They just are there, it's as simple as that. Some people will eat a chocolate croissant in the morning, just because one day in their lives they happened to be with people who eat chocolate croissants for breakfast. The same goes for Leo and drugs. They were there around him, the way they are in the woods among the boys. Once he got started with them it became a habit, part and parcel of his weekly routine.

How did you approach this unfathomable character?

I got into the film with slightly preconceived notions, since I had already studied in art school topics like queer, gender, the link between sexuality, the body, and society. Anyway, I had a very intellectualized view of the world of prostitution and the political issues connected to it. Ultimately when I played the character, at some point I let him take over, I was no longer responsible at all for what my body was doing. Camille was of great help as to let the character lead the way. He would guide me and did not leave me alone. There was this one scene though, halfway through shooting, when I lost control. I was so focused, there was such intensity. In the next couple of days, I was a little scared this might happen again, but Camille was around to help me find my way. The challenge with this character was like taking a devastated landscape and kindle a flame in the middle that would lighten up the rest. It could be said that what is unfathomable comes from the outside, and that Leo breaks this by making everything thoroughly humane. When we started working on the character, we felt that we absolutely had to make him very radiant, otherwise it would have been too depressing for everyone. And politically, it would have been wrong to devise a character who would have been the archetype of the guy who feels unwell. What we did was the opposite: everything goes badly in this guy's life, but he remains flamboyant and luminous, come hell or high water.

Did you bring anything from your personal life, like clothes for instance, to create the character?

When you're an actor, you arrive on set with everything that makes you who you are. You don't bring like a selection of yourself, you're totally open and available. So, surely, I did bring some stuff that belonged to me, for instance tattoos, or the shoes that Leo wears in the film. At the end of shooting, I left this pair of trainers in Strasbourg in the open! I'm lucky enough to be working with people that respect what I am and my viewpoint on things.

Did you have any reservations about the shooting, considering how bodies really take center stage in the film?

In art school, I had worked a great deal on the use of bodies and sexuality for political ends, not only in theoretical terms, but also through actual performances. This way of ridding the body of its inhibitions helped me to approach the character. What is interesting is that the sexuality displayed in the film is not about sensuality, but rather about the productivity of a sexual body. I

was also involved in some dance workshops with a choreographer, Romano Bottinelli, who had me work on the act of falling, on weightlessness, how you align your body, etc. It helped me a great deal to set things in order. It allowed me to be there, to be present in my body, to give life to the character. My body would become a mediating element, and Camille guided me through this. At the end of shooting, I had a little rebellious phase, this came after six weeks when I had spent most of my time being tampered with, being rejected, thrown to the ground, groped... Maybe I felt the same kind of saturation that Leo himself felt, this form of interconnection between reality and fiction is bound to arise when you do a film.

Before *Sauvage*, in which you play the main part, you had played in *BPM (Beats per Minute)*, a film based on the contrary on collective values.

When we made *BPM (Beats per Minute)*, I didn't know what acting, or creating a character meant. Robin Campillo hired me because when we met, the person I was corresponded to the essence of the character he had in mind. I played an absolute activist, we didn't know anything about his feelings or his personal life. Whereas with *Sauvage*, it was a genuine character study. I'm really different from Leo, for instance I make jokes every five minutes, but I love him very much anyway.

After such an intense shooting, did you feel like you had made a huge step forward as an actor?

When you experience such strong emotions on a shooting, naturally you think that you won't always find so fascinating characters. Because I am really passionate about Leo, he is an oddball, a parasite. I remember the last hours of the shooting, it was really moving because, of course, I was aware of what we had just accomplished. That shooting taught me a lot about the relationship you can build with a character, and a director. Camille is a really demanding director, he knows exactly what he wants, sometimes he went as far as to tell me how to pronounce some words. So when you work with someone like that, you're bound to make progress. I also felt a lot of gratitude, when I realized that my body could be used to give life to a body abandoned by the world, like Leo's. From the end of the shooting until today, I have felt as though I was taking a leap into the unknown, with a ghost behind me. It took me two to three months to let go of Leo, or rather for him to let me go.

CREW

Director	Camille Vidal-Naquet
Screenplay	Camille Vidal-Naquet
Producers	Emmanuel Giraud Marie Sonne – Jensen
Director of Photography	Jacques Girault
Editing	Elif Uluengin
Set Designer	Charlotte Casamit Jana
Sound	Jérémie Vernerey, Julien Roig, Benjamin Viau
Costumes	Julie Angel
Make Up	Aurélia Gauthier
Casting Paris	Stéphanie Doncker
Casting Grand Est	Jonathan Schall, Léa Triboulet
Music	Romain Trouillet

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