



## THE TREE

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A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

# THE TREE

A film by Julie Bertuccelli

The exquisite Charlotte Gainsbourg (*Antichrist*, *I'm Not There*) stars in French filmmaker Julie Bertuccelli's achingly beautiful follow-up to her sleeper hit *Since Otar Left*. The Closing Night Film at Cannes in 2010, *The Tree* is a mystical drama of loss and rebirth in the Australian countryside. Not since classic 1970s works *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *Walkabout* has the harshly gorgeous outback landscape been such a lyrical yet foreboding metaphor for grief and coming of age.

Blindsided with anguish after her husband's sudden death, Dawn (Gainsbourg)—along with her four young children—struggles to make sense of life without him. Eight-year-old Simone (unforgettable newcomer Morgana Davies) becomes convinced that her father is whispering to her through the leaves of the gargantuan fig tree that towers over their house. The family is initially comforted by its presence, but then the tree's enormous roots slowly begin to encroach on the structure and threaten their fragile existence....

# INTERVIEW WITH JULIE BERTUCELLI

## **How did you come to adapt Judy Pascoe's bestselling novel?**

I had always wanted to adapt Italo Calvino's *The Baron in the Tree*, but since it wasn't possible, I went looking for another story with a tree—it became an obsession. A cousin of mine gave me *Our Father Who Art in the Tree*, by Judy Pascoe. It was a revelation. The story's central figure of the tree sparked off my desire; and its themes strongly inspired me, to the point of imagining my second film.

An Australian producer, Sue Taylor, had already acquired the rights. My producer, Yael Fogiel, and I contacted her. She watched my first film, *Since Otar Left*, and we started working together. The book was written from the point-of-view of the child, but I chose to include that of the mother. I wanted to make a movie for grown-ups, with tenderness and humor. It flirts with the possibility of a supernatural world while being deeply rooted in realism and simplicity.

## **Why did you choose to shoot in Australia?**

Not only because the story was written and set in Australia. The film uses the primeval power of beings and elements, and Nature as a mirror of feelings. This is why shooting in Australia, where Nature and its excesses are central and stunning, seemed momentous. As a French director looking at this country from a distance, I found several advantages to setting this story in the Antipodes (as it is in the book)—in this environment far away from France, from home, from me. The southern hemisphere, on the opposite side of the world, a different culture, vegetation, climate, habitat—so many differences which enrich the tale and highlight its universality. The process of mourning is akin to going into exile, to tearing oneself away from the other, from a part of oneself. It is a journey one must undertake to willingly part from the other while keeping him within, as an exile trying to maintain internal contact with his or her roots. Therefore I found it was important to me to go and tell this story far away from home. As far as possible. On the other side of the world.

## **What fascinated you the most about the story?**

Two things: how death is dealt with, and how sadness pushes the characters to another place, to find comfort in their imagination. Simone, the young daughter, refuses to feel sad, so she tries to find another way to accept her father's death. In a way, it's similar to my first film—except then, it was a lie, it was about hiding death. In *The Tree*, it's the unstoppable power of life asserting itself over sadness. The voice of the father is never heard; it remains a whisper, a blend of rustling leaves, animal noises and wind, akin to an inaudible murmur, which stirs up doubts but never turns unreal. The tree's roots do seem to grow at a remarkable pace but then again, it is realistic because of the drought in the region. As in life, there is a balance between poetry and sensitivity, doubt and mystery, imagination and realism, emotion and humor, lightness and sadness. When terrible things happen around you, you know that you have to live with your sadness. But you can transform it and use this emotion creatively.

## **The tree is the central, founding character. How did you find the tree for the film?**

We had always envisaged a Moreton Bay fig tree. The book is set on the outskirts of Brisbane, so it seemed a good place to start. But there are hundreds of Moreton Bay fig trees out there! Finding the right tree was the most important thing and it was a very substantial challenge. It had to not be surrounded by other trees, in a place with space around it, so we could build the family house—because the connection between the house and the tree is crucial to the story. It also had to be big: the story is about nature, how nature is always stronger than humans, a feeling that is particularly stark in Australia. However, it wasn't just a massive tree I was seeking, but an expressive tree, conveying mystery, fear,

as well as beauty. We could have built a fake tree to fit exactly what we needed. But from the beginning I wanted the tree to be natural, alive, organic, real. So I insisted. The tree we finally chose was amazing, for all these reasons, and because it was also very inviting—a tree that children could climb and would want to climb. Sometimes there were 20 people up in the tree, and it remained safe. As we came over the hill, the tree revealed itself to us—and beyond the tree was this awe-inspiring landscape.

### **How does your background as a documentary filmmaker influence your methods?**

In documentary filmmaking, unpredictable things happen. In fiction, it's similar and different at the same time, because everything has to be created from scratch. For example, we were shooting on the beach, and the weather report suddenly announced a big dust storm for the next day. So we decided to speed up the shoot there and to run back to the tree—which was far away—to capture this storm around the tree, to integrate it at the end of the film. With the wind machine, it's never quite the same. Maybe because I come from documentary filmmaking, I believe reality is much stronger than anything artificially created.

### **How did you find Morgana Davies, the young girl who plays Simone?**

It was difficult to find the right girl, to be sure she could carry the role, every day, for nine weeks. With Morgana, it was obvious: she was amazing, really moving, beautiful, and strong. Yet decisions aren't always made with your intellect. It was the same thing with the tree: suddenly, we knew we'd found the one. But it took a lot of time and I saw more than 200 girls and about 1000 trees! It's impossible to define all the reasons; it's instinctive.

### **And Charlotte Gainsbourg?**

At the beginning I did not think about Charlotte because she was too young in my mind... I had forgotten that she had become a mother. She was perfect for Dawn—a mother, a girl and a woman at the same time. Charlotte is one of the most amazing actresses I've ever seen. She has such a strong presence, she's charming, graceful. You simply have to tell her a few words, and she completely inhabits her character. She illuminates every scene. She was the perfect gift for this film!

### **I hear that you had a very family-orientated shoot...**

The children brought real happiness on set: my children were there, Charlotte's, the crew's, the actors', the producer's... Of course there are challenges with working with children—I had never made a film with children before. As a director it pushes you to be inventive, to find the best way to ask a 3-year-old boy to stay in one place for two minutes. I had to find lots of little tricks. But to be surrounded by so many children was really inspiring.

# THE FILMMAKERS

## **JULIE BERTUCCELLI – Writer & Director**

Julie Bertuccelli started her film career as an assistant director, working with such internationally acclaimed filmmakers such as Krzysztof Kieslowski, Bertrand Tavernier, Otar Iosseliani, Rithy Panh and Emmanuel Finkiel. She has also directed several highly regarded documentaries. Her feature debut, *Since Otar Left*, which she wrote and directed, won several major awards including the Grand Prize at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival International Critics' Week, and a Cesar Award (French Oscar) for Best First Feature.

## **SUE TAYLOR – Producer**

Sue Taylor has been a filmmaker for over twenty-five years. Since establishing her own company in 2001, Taylor Media, she is most recognized for her Australian productions: *The Shark Net*, the award-winning three-part miniseries based on the novelist Robert Drewe's memoirs; the feature film *Last Train To Freo*, a superbly acted emotional rollercoaster ride to hell and back on public transport; and the acclaimed period TV movie, *3 Acts of Murder*. In 2004, Sue received the Screen Producers Association of Australia (SPAA) Drama Producer of the Year.

## **YAËL FOGIEL – Producer**

Yaël Fogiel, along with Laetitia Gonzalez, set up the French production company, Les Films du Poisson, in 1994. Within a year, the organization had won the Hachette Foundation award for Best Young Producer, and to date have been awarded four Cesar Awards. The company has produced more than 100 feature films, documentaries and shorts, including *Voyages*, *Since Otar Left* and *Jellyfish*, which won the Camera D'Or at Cannes in 2007.

## **JUDY PASCOE – Novelist**

Judy Pascoe was born in Brisbane, Australia and completed a degree in Journalism and Media Communications there before moving to Melbourne to join Circus Oz. She jumped ship in the UK and has since worked as a stand-up comedian, television presenter, screenwriter and author. *Our Father Who Art in the Tree*, the book on which *The Tree* is based, was her debut novel. She is currently working on an exhibition of large drawings, scheduled to open in London in March 2012.

# THE CAST

## **CHARLOTTE GAINSBORG as Dawn O'Neil**

Charlotte Gainsbourg has established herself as an actress of international renown who has brought truth and originality to a diverse, and often challenging, array of roles. Honored with the prestigious Best Actress prize at the 2009 Cannes Film Festival for her work in Lars von Trier's *Antichrist*, she has also acted in Alejandro González Iñárritu's Oscar-winning *21 Grams*, Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There*, Franco Zeffirelli's *Jane Eyre*, Michel Gondry's *The Science of Sleep* and Patrice Chereau's *Persecution*. Charlotte's feature film debut was in *Paroles et musique* (1984) in which she played Catherine Deneuve's daughter. Her English-speaking debut was in 1993's *The Cement Garden*, written and directed by her uncle, Andrew Birkin. She recently completed her second film with von Trier, *Melancholia*. Charlotte is also a successful singer/songwriter. Her most recent album, *IRM*, was produced by Beck. She is the daughter of British actress and singer Jane Birkin and French singer-songwriter, actor and director Serge Gainsbourg.

## **MARTON CSOKAS as George Elrick**

Born in New Zealand and now living in the U.S., Marton Csokas has built his acting career around prolific work in both the theatre and in film. His diverse feature credits include the international smash hit *Alice in Wonderland*, directed by Tim Burton, David Mackenzie's *Asylum* with Natasha Richardson and Ian McKellen, Paul Greengrass' *The Bourne Supremacy* opposite Matt Damon, Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven*, Peter Jackson's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and Christine Jeffs' *Rain*. Csokas won the 2007 AFI (Australian Film Institute) Award for Best Supporting Actor for his performance in *Romulus, My Father*, in which he starred with Eric Bana.

## **MORGANA DAVIES as Simone**

Morgana Davies ventured into the world of film acting for the first time, aged just 7 1/2, with the lead role of Simone. Fortunately Morgana, along with the other young actors in the film, loved climbing and playing in the giant Moreton Bay fig tree that dominated the set and is so integral to the story. Despite *The Tree* being her first role, Morgana's performance is astoundingly accomplished. Producers Sue Taylor and Yael Fogiel, and director Julie Bertuccelli, were constantly surprised by her ability to deal with the demands of long hours and late nights required on the shoot. Morgana, who recently won an Outstanding Performer Award from the 2011 Film Critics Circle of Australia for *The Tree*, recently completed *The Hunter*, which also stars William Dafoe and Sam Neill.

# THE TREE

## CAST

Dawn O'Neil **Charlotte Gainsbourg**  
George Elrick **Marton Csokas**  
Simone **Morgana Davies**  
Peter O'Neil **Aden Young**  
Vonnie **Gillian Jones**  
Mrs Johnson **Penne Hackforth-Jones**  
Tim **Christian Bayers**  
Lou **Tom Russell**  
Charlie **Gabriel Gotting**  
Megane **Zoe Boe**

## CREW

Directed by **Julie Bertuccelli**  
Written by **Julie Bertuccelli**  
Adapted from Judy Pascoe's novel ***Our Father Who Art in the Tree***  
Produced by **Les Films du Poisson, Taylor Media**  
Director of Photography **Nigel Bluck**  
Sound Designer **Olivier Mauvezin**  
Set Designer **Steven Jones-Evans**  
Costume Designer **Joanna Mae Park**  
Makeup/Hair Designer **Wendy De Waal**  
Casting Director **Nikki Barrett**  
Editor **François Gédigier**  
Sound Editor **Nicolas Moreau**  
Sound Mixer **Olivier Goinard**  
Music Composer **Grégoire Hetzel**  
1st AD **Chris Webb**

*Principal Investor Screen Australia*  
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*With the participation of CANAL+ and ARTE France*  
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*and Coficup 2 (a fund operated by Backup Films)*

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