



—ZENITHAL



A Film by Jean-Baptiste Saurel

PRESSKIT



80 MIN

FRANCE

2024

2:35

DOLBY 5.1

FRENCH

SCREENINGS IN FANTASTIC FEST

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(WORLD PREMIERE)

WED. SEPT 25th, 11:20 AM @ THEATER 2, 9 & 10

— ZENITHAL

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— SYNOPSIS

Ti-Kong, the famous Kung-fu master, is found dead. Could the assassin be the Machiavellian doctor Sweeper? Insecure Francis falls into his clutches as he becomes a crucial part of Sweeper's scheme to preserve absolute male domination over the globe. That is unless Sonia, Francis' girlfriend, decides to take action to save him, restore their relationship, and establish peace between the sexes.

A CONVERSATION WITH JEAN-BAPTISTE SAUREL



***Zenithal* was inspired by your cult short *The Dickslap*, shown at Cannes' Critics' Week in 2012. What gave you the idea of making a film about a kung-fu master who fights with a gigantic penis?**

The Dickslap was mainly inspired by the insecurities of my adolescence: the soccer locker rooms where I was terrified by the enormous penises of my completely uninhibited teammates. And I, who hadn't yet gone through puberty, didn't know what sperm was, didn't understand why these guys had such huge dicks... *The Dickslap* was kind of my revenge against the big dick, a way of making fun of these complexes and inhibitions that we unfortunately have as young boys. I really made the film to exorcise the ghosts of my adolescence.

***The Dickslap* was a novelty in the field of French comedy and became a cult hit. What films have inspired you?**

I have so much references: Tarantino for his dialogs, Tsui Hark for his fight scenes, Carpenter for his horrific side, Rodriguez for his unapologetically B-movie style... And there are also American rom-coms, especially those by Judd Apatow, which manage quite simply to question masculinity. I'm thinking less about the films Apatow directed and more about those he produced, like *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* or *Superbad*. On the other hand, I don't have many references in French comedies, where I feel that the question of masculine fragility is somewhat less explored.

Francis's quest to reconnect with Sonia reminds me of American romantic comedies from the 1930s and 1940s—the ones called “comedies of remarriage,” where a couple must save each other

Zenithal is really more of a romantic comedy than an action comedy, even though there are a lot of action scenes in the film. Their relationship is in danger because Sonia

has come a long way psychologically and has found a new form of balance, whereas Francis is still stuck in an adolescent mindset. He is unable to question himself, and he has a lot of work to do to win Sonia back. If we had to sum up his dilemma in one sentence, it would be: “Stop thinking with your dick!” It's a metaphor that becomes completely literal later in the film.

While kung fu master Ti-Kong (Thevada Dek) is, in a way, retired at the start of *Zenithal*, a new villain emerges in the form of Michel. What inspired him?

I wrote this character as a kind of incel, a figure that emerged recently, particularly in the U.S. – these men motivated by sexual frustration that translates into acts of violence. Michel is filled with hateful frustration, Machiavellianism and utter childishness, and he becomes the leader of a cult or a fight club – it's a bit of both, really – full of unhappy men who didn't get the affection they'd hoped for. There are assholes in this cult, of course, but there are also guys who've had bad experiences or a bad upbringing, and who are looking to form connections. It must be my Judeo-Christian upbringing, but I've always wanted to understand why these people are mean.

Michel has some hilarious punch lines in the film, such as when he talks about bananas in sex-education class.

That came from Xavier Lacaille, who is an actor with an incredible sense of timing and rebound. For example, when we shot that scene, he started talking about bananas in biology class, and then behind my monitor, I shouted, “Evil banana!” and Xavier yelled “Evil banana!” half-crying. Then there was silence, and he continued, “If at least they had used a small banana...” Xavier never stops. He's part of a generation, like Franc Bruneau and Vanessa Guide, who works a lot by improvising lines to bounce off the initial script.

What kind of direction did you give the actors on set?

All the actors had to act very seriously and straightforwardly, because the audience had to believe everything that was happening. It's really something I defend strongly: belief. The story of *Zenithal* is so implausible, with plenty of slapstick and offbeat moments, that if you don't believe in it, it just becomes one big joke. My producer Amaury Ovisé and I talked a lot about the fact that this completely crazy universe had to be believable at all times, whether in casting, performances, or visually.

The film is also full of visual gags. This is something you've developed in your short films, where props, art direction and cinematography play an important role.

I'm always looking for new ways to make comedy visual so that it doesn't just rely on dialogs. For *Zenithal*, I was constantly trying to invent visual details and metaphors to convey the film's themes because I love crystallizing my ideas into an image. For example, there's a moment when members of Michel's sect try to hit a clitoris-shaped piñata to make candy fall out. It may be very silly, but to me, it says a lot about their incompetence, about their rage at not understanding how it works.

How did the shoot go?

I was well-prepared and knew where I was going. And I had time to fine-tune my shot lists, especially for the action scenes. Actually, I love the challenge of saying: okay, we have this much time and money, so how can we maximize it to make a spectacular and surprising film? It's like playing with Lego: you have a certain number of pieces, and you've got to build something.

The fight scenes in *Zenithal* are particularly impressive. How did you manage to make them so believable, especially when they

involve a battle against a giant robotic penis?

These scenes were choreographed with precision, and we tried as much as possible to use practical effects. For the close-ups, there really was a huge cock strapped to the actor. And we had a second cock on a stick to be able to make more precise attacks. I admit it created some incredible situations... Sometimes a piece of dick would fall off, and we had to glue it back on or paint over it. The funny thing was, there wasn't much time for laughter when we were shooting scenes like that. Everyone was very serious and very involved. It led to absurd moments on set, where you'd see experienced technicians shaking a big wiener.

The film's photography is highly stylized, with lots of camera movement and saturated colors, especially during the second half, which takes place in the abandoned factory. How did you work with Yann Maritaud, your cinematographer, to achieve this result?

I'm the kind of director who likes to get his hands dirty when it comes to shot lists, and I get more and more excited about light when I'm on set. *Zenithal* is first and foremost a genre film, and I really wanted us to tap into that vocabulary. I insisted on a lot of camera movement, and for the lighting I wanted very assertive color temperatures, real flat tints with very sharp directions. We didn't compromise on color contrast, even if it was sometimes a little over the top. If we wanted red, I told Yann to stick red everywhere.

Why do you insist on using practical effects rather than digital effects?

I'm more of a hands-on filmmaker, and I like to keep things physical. I make films to go on an adventure, so if it's just to stay on blue screens, I might as well stay home. We favored mechanical



effects as much as possible, although we added some visual effects to give more impact to certain moments, like the confetti in the final fight scene. The question I asked myself for this scene was: what are the most relevant special effects we can use to try and get a bit more spectacle, and that aren't too expensive to do? I thought of Tarantino's *Kill Bill*, where there's that fight in the snow, and Wong Kar-Wai's *The Grandmaster*, where they fight in the rain. So we did the same thing, but with confetti.

What was the most fun scene to shoot?

It was the scene where Michel, who turns into an evil doctor, brings Francis into the operating room, makes him sit in the gynecological chair, and then reveals his plan to dick-slap the moon. I love the tension in this scene, with the gradual discovery of the

huge metallic sex that the doctor is going to implant on Francis. When I shoot sequences like this, I try to put myself in the audience's seat. I imagine how they'll shudder in the theater, wondering: is this really what I think it is, that big metallic thing? And what's this brain I see as a large Chinese shadow behind a sheet? I like when you feel something gradually closing in on you, while still staying in comedy.

Manuel Peskine's music also contributes to the film's suspense. I feel it was partly inspired by the themes John Carpenter composed for his own films in the 80s.

Yes, especially for the villain's theme. In fact, that's the first piece Manu sent me, and it remains my favorite theme in the film. I'm quite basic when it comes to music; I'm looking for sensations, and I discuss them with the



composer. Manu is a workaholic and would send me pieces at 2 am sometimes—he's really a craftsman in the most noble and nicest sense of the word. For me, the villain's theme perfectly encapsulates the film, meaning that there's a disquieting strangeness, but at the same time, you know you're still in a comedy.

When you made *The Dickslap* more than ten years ago, it was before #MeToo and other society changes that have happened since. Do you think audiences will see these movements reflected in *Zenithal*?

I think the film will inevitably resonate with current events. The idea started from a personal reflection on my ignorance, my weaknesses, my doubts, and my questions, and all of that resonates with a broader societal issue. I tried to incorporate these reflections into a universal comedy by addressing these themes in a funny and playful way: the film shows a character who

has to stop thinking with his dick and accept a paradigm shift, who has to accept that he too is the product of a somewhat sick society. It was also important to find a female perspective on all these issues, and my co-writer Elodie Wallace contributed enormously in that regard. We talked a lot about these changes with her, and also with my producer Amaury, with whom I've been working since *The Dickslap*.

***Zenithal* raises many questions that resonate today, and like all classic romantic comedies, it ends with a solution that offers hope, at least for couples.**

The idea was really a kind of reconciliation of the sexes. At least, an opening towards a future of dialog, reflection, and more peaceful, thoughtful coexistence. And it's true that this simple metaphor of just having these two hands coming together indeed becomes the metaphor towards which the whole film is aimed. It means

there's no need to be angry with each other. Let's work together, think together, and try to truly understand the problem, because in fact it was misdiagnosed in the first place. This way of making masculine and feminine energy coexist is a way of seeing ourselves in our strengths and weaknesses and questioning ourselves together.

You've just finished shooting one of the biggest French series of the year, the new adaptation of the legendary *Zorro* with Jean Dujardin. How did it go? Will you be returning to cinema, or has the series format won you over?

Directing this new *Zorro* adventure was a privilege, a lot of pressure, but also a lot of fun. I directed the first four episodes, Emilie Noblet the next four. Personally, I feel like I've relearned my craft. Combining comedy and spectacle, while preserving emotions despite the vaudeville character of the story. Benjamin Charbit and Noé Debré's script was a real gift, and I had to match the writing, the talent of the actors and the greatness of the myth. I loved working on this series as if it were a film. The format doesn't matter to me; I love telling stories, whether for the big screen or for streaming!



BIOGRAPHY JEAN-BAPTISTE SAUREL

Graduating from La Fémis in 2009, Jean-Baptiste Saurel has written and directed several short films, including *La Bifle* (*Dickslap*), which was selected for the 51st Critics' Week at the Cannes Film Festival. He has also directed episodes of various series: *Parallèles* (Disney+), *Les Sept Vies de Léa* (Netflix), *Dawaland* (Arte), and *Zorro* with Jean Dujardin (Paramount+ and France TV).

His debut feature film, *Zenithal*, co-written with Elodie Wallace, was released in theaters on August 21, 2024 (distributed by Jokers Films), with a U.S. release scheduled for the second half of 2024.

Jean-Baptiste Saurel is currently developing a new project for Netflix, *Yokai Busters*, co-written with Clémence Dargent and Xavier Lacaille, with shooting planned for the second half of 2025.

Jean-Baptiste Saurel is also the author of a children's comic book, *Trésor*, published by Dupuis.

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FILMOGRAPHY JEAN-BAPTISTE SAUREL

2024	<i>Zorro</i> – France TV and Paramount+ TV Series
2022	<i>Parallèles</i> – Disney + TV Series
2012	<i>The Dickslap</i> Short Film – Cannes Critics' Week





CAST

Francis	Franc BRUNEAU
Sonia	Vanessa GUIDE
Marcus	Cyril GUEI
Sweeper	Xavier LACAILLE
Marion	Rebecca FINET
Ninon	Anaïde ROZAM
Le Détective	Bruno GOUERY
Assistent du Détective	Jean CHAUVELOT
Ti-Kong	Thevada DEK
Fengshui	David NUNES
Légiste	Romain FRANCISCO

CREW

Director	Jean-Baptiste Saurel,
Screenplay	Jean-Baptiste Saurel, Élodie Wallace, Amaury Ovisé
Director of Photography	Yann Maritaud
Production design	Sarah Berthet-Nivon
Wardrobe Design	Charlotte Richard
Makeup Design	Maëla Gervais
Editing	Nicolas Desmaison
Sound	Jean Minondo
Sound Edit	Pierre Bariaud
Sound Mix	Samuel Aïchoun
Original Music	Manuel Peskine
Color Grading	Charles Freville
Post-production	Pauline Gilbert
Production	Kazak Productions
Producers	Amaury Ovisé, Jean-Christophe Reymond
Country	France
French Distributor	The Jokers Films
International Sales	Best Friend Forever

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