



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2024 OFFICIAL SELECTION
UN CERTAIN REGARD

NIKI

A film by
Céline Sallette

CINÉFRANCE STUDIOS and WILD BUNCH
Present



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2024 OFFICIAL SELECTION
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NIKI

A film by
Céline Sallette

Screenplay
Céline Sallette et Samuel Doux

With
Charlotte Le Bon
John Robinson
Damien Bonnard

SALES

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SYNOPSIS

Paris, 1952. Niki has recently moved from the US with her husband and daughter. Despite this newfound distance from a family and country that were suffocating her, disturbing flashbacks of her childhood continue to invade her thoughts. From the hell she is about to discover, Niki de Saint Phalle will find in her art a weapon to free herself.

FROM NIKI...

When I found an interview with Niki de Saint Phalle from 1965 on Juliette Binoche's Instagram page, I was struck both by the power of the artist's words and by her resemblance to Charlotte Le Bon.

There are **obvious similarities in their backgrounds** - both were models, possessing a beauty that is a springboard that attracts encounters, but that can also be a burden, a chain.

People said to Niki, 'If you weren't beautiful, no one would care what you did'.



Like Niki, Charlotte is an artist. She paints and sculpts, and we made great use of her skills on set. She created a canvas, just as Niki did when she was starting out and didn't have any money. She knew the method and the measurements for using pigment to make colours - it was all very simple.

Charlotte is also, as was Niki, a writer and director. Her talents were with me throughout the creative process, during the writing process, on set and in the edit. I remember changing the staging of a sequence when she came up with an idea that was better than mine.

TO CHARLOTTE

It was really powerful to have her take on the project. **Fantasy** and humour are another two characteristics shared by Niki and Charlotte, as is their **dual nationality**.

But what struck me the most, was **the boldness with which Charlotte took on the challenges of incarnation**: the 'reliving' of trauma, being crushed, the vitality of survival, the joy found in power, the childhood that surfaced at every moment in her approach, in her expressions. I couldn't have wished for a better partner.

FROM ARTISTS...



Damien Bonnard
IS
Jean Tinguely



Judith Chemla
IS
Eva Aeppli

TO ARTISTS



John Robinson
IS
Harry Matthews

Both John and Damien, in their interpretation of two masculine figures that were ahead of their time, possess a rare soul quality. It was wonderful to be able to rely on them. The same goes for Judith, who decisively gives Eva her power and freedom, and this sense that anything is possible.

Elodie Demey and I assembled a cast of real artists and actors for the gang, and it was a lot of fun.

FROM NIKI MATTHEWS...

I wanted the film to tell the story before the story. How did a young mother from an aristocratic family become one of the most powerful artists of a century? I wanted to tell the story of domination - **how she frees herself from it and at what price. A flower growing on a corpse.**



TO NIKI DE SAINT PHALLE

Between these two photos, the first and last images of 'Niki', you can see what the film is about, a journey through almost a decade (1952-1961), where Niki recovers the memory of the incest she suffered, then rises again, revealing herself through art. For me, it is her journey, like a transmutation, that is her greatest work. A work she will have to repeat throughout her life. **To die and be reborn to herself.**



FROM CONSTRAINT...

My sense of responsibility in taking on this story was immense. I had to get it right. As I immersed myself in *The Hero with a Thousand and One Faces*, to study the motivations behind heroic journeys, I realised the extent to which Niki had a mythological dimension. She was a true heroine. She descended into the underworld and returned with a knowledge that would enlighten the world. Descended from a line of knights, the child who was renamed Niki (meaning victory in Greek) realised her dream: to make her life a triumph.

The chapters and the distance they foster, highlight the external and internal circumstances of Niki's journey, her choices and her exemplary character. The split screens show the mythological dimension of her life: the father devours his child, the Ronsin impasse becomes the labyrinth in which she meets her destiny. Magic and metaphor are at the heart of Niki's work. The film could not be naturalistic, nor could it be written at face value.

TO FREEDOM

We were not permitted to use Niki's work, which I fully understand. You cannot use somebody else's poetry to create your own. This constraint immediately allowed me to identify my desire in the narrative. I was interested in seeing Niki's metamorphosis and the point of view of her work seemed entirely appropriate. It wasn't a question of knowing what the viewer might think of the works themselves, but of seeing the artist grapple with her creation, up close and personal, in her catharsis.

I wanted us to have on set, the same freedom that is earned during the film, by being light and fast. I wanted us to work as a small team, so there was no script supervisor or make-up artist except for the first sequence where Niki is introduced as a model, and the sequence showing her mother in a performance. Charlotte used make-up whenever and however she wanted, and often not at all. It brings a rawness to the image that I really like.



I contacted Victor Seguin because I'd seen his work as cinematographer on *Gagarine* and *Full Time*, and I'd read an interesting interview with him. I quickly realised that he was a hard worker. I proposed we start without any machinery or projectors, just a tripod and a camera. I wanted us to move from constrained shooting to freedom and more movement.

In the same way that **Niki moves from amnesia to consciousness, from enslavement to revolt, from confinement to liberation, we wanted to move from grey to bright colours.** All this work is subliminal in the film, but it permeates it and produces a particular texture. We were intent on creating an image that would reflect the transformation and richness of Niki's world.

We took time to decide on **the colours in the memories**, places of intensity and trauma. Victor suggested that there should be one colour for each memory. As colours grow increasingly prominent in the film, Niki becomes herself. It turned out to be a very good idea. A few days later, I came across this

passage from *Traces* (one of Niki's autobiographies) where she describes her living room in New York as a child - everything was green. The green of Niki's monsters. The red of the painted statues' genitals needed to spill over into the image too, like her rage for life, and so on.

Victor came up with **the idea for the format** to resemble the photos we were studying to prepare. I'd made a moodboard and collected hundreds of reference images for the film's sequences, which included works by the photographer Paul Rousteau, who twists images, making them plural. That spoke to Victor, and we incorporated them into the film's grammar. We had a distorting mirror, with which we planned to tell the story of the fall into memory. It produced some very beautiful images but it didn't work in the editing. The box of jewels that Victor had collected, and the fact that Raymond Hains of the Nouveaux Réalistes team used similar photographic processes, gave us the opportunity to use this jewel that rotates ten Nikis in the image, acting as **a machine of fragmentation and evolution.**



Set designer Rozenn Le Gloahec's work was so important. The sheer number of sets and the aesthetic challenge of this artistic bath on a first film budget were a real challenge.

The location scouting was crucial, and her perseverance saved us. The sets went from monochrome to increasingly colourful, and memories were treated in the same spirit: green furniture and accessories in New York, etc... We used the cage and the bird in every corner of the film to give continuity to the allegory.



Marion Moules and Matthieu Cambor, in wardrobe, also had their part in drawing this passage, Niki's evolution. They went from the rigidity of the 50s to more and more colour and extravagance. Charlotte's first costume fittings were overwhelming, as we watched Niki come to life.

Their work planted clues to her poetry (just like the inspirations above). Niki was also the bird in the film, caged... the feathers follow her, adorn her, materialise her. In the end, she flies high.



FROM SOUND...

The music was key to materialising the art in the film. The audience does not see the works of art, but hears the emotions as the work transforms.

It took some time to find the composer. Para One brought an immediate poetry and power. When he joined us, the film was ready for editing and we were just working on the sound, and of course his music played an important role in the film's momentum. In the first pieces he sent us, he had already captured the final shooting scene and the first flip into a memory.

I thought the trumpet could be the lead instrument in the music. I could hear this heroic journey punctuated by brass instruments whispering and shouting, triumphant or soaring. Para One transcended this assumption magnificently. His music is peppered with the sounds and sparkle of childhood, and brings a lot of light to the film.

What amazed me the most was the intelligence of each of my close friends and collaborators as they really guided the film. Cinema is collective intelligence in action. For example, we owe the alternate editing of the final sequence to my

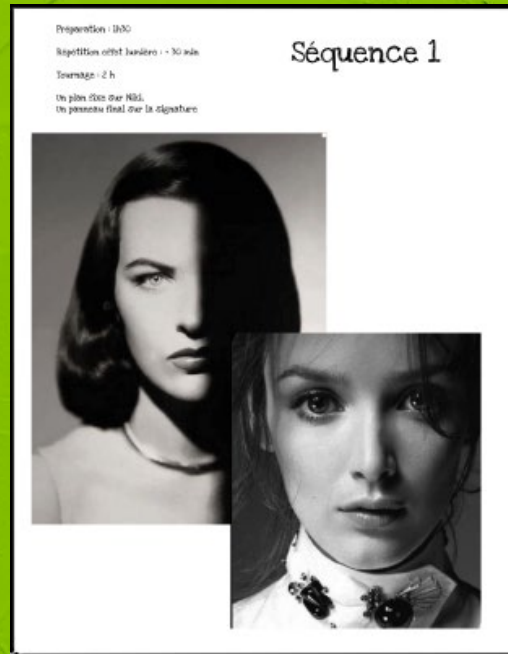
TO MUSIC



actress and director friend Romane Bohringer, and that wasn't all. Sometimes it is rejections that help us progress. I remember removing a screen at the hospital after a consultant told me he hated them.

Jean Pierre Duret (sound engineer) and Stéphane Thiébaut (mixer) were crucial to the sound work and the place of the music in the film. You were not really immersed in the psychiatric hospital until they were involved.

FROM INSPIRATION...

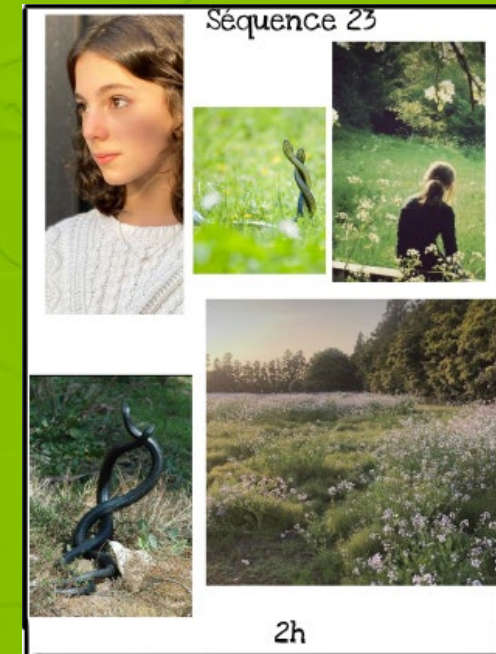


The opening sequence begins with the word "Silence" and shows Niki divided by the light, part of her plunged into the darkness. That part of her to which she still has no access. It ends with Niki asking "Am I free"? That is the question that the film is asking.



The hospital was very much inspired by the photographic work of Raymond Depardon. The stakes were high. We had to sink into the hospital with Niki without staying there too long - she only spent 6 weeks there, which is so little in a lifetime. But those 6 weeks were absolutely seminal.

TO SET



The Summer of Snakes, as Niki tells it, was the summer when she saw two snakes entwined and facing her, and when her father raped her. I was amazed to discover that the thyroid gland that caused her suffering, resembled a snake, and to find the two snakes entwined as symbols of the medical profession. They are one of the great motifs of her life.

FROM SCRIPT...

I approached these two stages with some level of recklessness. When I explained to the scriptwriter that I met that I wanted to write the film in 3 months... he replied that he too would like to have a solid gold toilet but that it wasn't going to happen, before refusing to embark on the adventure with me.

Then when I met Samuel Doux, my co-writer, I had learnt a lesson and was more receptive, less off the wall.

Samuel was a fantastic guide, putting the film back into chronological time. He pushed me forward on my idea of chapters. I started by writing because I couldn't let go of the dialogue, but Samuel's feedback made the script progress at rocket speed. He was also a major partner in finding the right place for incest in the story. I worked with a heart that was open from reading Dorothee Dussy, Murielle Salmona, Christine Angot, Christiane Rochefort, Charlotte Pudlowski, and more recently the work of CLIVISE, Neige Sinno and so many others. I grew up going through these nights.

TO EDIT

Once again, when the final phase of writing began, for the edit, I was convinced that we would quickly find our film. Once again, I learned that my expectations of the time it takes to make a film were unrealistic.

My editor, Clémence Diard, didn't want to disillusion me, but we laughed at the obviousness of that and carried on working. That was the most complex phase of the production, along with the music. It took us a long time to find the rhythm of the film. What surprised me the most was that this was the point where the film really started to speak, rejecting certain ideas and embracing others as if they were obvious. We had allowed only for a fairly short editing time, but, thanks to my producers, we were able to extend it. But Clémence had to leave to work on another project, Emma Benestan's *Animale*. So we finished the last two weeks with Alexis Noel, her assistant editor, who knew the film very well.

FROM ACTRESS...

I was 34 when I realised I had to change everything. My intimate life was so catastrophic that I had no choice, and this realisation was one of the most intense upheavals of my life.

It was these years of work on myself that led me to allow myself to write stories. I've always been passionate about stories. Following stories, acting them out, bringing them to life. There was a dimension to my work as an actress that I couldn't quite conquer, but now, as a director, I no longer question it.

It is an extension and a transformation.

That's what the film is about: transformation.

How do you become YOURSELF?

Niki has written a lot about her ICH, her ME. Moving in her wake, I learnt a lot from her over the years that I worked on the film.

TO DIRECTOR

My background as an actress aids my access to potential industry partners. When I had the idea for the project, I sent the deck to Grégory Weill, my agent, who is also Charlotte Le Bon's agent. His role was key. We made an appointment with a producer and two weeks later Jalil Lespert, for whom he is also the agent, called him to say he wanted to make a film about Niki de Saint Phalle with Charlotte Le Bon, and was in partnership with David Gauquié at Cinéfrance. When Gregory told him that I'd had the same idea, he was enthusiastic - he didn't necessarily want to write or direct, but we had to meet. David and Jalil were important working partners throughout the process. Florence Gastaud, who co-produced the film, played an important role when she joined the project, too.

I was lucky enough to have the support and guidance of my producers. They followed my artistic choices, took risks and gave me the time I needed when the film was in the edit, and the film grew as a result of this trust.

CAST LIST

Niki de Saint-Phalle	Charlotte Le Bon
Harry Matthews	John Robinson
Jean Tinguely	Damien Bonnard
Eva Aeppli	Judith Chemla
Dr Cossa	Alain Fromager
The knight	Virgile Bramly
André de Saint-Phalle	Grégoire Monsaingeon
Jacqueline de Saint-Phalle	Nora Arnezeder
Daniel Spoerri	John Fou
Pierre Restany	Quentin Dolmaire
Arman	Hugo Brunswick
François Dufrêne	Eric Pucheu
René Drouin	Xavier de Guillebon
Hugues Weiss	Romain Sandère

LISTE TECHNIQUE

A film by Céline Sallette
Screenplay written by Céline Sallette

Samuel Doux

Produced by David Gauquié et Julien Deris
Florence Gastaud

Producer for Onzecinq Jalil Lespert

Produced in association with Alexandre Mattiussi
Producers for Cinéfrance Studios Jean-Luc Ormières

Assistant director Elodie Roy

Casting Elodie Demey - ARDA

Production Manager Cécile Remy-Boutang

Cinematographer Victor Seguin A.F.C

Sound Jean-Pierre Duret

Costume designers Marion Moulès et Matthieu Cambor

Production designer Rozenn Le Gloahec

Editing Clémence Diard
Assistée de Alexis Noël

Sound editing Paul Heymans

Mixer Stéphane Thiébaut

Post-Production supervisor Antoine Lepoivre

Music Para One

Coproduction Cinéfrance Studios
Wild Bunch

In co production with France 2 Cinéma,
Onze Cinq
Panache Productions, La Compagnie Cinématographique,
Proximus Voo Be Tv, Hologram

With the participation of Canal +
Avec la participation de Ciné + et de France Télévisions,
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la Région Ile de France
la Région Provence Alpes Côte d'Azur

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