



MAGDALA



A Film by Damien Manivel

PRESSKIT



78 MIN

FRANCE

2022

SUPER 16MM

1.85

DOLBY 5.1

ARAMAIC

MAGDALA

INTERNATIONAL SALES

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A FILM BY DAMIEN MANIVEL

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— SYNOPSIS

Since the death of Jesus, Mary Magdalene has withdrawn from the world. Her hair has turned white, she eats berries, drinks water from the rain and sleeps among the trees.

Alone in the heart of the forest, she remembers her lost love. She looks for a way to find him.

A CONVERSATION WITH DAMIEN MANIVEL

WHAT 'S THE ORIGIN OF THE PROJECT? WHERE DID THE IDEA OF TACKLING THE FIG- URE OF MARY MAGDALENE COME FROM?

When I was editing my previous film, *Les Enfants d'Isadora*, I was disturbed by the last shot when Elsa Wolliaaston raises her eyes to the sky. I found a mystical accent to it. I said to myself that I had to make a film with her about the sacred. I first thought of the figure of the nun, before realizing that it was the saint who interested me. Mary Magdalene's journey raises the question of exile, faith, mystical contemplation and, above all, mad love. She is a character who has been represented a lot in art history. All this material, the paintings, the poems about her, helped us and inspired us deeply. We started from the legends of the Middle Ages, which tell us that after the death of Christ, she isolated herself in a hostile forest, a spiritual desert, to spend the rest of her life with the memory of her lost love. The paintings mostly depict her as a beautiful young woman, often naked, in mystical contemplation in a cave. There is a skull near her, and she holds a cross

in her hand. There are few representations of an elderly Mary Magdalene. There is, however, a magnificent sculpture by Donatello, where she is emaciated, her clothes in tatters. What animated me as a filmmaker was to dream about what might have happened in that forest. How did she feed herself, sleep, observe the world around her and what did she think about? The film is therefore a reverie on her hermitage and more particularly on the last days of her life. There is very little documentation on it. We only know that she spent thirty years there and that when she died, the angels took her to heaven. It's not much, so it leaves room for my work as a filmmaker.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT THIS FIGURE THAT SPEAKS TO YOU TODAY?

Mary Magdalene says "no" to the world, she chooses to end her days, alone, in nature. Her radicalism is timeless, it could be a response to the present time. She fascinates me, she inspires me in the practice of my art.

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE VISIBLE AND THE INVISIBLE. YOU CHOOSE TO REPRESENT LITERALLY THE MEMORIES AND VISIONS OF MARY MAGDALENE...

I wanted to film artisanal and naive miracles. I have seen paintings where saints literally offer their hearts. It's such a clear image, I wanted to allow myself the same thing cinematically.

Very early on I had the image in mind of the resurrection of the bird. I saw a small bird, tiny compared to Elsa's massive body, and I thought there was something moving in this relationship of proportions. The big question was how to film Jesus. I did a casting call and I found Saphir Shraga, who immediately impressed me. He is not very present in the film because I believe he should not appear much. I kept a face, a hand, a bright smile, a voice. I tried to capture him in this way by saying to myself: "He is a man like you and me. Mary Magdalene and him are two people of flesh and blood who love each other". In this sense, it was essential for me to film the trace of what they were to each other by bringing them together for the river scene. Is it Mary Magdalene's memory, her dream? I wanted to film the way they look at each other, the sensual contact of their joined hands, the simple beauty of their naked bodies in the sunlight, the silence before a tragic fate separates them.

To me, this film is dual: I am filming a biblical character - in this sense, I am attaching myself to a heritage - and at the same time, I am portraying Elsa Wolliaaston, I am offering her an ascent and an extraordinary end. And that's my underlying project as a filmmaker. To me, making a film means having at least two projects: a surface project that must be felt, personal, and underneath this surface, there must be a second, more secret project that keeps my emotion alive. Offering a cinematographic death to Elsa was my secret project. We shot *The Lady with the Dog* and *Isadora's Children* together. I've been working with her for thirteen years, filming her, and I still want to film her. Clearly, the most important thing for me was to give her a leading role that

was worthy of her talent and power. I needed to give her that gift, I think. And in return, she gave me a huge one too.

I wanted to film the death of Mary Magdalene in a very concrete way. To make the viewer feel that death can happen peacefully, that it is only time that passes, that despite the pain, it is not so serious. And at the same time, I wanted this death to be great, brilliant and sweet. The fact that it was set in a cave changes everything, it brings us back to the painting. We shot on film with only ts for lighting.

ONE THINKS IN PARTICULAR OF DE LA TOUR...

Yes, it was a major influence. A lot of films claim to be shot under the influence of De La Tour, but they use a whole arsenal of lights and projectors. I find it absurd, they put candles on the screen but they don't use them. It was clear to me from the start: there would be no additional lighting at all. So obviously, it's very fragile, but I think the beauty of this sequence lies in this risk.

YOU PREFER DAWNS, TWILIGHTS, AND FOGGY LANDSCAPES. WERE YOU OFTEN WAITING FOR THE LIGHT WITH YOUR TEAM?

There was indeed a desire to work in extreme light atmospheres. We waited a lot for the wind, the rain, storms, twilights and dawns. I needed the support of nature and light to carry Elsa's presence. The particularity of the film, and one of the reasons I shot in 16mm film, is that I knew I wouldn't be able to do many takes because of Elsa's physical condition. So I went with film. Film is material, concrete. Recording Elsa's presence, merged with that of Mary Magdalene on film, makes sense, it's like a frame. We didn't do many takes, but that didn't stop me from doing some very long ones. From the digital school, I burnt entire magazines. When you see me shooting, it can look messy but I know what I want. Elsa and I know each other very well - she's a dancer, I was a dancer - she knows what I'm looking for, especially the speed and density of the movements. We have very little dialogue. She feels things.



YOUR SINGULARITY, COMPARED TO A GREAT NUMBER OF PRACTICING DIRECTORS, IS THIS CONCEPTION OF WRITING IN A WORK IN PROGRESS. ON THE FIRST DAY OF SHOOTING, YOU DON'T KNOW EXACTLY WHAT YOUR FILM WILL LOOK LIKE.

I already have images in my head because I've been preparing for the shoot for many months, but my pleasure as a director is to arrive at the location without knowing what I'm going to do, to discover, for example, a tree with a particular shape, to show it to the crew and to create a scene with this tree at the moment. I know from experience that what surprises me always pleases me more than what I have written. If a detail, a light or an accidental gesture catches my eye, I modify the scene to integrate it. Everything is constantly being invented, in the present.

YOU'VE NEVER FILMED NATURE AND THE ANIMAL WORLD AS MUCH. I HAVE THE IMPRESSION YOU FELT AN ENORMOUS PLEASURE IN CAPTURING THE LIFE OF NATURE. THE SHOTS ARE INCREDIBLE.

The whole team really enjoyed it. Filming dragonflies, butterflies, spiders, fish, a bird, the wind in the leaves. All this life. I was obsessed with it. It seemed essential to me to connect Elsa's body to all this rustling of nature, insects, and wildlife.

THE FANTASTIC OFTEN APPEARS IN YOUR FILMS AND HERE, IN MAGDALA, IT IS VERY PRESENT...

Yes, I think it's a film that flirts with the genre, and even sometimes discreetly with the codes of horror. I wanted to explore this direction, while treating it with simplicity. I think back to the shot of Mary Magdalene's bloody hands: is it her own blood? Is it Christ's blood? Is it a vision? I think it's a scene that translates well what I'm looking for. And for

the Ascension scene, I wanted to do a special effect in a handmade way, without using digital techniques. So we filmed on painted backgrounds, with wind machines. This is what gives the scene its purity, there is something of a primitive cinema, in the sense that it directly questions the spectator on his capacity to believe in miracles.

HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT THE REACTION OF A BELIEVER?

With this film in particular, I try to reach a sensitivity connected to very simple, very material things, such as the body, old age, suffering, and also to more interior questions, such as spirituality, solitude, exile, mourning, passionate love. I don't know if I am a believer myself, I don't ask myself the question in this way, but on the other hand I am convinced of the presence of Mary Magdalene and of the fact that through Elsa, I have tried to capture a part of this presence. It's what Donatello did in his sculpture. What Rilke does when he writes a poem. We try to catch things. There is a

spirit, that's for sure, and it can be captured by photography, by painting, by a poem or a film.

WE HAVEN'T TALKED ABOUT SOUND. ELSA WOLLIASTON'S BREATH, THE RUSTLING OF THE FABRICS AND THE MOVING NATURE. HOW DID YOU APPROACH THIS, DID YOU KNOW VERY EARLY ON THAT IT WOULD BE SO IMPORTANT?

There is a kind of soundscape, very immersive, which is the fusion between Elsa's body and the forest. I think of sound editing as working on concrete music, fed by the ambiances and multiple sound details. I am very pleased with the sound effect we found in the cave for instance. You don't know where you are, you are traveling in time, the aquatic element is very present: you can feel the drops, the humidity, an atmosphere that tells something about the body that is emptying itself, about its agony.

**ARE YOU LOOKING AT THE MONITOR
DURING THE SHOOT?**

I'm usually glued to the monitor. I'm obsessed with the frame, the image. But on Magdala, it was useless. With the film camera monitors, as soon as you shoot at dawn or dusk, when the light is veiled or shaded, you can hardly see anything. And at night, it's even worse. So this is the first film where I had to let go of the image monitoring, which forced me to put a lot of trust in Mathieu Gaudet, the chief of photography. And to discover the rushes a week later. Each time we discovered the images was magical, it was always different from what I expected.

**IT IS ALSO A TEMPORALITY THAT
CORRESPONDS WELL TO THE SUBJECT, TO
ITS MYSTICAL DIMENSION: NOT HAVING
IMMEDIATE CONTROL, NOT KNOWING,
REDISCOVERING...**

I find the gesture of filming on celluloid very beautiful. I have no nostalgia; it's purely the craft, the chemistry that interests me. I think it's a beautiful way to make cinema in 2022. Every image is so alike: as soon as they are produced, they are drowned in the mass. So we need to find working methods, technical processes, that appeal to authenticity more than to calculation, and rediscover how making an image is something precious.



— BIOGRAPHY

DAMIEN MANIVEL

Director

After being a dancer, Damien Manivel directed several acclaimed short films including *The Lady with a Dog*, which won the acclaimed French Jean Vigo Award. Since 2014, he has written and directed five feature films presented in major festivals (Cannes, Locarno, Venice, San Sebastian...), including *Isadora's Children*, awarded Leopard for Best Director at Locarno IFF. His latest film, *Magdala*, have its world premiere in Cannes ACID 2022.



— FILMOGRAPHY

DAMIEN MANIVEL

2022	MAGDALA (78 min) Festivals & Awards: ACID – Cannes Film Festival
2019	ISADORA'S CHILDREN (84 min) Festivals & Awards: Locarno Golden Leopard for Best Director
2017	THE NIGHT I SWAM (78 min) Festivals & Awards: Venice Orizzonti
2016	THE PARK (71 min)Prix & festivals : Grand prix – Entrevues de Belfort, MEILLEUR FILM– Festival de Jeongju, Festival de Cannes – sélection ACID 2016...
2014	A YOUNG POET (71 min) Prix & festivals : Jury Special Mention – Locarno IFF
2012	A SUNDAY MORNING (18 min) Prix & festivals : Festival de Cannes 2012, Cannes Critic's Week Best Film Award, Prix Nikon du Court-Métrage, IFFR...
2010	THE LADY WITH A DOG (16 min) Prix & festivals : Prix Jean Vigo
2008	BE STILL O MY SORROW (10 min) Prix & festivals : Festival du film de Belfort 2008, Entrevues de Belfort, Festival Côté court, Exposition Fresnoy au Grand Palais...
2007	VIRIL (10 min) Prix & festivals : Locarno IFF, IFFR...

— BIOGRAPHY

ELSA WOLLIASTON

Actress

Born in 1945, Elsa Wolliaaston is a dancer, teacher and choreographer.

She lived a nomadic childhood between Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania (still under British rule), during which she was introduced to ancestral cults and traditional dances.

At the age of 16 in 1961, she left Kenya and went to New York. There she studied classical dance, before switching to contemporary abstraction under the teaching of Merce Cunningham.

In 1975, she founded the company Ma Danse Rituel Théâtre in Paris with the Japanese dancer and choreographer Hideyuki Yano. Their collaboration will bring the new French dance by influencing young artists in search of forms. With them, the break between dance and theater is no longer necessary, and the actor's body is understood as the support of a unique and global expression.

She founded the One Step company in 1985, and has since worked with many artists of the musical scene (Steve Lacy, Jean-Marie Machado, Joëlle Léandre, the singer Camille...)

In the cinema, and after the role of Ronga in *Maléfices* by Carlo Rola in 1990, she plays a psychoanalyst in the film *Kings and Queen* by Arnaud Desplechin (2004), and plays a role of clairvoyant in *In Bed with Victoria* by Justine Triet (2016). But it is with Damien Manivel that she forges a close relationship in cinema by playing the lead role in the short film *The Lady with a Dog* in 2010, then in *Isadora's Children*

in 2019, and with the role of Mary Magdalene in *Magdala*, selected at ACID Cannes 2022.

Elsa Wolliaaston received the SACD Dance Prize in 1994 and became a Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres in 2003.

— FILMOGRAPHY

ELSA WOLLIASTON

2022	MAGDALA, Damien Manivel
2022	SONS OF RAMSES, Clément Cogitore
2022	MAOUSSI de Charlotte Schiøler
2019	ISADORA'S CHILDREN, Damien Manivel
2018	ALLONS ENFANTS, Stéphane Demoustier
2016	IN BED WITH VICTORIA, Justine Triet
2010	THE LADY WITH A DOG, Damien Manivel (court-métrage)
2004	KINGS AND QUEEN, Arnaud Desplechin

CAST

Elsa Wolliaaston	Magdala
Aimie Lombard	The angel
Olga Mouak	Young Magdala
Saphir Shraga	Jesus

CREW

Director	Damien MANIVEL
Screenplay	Damien MANIVEL Julien DIEUDONNÉ
Cinematography	Mathieu GAUDET Assisted by Céleste OUGIER
Editing	Damien MANIVEL
Sound	Jérôme PETIT
Sound editing	Agathe POCHE
Sound mixing	Simon APOSTOLOU
Color grading	Yov MOOR
Costumes	Elise CRIBIER-DELANDES
Director assistants	Romain PÉRIGNON Atsushi HIRAI Marin MOREL
Production	MLD Films
Producers	Martin BERTIER & Damien MANIVEL
Country	France
French distribution	Météore Films
International sales	Best Friend Forever

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