

SYNOPSIS

The end of the 1950s, on the outskirts of Brussels.

Like the rest of the young generation of the time, Jeannine Deckers (Cécile de France) has a thirst for freedom and adventure. There's no question of her following the path her parents have chosen for her - finding a husband and taking over the family bakery. She wants a different life. To move away, to meet other people. After toying with art studies, she enters a convent. Jeanine finds out that being a Dominican nun is a difficult vocation. It requires giving up one's passions, including music. But she's not prepared to do this. The other sisters don't understand her, but with the blessing of the Mother Superior, she sticks to her dream and writes a global pop hit: "Dominique".

For audiences around the world, Jeannine became "Sister Smile", also known as the Singing Nun. She was a worldwide sensation and sold millions of records. Her success was compared to that of Elvis Presley.

Struggling to reconcile her faith and her newfound fame, Jeannine leaves the convent and attempts to continue her career as a rock star.

The film traces the unique and deeply moving story of this young girl who never gave up.

CAST

CÉCILE DE FRANCE-----Jeannine Deckers
SANDRINE BLANCHE-----Annie
CHRIS LOMME-----Mother Superior
MARIE KREMER-----Françoise
JO DESEURE-----Gabrielle Deckers
JAN DECLEIR-----Lucien Deckers
JOHAN LEYSEN-----Father Jean
FILIP PEETERS-----Brusson
CHRISTELLE CORNIL-----Sister Christine
TSILLA CHELTON-----The doyenne

CREW

Director-----**Stijn CONINX**
Producers-----**Eric HEUMANN**
-----**Marc SILLAM**
-----**Christine PIREAUX**
-----**Peter BOUCKAERT**
Script-----**Chris VANDER STAPPEN**
-----**Ariane FERT**
-----**Stijn CONINX**
Original music-----**Bruno FONTAINE**
Image-----**Yves VANDERMEEREN**
Sound-----**Henri MORELLE**
-----**Philippe BAUDHUIN**
Production designer-----**Arnaud DE MOLERON**
Costume designer-----**Florence SCHOLTES**
-----**Christophe PIDRE**
Editing-----**Philippe RAVOET**
Production Director-----**Cyrille BRAGNIER**
Executive producer-----**Pierre GRUNSTEIN**
Associate producer-----**Brigitte GERMAIN**

In coproduction with PARADIS FILMS, LES FILMS DE LA PASSERELLE, EYEWORKS, KUNST AND KINO
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FILM INFO

Origin: Belgium, France

Language: French

124 min, Image 35mm, Sound Dolby SRD, Color

Rating: PG – Mild themes, brief nudity, infrequent coarse language

INTERVIEW WITH CECILE DE FRANCE

How did you arrive on the project?

It was the producer Jan van Raemdonck who first told me about this film seven or eight years ago. I was immediately interested in the character of Jeannine Deckers, but the project was delayed several times because of financing problems. Until very recently, we were not even sure if the film could be made one day. Luckily, the producer Eric Heumann agreed to produce it.

How was your relationship with the director Stijn Coninx?

From the beginning, Stijn and I were connected and on the same wavelength. We even retouched the scenario together: he let me participate in the rewriting of the dialogue and he took my ideas into consideration, including during the shooting. At the end, what was formidable it is that we wished to tell the same story. As a result, every time we were told that the film risked not being made, we were very sad.

What is your opinion on Sister Smile's character?

For me, she is first a rebel, a dissenter who exceeded her limits authorized by her status. She also wanted to give the Church a more human image. By her songs, she sincerely believed that she could move the young people closer to the Catholic religion. Moreover, when she was a student at Louvain-la-Neuve, she liked exchanging many ideas freely and without restraint with people of her age. But she is also a woman who was interested in the social reality of her time and in the most modest people: this is the reason why she would have wanted the Church to be in service of humanity.

She nevertheless aroused several debates within the Church ...

The church turned its back on her – as did her fans – after "The Golden Pill", a revolutionary song for the time which promoted contraception. She did not hesitate to take risks and to assume her progressive ideas, while claiming a sincere faith. For those days, she was a punk prematurely!

What is the facet of her personality which most interested you?

She was a nuisance! A headstrong ... She was a very big selfish woman with an oversized ego. She refused any sign of authority, whether it is from her mother, from her superiors in the convent or about rules in social life. At the same time, she played a true role of Judas in the convent. I also like her anti-authority side which refuses the slightest criticism.

Jeannine Deckers also has her dark side ...

Yes, she has a repulsed aggressiveness and a wild brutality. Moreover, on the shooting, I proposed things physically violent which Stijn often accepted. At the end, I believe that she was a big unstable and surly teenager who never became grown-up and was never able to face the reality of life. That is why she spent her time running away: as soon as she ran into conflicts or criticisms, she would close up on herself and leave in her search for a "beyond the reality", as she said herself in her diary.

What was she avoiding?

First, the authoritarianism and the coldness of her mother. Then, her fears and her confusions when she discovers love at the time of adolescence. Because instead of living and accepting the confusion that she feels for a girl or a boy, she avoids it and runs away. It is necessary to know that her mother disdained physical love and that

it played a very important role in the construction of her identity and her vision of herself. Hence the feeling of auto-repulsion and her panic fear of love.

It is why she took refuge into the convent?

Yes, she looks for answers to her doubts, and the peace and the comfort that she misses. She also wanted to challenge God and to disregard herself. It is also a way to prove herself to her mother: the dress gives her a very strong social status. But, even there, her hopes will be disappointed. Later, having left the convent, she will dive into depression, alcohol and anxiolytics, and will eventually commit suicide - which is another way of escape. I think that she was, for herself, her biggest obstacle.

How to explain that she repressed so much her feelings?

She never managed to use her heart because nobody taught her when she was young. Moreover, if she considered herself as a great artist and if she was never able to question herself, it is because she needed love and, at the same time had an incapacity to love: she is really happy only when she feels the love of the public.

She finishes abandoned by all.

She is abandoned at first by her mother. Then, by the convent which refused to help her financially when she got into debt. By the Church, then, who did not authorize her to use her artist's name in order to reduce her to silence. By her public of Catholic followers also who were shocked by her most provocative songs. The State also turned her back when she asked for the indulgence of the treasury. Then the media which created the phenomenon Sister Smile without her knowing and which made her suffer by revealing her homosexuality before abandoning her. Or even her manager after her failed tour in Canada. Annie is the only one who remained faithful to her: thanks to her unconditional love, Jeannine was seeing herself as an invincible goddess.

Did you plunge into archival images to better define the character?

Naturally! I watched the documentaries which exist on her and I read all the interviews she gave and the works which were dedicated to her. In my performance, I always tended to go closer to the reality, whereas Stijn wished more to go towards the evocation of the character to pull the narrative towards the fiction. His purpose was to make her charming. Moreover, in the film, she may be gruff and obstinate, we can easily identify with her. We therefore shaded off a little of her less pleasant aspects, like her aggressiveness and her arrogance.

You trained for the guitar and for the singing?

For five months. But it is especially the guitars which worried me the most: it is really thanks to Bruno Pilloix that I managed to surmount my fears on the shooting.

How does Stijn Coninx directs his actors?

He is extremely present. He always takes time to set the scene with the actors before the take. He re-explains at which moment of the story we are and he gives the stakes to each of us. Besides, he does it with an immense sweetness. Despite the fatigue and the difficulties during the shooting, he knew how to create a serene atmosphere free of tensions. It was a magnificent human adventure which will stay among my best memories.

Is there a real difference between shooting in Belgium and in France?

The working customs are not the same. For example, the Belgian actors do a true research on their character and are not afraid of looking ridiculous, unpleasant or ugly. In fact, they are above all in the service of telling the story. As a result, we are not prisoner of an image or an ego and we can really work characters profoundly. I like very much shooting in Belgium because I have the feeling to find my culture and my way of working.

BIO

Born in Namur in 1975, Cecile de France left Belgium at the age of 17 to go to Paris where she studied at Jean Paul Denizon's acting school for two years while preparing the ENSATT (*École Nationale Supérieure des Arts et Techniques du Théâtre*), the "National Superior School of Arts and Techniques of Theatre". Accepted, she spent three years (from 1995 to 1998) attending the Comedy Section at first *rue Blanche* in Paris, then in Lyon.

She was discovered by the agent Dominique Besnehard and appeared in French cinema hits such as *L'Art (délicat) de la séduction* (2001) and *Irène* (2002).

Her international breakthrough came through the horror thriller *High Tension* (2003) which was a worldwide success. She caught the eye of Hollywood producers and soon landed her first major role in a US feature, *Around the World in 80 Days* (2004), in which she starred alongside Jackie Chan.

She won two César Awards for Most Promising Actress in *The Spanish Apartment* (2002) and Best Supporting Actress in *Russian Dolls* (2005).

SELECTIVE FILMOGRAPHY

SISTER SMILE (2009), Dir. Stijn Coninx
MESRINE : KILLER INSTINCT (2008), Dir. Jean-Francois Richet|
A SECRET (2007), Dir. Claude Miller
THE SINGER (2006), Dir. Xavier Giannoli
ORCHESTRA SEATS (2006), Dir. Danièle Thompson
THE RUSSIAN DOLLS (2005), Dir. Cédric Klapisch
AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS (2004), Dir. Frank Coraci
HIGH TENSION (2003), Dir. Alexandre Aja
IRENE (2002), Dir. Ivan Calbérac
THE SPANISH APARTMENT (2002), Dir. Cédric Klapisch
L'ART (DELICAT) DE LA SEDUCTION (2001), Dir. Richard Berry

INTERVIEW WITH STIJN CONINX

Can we see Jeannine Deckers as rebellious, announcing in a way the protesting of the years 68?

Absolutely.

Moreover, it's also what interested me in Cécile de France: she asks many questions and does not hesitate to argue some decisions, but always advisedly and without playing the "diva". Because, above all, she wants to keep her freedom in her approach of the character. But it doesn't prevent her from being extremely prepared and easy to direct.

Cécile of France particularly dedicates herself to her character.

Totally! She liked the role from the beginning, seven years ago, when we proposed the project to her. She worked persistently, even when we were not sure that the film would be made. For example, she did not hesitate to take classes of guitar and singing, and to practice regularly, without having the certainty that the film would be made one day. I owe her a lot.

From the beginning, we understand that Jeannine suffers from the absence of communication in her family ...

We just need to see her parents watching TV during the meals to understand how much these people do not communicate. For a girl like Jeannine who aspires to freedom and love, it is the family context which restrains her desires and which prevents her from expressing herself. I also wanted to show that the presence of the television, fatal in the communication, is an image which is still present today.

On the other hand, the complicity between Jeannine and her cousin is very gentle.

With my scriptwriters, we wanted someone within the family, who understands Jeannine and who plays the role of her confidante. For this character, we were inspired by her sister who is still alive, but who does not want to hear any more about her. It is the reason why we decided to create the character of Jeannine's cousin, to avoid any troubles with her sister ...

While showing that the Church manipulates Jeannine, you also show nuanced characters, like the one of the Mother Superior.

In all my films, I try hard not to be binary, because in life, things are never all white or black. What interests me is when the characters begin to have doubts on their own behavior: it is what occurs with the Mother Superior. Although she is worried about rules of conduct in the convent, she manages to listen to Jeannine's arguments and to revoke her decision forbidding her to sing. Little by little, links of affection are formed between both characters: the Mother Superior is a kind of surrogate mother for Jeannine.

Can we consider that Sister Smile contributed to move the Church closer to society?

She especially tried to move the youth of her country closer to the Church. It is not a coincidence if, at the beginning of the film, Jeannine watches Jean XXIII on TV: he is one of the only popes who knew how to open the religious institution to the world and to the youngest generations.

What memory do you keep from the shooting?

From the beginning, the production trusts us and allowed us to advance very fast in all our artistic decisions. This complicity created an extremely constructive working atmosphere on the shooting. It is rare enough to be underlined.

BIO

Born in 1957 in Neerpelt, Stijn Coninx is a Belgian film director. He studied film directing at HRITCS (currently Rits, at Erasmus Hogeschool Brussel). His film *Daens* has been nominated for the Oscars Best Foreign Language Film in 1994.

FILMOGRAPHY

Features

1987 **HECTOR**, comedy
1990 **KOKO FLANEL**, comedy
1992 **DAENS**
1997 **WHEN THE LIGHT COMES**
2003 **SEA OF SILENCE**
2009 **SISTER SMILE**

Shorts

1980 **RAOUL SERVAIS**
1982 **SURFING**
2003 **TEN DUINEN**
2004 **VISIONS OF EUROPE**
2006 **TRADITIO UNIVERSALIS**

DOCUMENTARIES

1988 **WOULD YOU GO THE DISTANCE** (voor American College) (25')
1990 **SOOI WILLEMS : DE PENDELAAR VAN GOD** (60')
TO WALK AGAIN (91')