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Acropolis Cinema presents

Valérie Massadian’s

MILLA

August 15, 2018 ~ 8:00pm ~ Downtown Independent
ABOUT THE FILM

In a delicate, even generous manner, Valérie Massadin’s new film begins as a story of two young lovers’ life on the fringes before shifting towards one of recent cinema’s finest depictions of motherhood. Milla and Leo live clandestinely, their meager furnishings and sustenance countered by a love for which there is neither a logic nor substitute. But such an existence will only last until forces of nature take hold. Where is there to go in its wake? Milla considers every dimension of love, loyalty, and grief through a poetic, startling vision that recalls the likes of Barbara Loden and Chantal Akerman while remaining without precedent. (Grasshopper)

128 min // France/Portugal // 2017

Add It Up: Valérie Massadin on Milla
by Andréa Picard

The following is an excerpt of an interview originally published in Cinema Scope 72

Cinema Scope: Where did Milla come from? How are Nana and Milla linked? Do they form an informal diptych or series?

Valérie Massadin: When I did Nana, I knew I wanted to explore three hinge ages—the moments in girls’ lives when all is in between, all is uncertain, changing. Childhood at four years old, as an age when most children, not all of them, but most of them, are still undomesticated, still “savage,” hungry for life, to learn, understand, search, interrogate. Next, 11 to 12 years old, when suddenly one morning the world treats you completely differently than the night before, when you just became “responsible,” when your candid, naïve, and playful state suddenly doesn’t fit with society anymore and all becomes serious. Let alone the fact that your body changes, and that sex in between your legs, or that blood coming from it—you have no idea how to deal with it all. And then motherhood as a teen—in a way, both of the first stages together, fighting inside. Teenage mothers don’t belong anywhere. Not with the ones their age who have a freedom that they no longer have, and not with the adults, with whom they don’t yet share the codes or interest.

Three stages, where basically you don’t have a defined place in the world...something like that, and how it renders a person fragile, and at the same time shapes that person. So a triptych, yes. Three films, three girls who don’t belong yet to the world, but manage.

Scope: Would you say that the films are about forms of resilience?

Massadin: Absolutement, darling!

Scope: Where does Milla take place, and what is the significance of this landscape for the film, for the characters, and for you?

Massadin: It always starts from a place. Always. Landscape, nature, is the beginning for me. With Milla, I wanted the wilderness of Nana’s nature with the ocean. Water, fluidity and roughness with motherhood unconsciously, I guess. I found that place completely by chance, if chance exists! I was reading about Alexandre Trauner, and how he and Jacques Prévert are buried in the same very small village by the English Channel named Omonville-la-Petite. I thought, these two old guys knew how to live, and if they had decided to spend the last 15 years of their lives there, I should go see it. So I went. And driving around I also ended up in the village of Millet, whom I love, and Marie Rayenel, a heroine of mine. She was a miller and a poetess in a time when girls rarely went to school, especially when they were from a farmer’s family, but Ravenel knew how to read and write at seven
years old...in 1820 or something. The poem in the film is one of hers. As I’m very superstitious, I saw it all as a sign! No, but really, there’s something very powerful up there. How the sea, the cliffs, the fields, all merge together. How there is almost no separation, as the blues, the greens, the dark browns, just melt into one another...the roundness in contrast with the brutality of the English Channel, the harsh, regular, and very impressive sound of that sea.

I don’t have a postcard relationship to nature. I know how the beauty of nature equals its dangerousness. And, believe it or not, these sequences of nature are the hardest for me to cut, to find the right duration for, because I prefer them to last for really long...Nature has no time, apart from seasons. You can’t say, “Oh, that landscape is from 1999 or 2017”—it just is. And I’m not very anchored in time. I scratch and twist and careen details in people I film, that I think, or at least hope, are timeless. They just are, like nature just is.

**Scope:** You have a very particular way of observing bodies and conveying physicality, and doing so without giving up a sense of formal composition. More and more, I’m seeing films that are reducing their scale, rendering intimacy, perceiving physical presence in the world. Can you talk about this?

**Massadian:** That’s a complicated question for me because it’s very difficult for me to intellectualize or analyze that. That’s my relationship to people, that’s my relationship to the world. So I don’t “think” about how I’m going to film the intimacy, I do it. I don’t “think” where to put the camera, I know in a very instinctive way entering a room, facing a wall, a tree, a face, a body, someone...And I don’t ever feel I’m in an observing position, ever, strangely. On the contrary, to reach that level of small things that sweat, slip from someone, you have to be very close to the person, very present. It’s always together—with or against—but together, that it happens, or not sometimes. Maybe that’s why there is this sense of physicality, because the relationships we build before, during, and after are very engaging, very physical—meaning beyond words, way beyond words, which I don’t trust so much.

*Scope:* On a similar note, both of your actors have a tremendous presence. I had of course seen Luc Chessel before, most notably in Nicholas Klotz’s *Low Life* (2011) and Benjamin Crotty’s *Fort Buchanan* (2014), but where did you find Séverine Joncèere, who plays Milla and more than ably carries so many scenes on her own?

**Massadian:** I found Séverine doing casting. I was going to shelters for young girls and women with my DVD of *Nana* and showed the film there. I met many girls, and filmed about 30 of them. Then Séverine walked in, just like Kelyna [from *Nana*] walked in. And I knew, for the same reason always. That this girl, the way she moves, her frontality, her roughness, her mistrust of people, her resistance, her folie, I could dance with. I knew that it would be a battle, but maybe with a lot of patience and a lot of tenderness we could do something. And again, same as for *Nana*, Séverine doesn’t act. She plays as you play a game, not a character. She becomes a character, with the editing. Same for Luc. I know that for Luc it was a completely different experience than any film he has done—there was no script, no lines to learn. We had to work and build, and search and fight and laugh...Again here I can’t explain how we work—it’s not improvisation, it’s something else. It’s a confrontation between them and me, and not confrontation as a negative thing, but as a positive one. They never know what I’m looking for; I don’t know sometimes. I know the emotion I’m looking for, the emotional motif, and I don’t care how to get there narratively. Sometimes, they don’t have a clue what I saw happening and how maybe I can build on that. Sometimes I feel very strongly about what came out, but don’t know how it’s going to be in the construction.

*Scope:* But if not extemporized, how was the dialogue constructed? And did you fight with yourself, also, in those moments of not knowing? It’s a risky way to work, no?

**Massadian:** Risky is a too-big word: uncertain, uncontrolled, but not risky. I don’t fight with myself when not knowing. I fight with myself when I suddenly stupidly insist like an idiot on a situation that doesn’t work for them. I get very angry with myself in these moments. But I’m getting better. An example: I wanted a sequence or two that shows the dichotomy between them. The contrast between boys and girls, or men and women. So, I have to find two or three or more actions, situations I put them in to try to unfold something of that nature. Damn, I’m really bad at explaining...
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