

Official Selection Cannes 2003

La Petite Lili

A Film by
Claude Miller

France/ 2003/104 minutes / color / 1:85 / Dolby SR



First Run Features Release

153 Waverly Place

New York, NY 10014

(212)243-0600/Fax (212)989-7649

www.firstrunfeatures.com

info@firstrunfeatures.com

LA PETITE LILI

94 minutes, 35mm, Color, 2003

Directed by
Claude Miller

Written by
Julien Boivent, Claude Miller

Cinematography
Gérard de Battista

Film Editing
Véronique Lange

Producer
Christine Gozlan

Associate Producer
Sylvestre Guarino

Executive producer
Daniel Louis

Co-Producer
Denise Robert, Annie Miller

CAST

Nicole Garcia.... Mado Marceaux
Bernard Giraudeau.... Brice
Jean-Pierre Marielle....Simon Marceaux
Ludivine Sagnier....Lili
Robinson Stévenin....Julien Marceaux
Julie Depardieu....Jeanne-Marie
Yves Jacques....Serge
Anne Le Ny....Léone
Marc Betton....Guy
Michel Piccoli....Le comédien qui incarne Simon

DIRECTOR BIOGRAPHY: CLAUDE MILLER

Producer/director/writer Claude Miller studied at the IDHEC film school in Paris from 1962 through 1963, acting as assistant and supervisor in the crews of many notable directors of France's *Novelle Vague*, including Robert Bresson, Jean-Luc Godard and Francois Truffaut. Under Truffaut's aegis Miller directed three shorts and his first feature film in 1976, *The Best Way to Walk*. Miller completed several more features and script adaptations with the perceptible influence of his mentor, and after Truffaut's death in 1984, Miller completed the filming of Truffaut's half-completed *The Little Thief* in 1988. Miller has since fully come into his own, and has helmed such critically-acclaimed films as *The Class Trip* (1998), *Under Suspicion* (2000), and *Betty Fisher and other Stories* (2001).

“La Petite Lili” – Interviews

BERNARD GIRAUDEAU

What do you like about Claude Miller's films? I've always liked his films. I've wanted to work with him for a long time, ever since “The Best Way to Walk” (“La Meilleure façon de marcher”). You just know the kind of people you'd like to go on a filmmaking adventure with. I wanted to go on an adventure with Miller. And the feeling was mutual! He asked me at quite a late stage to be in “La Petite Lili,” but I wasn't particularly interested in the part.

Why not? I didn't like this seducer figure who hadn't grown up, who hadn't grown old. I didn't think that my scenes were strong enough. You see, I first choose the people I want to work with, in this case Claude and his people, then the bonus was the actors I'd be working with: Jean-Pierre Marielle who I adore, Nicole Garcia who already worked with me and directed me, Ludivine Sagnier, my partner in “Water Drops on Burning Rocks” (“Gouttes d'eau sur pierres brûlantes”), and also Julie Depardieu.

How long have you chosen the people you work with before the part itself? For a while now. I don't want to work in painful situations - I need to get on with people and be happy. A film is a fragment of happiness, not a fragment of pain and suffering. Miller's screenplay was magnificent. And there was also that wonderful September on the Ile aux Moines with its unpredictable tides, wild oysters, and fishing for elusive bass in the currents. Morbihan Bay is a kind of shifting mirror. Miller has always been very sensitive to the subtle details of everyday life. He also has the commendable quality of listening to suggestions other people make, the little details which make up a character's personality and identity.

What suggestions did you make to him? As I said, the role of Brice didn't interest me, because I like excessive characters such as the one in “A Matter of Taste” (“Une affaire de gout”), for instance, where there was ambiguity and perversity. I said to Claude that I was fascinated by his story, but that the character needed more substance. I goaded Claude, he listened to me, picked up on it, and gave me a little bit extra to work with, which I think the character lacked originally. I wanted to make Brice a little bit deeper and flesh out his relationship with Mado and Jeanne-Marie.

Brice says to Jeanne-Marie that she is probably the most interesting character in L'Espérance, that supporting roles whose lives are sacrificed for others are often the most interesting and the ones people remember. Do you agree with that? Yes, I think Jeanne-Marie is one of the most interesting characters in the household. When I read the screenplay, I was also drawn to Simon, a man distressed by old age but whose constant obsessive grumbling makes him amusing. And then, there's Mado with the frenzied selfishness of an egocentric actress. I thought that my character was incredibly bland compared to them, so that had to be remedied by giving Brice more color.

How would you define the relationship between Brice and Lili? It all comes to a head: the actor, the director, and a man who is to be seduced by youth, and above all by talent. He very quickly knows that he's going to kill her innocence. He kills the Seagull - perhaps to make a vulture out of her - with great perversity, and that's the only thing that interested me in the character of Brice.

There is a very powerful scene which brings Julien, a hard-line young filmmaker, into conflict with Brice, a more consensual, commercial filmmaker. During your career, have you been confronted with these two kinds of directors? The ones with whom I made so-called commercial films didn't claim to make anything other than a good story to entertain or to scare people. I've known others who had higher ambitions but who were always extremely humble about their subject matter. I think it would have ended in trouble if I'd come across filmmakers who tried to make me swallow their messages or bombastic ideas!

Do you have a bad temper? No. I think that's not what talent is about. I've been directed by Scola and he didn't need to go into long speeches to make me work. The people with talent don't need to prove it. In this case, it's different. I think that what Julien is criticizing Brice for is not rebelling anymore, of settling into

the comfort of success and security. And he's right. But, in the end, they're trying to say the same things in a different way. You keep returning to the same essential themes with a desire to ask questions in order to ask others, as Diderot put it. Julien has this faith, this passion for revolution that is so characteristic of youth. Brice was once like that, too. It's an inevitable phase if you want to be a creative artist.

Did you have this revolt, this passion? I was a major pain in the ass!

And as a filmmaker, where do you see yourself? Nowhere! I sometimes make films like a madman, and sometimes like a contemplative. I just don't know. I tell my own stories. My journeys. Sometimes they're violent, passionate, or in the form of a reverie. I don't have a message. I've always loved poetry, novels, stories about people. I tell fictional stories probably always with a certain symbolism, the theme of which revolves around self-denial, differences, ignorance, and tolerance.

LUDIVINE SAGNIER

When did you first discover Claude Miller's films? Very early on, at the age of eight. When "Charlotte and Lulu" ("L'Effrontée") came out, my sister was the same age as the character played by Charlotte Gainsbourg and I was the same age as Lulu. Like many girls of my sister's generation, she adored "Charlotte and Lulu," so much so that her enthusiasm rubbed off on me and we would act out the film together! "Charlotte and Lulu" is the film I've watched the most, I know it off by heart! It's a highpoint of my childhood. Later, of course, I saw his other films and I particularly like "The Best Way to Walk" ("La Meilleure façon de marcher"). This evocation of homosexuality was very challenging back then and, of course, there was Patrick Dewaere, one of my favorite actors. I love the way Claude portrays people, childhood, troubles and passions with a rare, moving humanity and tolerance. I never dreamed I would be directed by him one day.

How did your first encounter with Claude Miller go? He called in a few up-and-coming young actresses for screen tests. I couldn't believe he'd given me such an opportunity, especially as it was loosely based on Chekhov's "The Seagull" I was fascinated by Claude Miller as well as by the play which deals with an actress who learns about suffering. I had to pass the screen test which involved doing one of the play's monologues, "Men, lions, eagles, partridges, deer...". I had to bring something realistic, natural, and intimate to a text which is none of those things, but which has a very oratory, passionate, fiery style. I managed it, because I was helped by the background of my childhood. I think that Claude was moved by it.

What can you tell us about Lili? "La Petite Lili" is a modern adaptation of "The Seagull" and it's hard to separate Lili's character from Nina's. Nina is a very emotionally deprived provincial girl. She doesn't have a mother. And her stubborn, frustrated, alcoholic father beats her. She is a little Seagull beside a lake who dreams of big oceans, but unfortunately cannot reach them. Even though the film doesn't dwell on this metaphor, there is still the same urge by the provincial girl who dreams about the world of cinema and becoming an actress in Mado's league. Lili is a simple girl who lives in the world of nature - she doesn't theorize about art like Julien. She is living life rather passively reflecting on art. And it is this spontaneity and lightness which give her her charm and which catches Brice's attention.

She later learns that Brice wrote in his notebook about their first kiss, "I knew right away that we would fall into a bottomless well of unhappiness." How cruel! Of course, but she also shows great cruelty. She isn't in love with Brice but with what he represents, a successful filmmaker. Lili contrasts with the character of Mado, who suffers from the passing of time to the point of crying "Down with young people!" Mado's goal is to catch up with the others in a naive, impetuous way. In the second part of the film, five years later, the only thing she has learned is suffering with dignity. She has understood the illusion of this profession, but unfortunately it is too late. There is a line in Chekhov which I had in my head throughout the shoot. It's in "The Wood Demon," the first version of "Uncle Vanya": "Day and night, the thought haunts me, like a fiend, that my life is lost forever." All Chekhov's characters look to the future with nostalgia. There are two other key lines by Nina in "The Seagull" which helped me to play Lili: "If you ever need my life, come take it" she says to Trigorin and also, "I was simple, too simple to understand you" she says with immense suffering to Treplev at the end of the play.

Thanks to Brice, Lili gets to act in her first film, gains the recognition of the public, and is awarded the Romy Schneider Prize. But celebrity brings a loveless, childless life of solitude. Are you afraid of that? I was awarded the Romy Schneider Prize this year for François Ozon's "Huit femmes." It was a magical coincidence to receive it for real after having acted the scene! My encounter with Lili enabled me not to make the same choices as her.

Were you tempted to? Yes, on the night of the awards ceremony, I was tempted to go off with someone more experienced... Understanding Lili's character gave me the strength not to succumb to that particular temptation. This film struck chords in me which helped me to make the right choices in my life. Unlike Lili, I'm lucky in that I suffered less from emotional deprivation, so I feel less strongly an irrational need to be loved by others. I'm not in this profession for the same reasons as Lili.

What were your reasons? A necessity. I always felt that my life was too simple and I aspired to greater complexity. I always think I'm undergoing a long analysis through all my roles. And I've come to realize that I learn a little about myself with each character. There's an irresistible attraction to fiction, suddenly you're drawn to a particular story, fascinated by it, you're in a state of dependence to the fiction which sometimes makes you forget reality. And that's what makes actors cruel sometimes with the people around them.

Are you prepared to make compromises in your career, like Lili? I'm open to variety. But I'm against the massive industrialization of film. I always said I'd refuse American blockbusters and yet I'm playing Tinkerbell in "Peter Pan" by P.J. Hogan! But I don't think I've made any compromises. When I was a child, I dreamed of flying and having magic powers! It's in keeping with everything I've done so far. And I can't believe I'm in competition at Cannes for "La Petite Lili" by Claude Miller and for "Swimming Pool" by François Ozon.

ROBINSON STEVENIN

What is Julien really like, in your opinion? A character who voices his beliefs, his view of life, and his ambitions, and they're things I would go along with. When you're young and you're creative, there comes a time when it becomes your own world which no one can enter. At the start of "La Petite Lili," Julien is coming out of that phase and is about to show his work to the world. He put his heart into his short film and he vigorously defends it to his family circle.

Do you like his hard-line nature? Yes. But I'm more moderate in the way I speak, though not in the way I think. At 22 years of age, I'd like to go as far as Julien does. He has a revolt, a violence within himself. He needs to gain his independence. When he screens his short film, he tries to assert this independence, his own vision of things so as to be accepted as an adult. But the problem is that his mother, Mado is ultra-possessive. She wants to control everything.

Julien also rebels against Brice, his mother's lover and a successful director. Julien struggles to exist through confrontation. There are various different families in cinema. My father is an actor and a director. I want to live my own life, which doesn't necessarily involve going and acting in films by my father's friends! I want to make my own choices without asking my parents' advice. They only get to see the fruit of my work.

You started acting at a very early age. I did my first film at the age of eight, "La Révolte des Enfants." Then, when I was 14, I acted in "1914 the Glorious Summer" ("Le bel été 1914") by Christian de Chalonge. And I was sometimes present during the shooting of films my father was in. It wasn't just child-minding. They were moments of great freedom. I came and went as I pleased on the set. I learned self-discipline very early on.

You've already had a fine acting career, with, among other things, the role of the bad guy in "Bad Company" ("Mauvaises fréquentations") by Jean-Pierre Améris and the part of a transvestite in "Bad Genres" ("Mauvais Genres") by Francis Girod for which you received a César award. I'm

happy with all the films I've done. But strangely, I don't think of myself as an actor and yet I can't see myself doing anything else! I'm tempted by the idea of directing a film. Making a film is about showing moments of life, the little joys and failures you've observed and that you can powerfully recreate through images, music, and words. When you make a film, you go on an inner journey, so talking about it now would be like closing the door on the imagination.

CLAUDE MILLER

How much is “La Petite Lili” freely based on “The Seagull” by Chekhov? About ten years ago, I reread “The Seagull”. Even though the play is set in the 19th century in the world of theater and literature, I found so many similarities with our lives as filmmakers and movie actors that I wanted to do a screen adaptation of it to show how contemporary and universal the characters are. All the characters in the play are the heroes of the film: Nina is Lili (Ludivine Sagnier) who dreams of becoming an actress. Treplev becomes Julien (Robinson Stevenin), an intransigent young filmmaker, Arkadina his mother is Mado (Nicole Garcia), a talented actress. Trigorin is Brice (Bernard Giraudeau), a successful director and Mado's lover. Masha is Jeanne-Marie (Julie Depardieu), who Julien doesn't realize is in love with him, and Sorin is Simon (Jean-Pierre Marielle). So, “The Seagull” was the starting point for “La Petite Lili,” except for the fact that I felt that Act IV wouldn't work with young people in this day and age. My adaptation moves toward a different dénouement. My co-screenwriter, Julien Boivent and I came up with another ending to show how artists can use their suffering and experiences in their work and in the best cases, turn them into art. It is in the very nature of us filmmakers and actors to use everything which has formed us and made us what we are.

Talking of which, “La Petite Lili” seems to be your most personal film to date. Is there any similarity between Julien, the young fiery, intransigent filmmaker and the young Claude Miller? I was much more timid, reserved, and diplomatic, or let's just say more of a hypocrite than him! But I profoundly empathize with Julien. What interested me was rediscovering all the high standards, the determination, the radicalism I had in me and which are an intrinsic part of being young. Opposite Julien, there is of course Brice, a mature filmmaker who I also resemble. But, you know, I'm a little like everyone in this film: Lili, Mado, Simon...

Did you want to become a director right from the start? Oh, yes, right from the age of 12. I was mad about cinema and I never considered doing anything else. I lived in the suburbs and I went to the cinema two or three times a week. When I was very young, I thought that it was the actors who got together and made the film! When I realized that there was a director, a conductor, I wanted to be that person.

Do you see yourself now on the side of Brice, the consensual filmmaker rather than on that of Julien, the “pure, uncompromising” young director? We don't really know what kind of films Brice makes. He makes films which are successful but which aren't trash either! Like myself, he is the kind of filmmaker who is sometimes cursed by young directors. And I'm not considered cutting-edge by a certain section of the press. I make films of personal expression, as they say. And you can take it or leave it! Brice is like me insofar as he tries to express what he is, at the age he is. He's very sincere. Certainly he takes into account almost unconsciously all sorts of not so much commercial as realistic, pragmatic considerations. It's only natural for someone like Julien to be more radical, because he hasn't yet come up against the harsh realities of the profession.

Julien considers Brice to be “a movie business hack who plays golf with the Culture Secretary.” He says some very hard words about him, declaring that he's “the enemy” and the films he makes “threaten” him. A type of cinema embodied by “over-written, oh so meaningful characters... hot air which only exists for the actors to do their performing poodle number.” Have you ever been subjected to this kind of attack? You can get panned by the critics and pulled to pieces by young filmmakers, but it doesn't matter, it goes with the territory. And that's why it amused me to show this young boy confronting a mature filmmaker by trying to show both men's points of view and the reasons which drive them. Once again, I identify as much with Julien as I do with Brice. I share with Julien the same views on life, love, the desire to be true to oneself, not to put on a fake nose or flashy clothes.

Julien and his mother, Mado, played by Nicole Garcia, have a conflictual relationship. She is a famous actress and Brice's mistress. Julien criticizes Mado for her movie successes. When he shows his first short film to the little family circle, she calls him a "provincial Bergman, an ayatollah, a pretentious little fool". After "Alias Betty" / "Betty Fisher and Other Stories" ("Betty Fisher et autres histoires"), yet another harsh mother role for Nicole Garcia! Mado is indeed harsh, but she's also terribly fragile. I absolutely wanted to work with Nicole Garcia again. We get along very well and share a lot of intellectual common ground. It was obvious when I thought of the character of Julien's mother that she should have the part. Mado is at a very difficult age for a woman in terms of seduction, love, affectivity, and up-and-coming young girls. She shows her cracks and from that point of view, she is transparent. But the difficult relationship between Mado and her son doesn't start at the beginning of the film. It goes back much further than that. She knows full well that Julien considers the films she makes to be "turkeys," as he puts it. So, she's permanently on the defensive. She arrives, wearing her body armor. There is an old disagreement between them. What's more, it's a profession that is so based on how other people look at you that you become thoroughly dependent on it, which explains why she is in this extremely fragile state. It takes extraordinary, incredible strength to resist.

Do you have such strength? Not at all! When the critics attack me, I get very unhappy. And when I'm praised, I find it very flattering. I can be got very easily on my vanity! And I'll never change. There's no point putting on an act or trying to throw people off the scent. I'm not at all immune to all that.

When Lili arrives at L'Espérance, the house on the Ile aux Moines, she brings about turmoil, desire, jealousy, and inevitably, it ends in tragedy. She's a young girl who wants to become an actress. She wants to shine, she thinks she has talent and artistic worth. During that summer, she frequents these people she admires: Brice, the great filmmaker she seduces, and Mado, the great actress, the mother of her boyfriend Julien. Lili's ambition, how she is blinded and dazzled by other people's successes, are things that anyone can identify with. She will pay the price of all that at the end. Ludivine Sagnier plays this with great precision. She was the most genuine and above all, the least "arty" of all the actresses of her generation I met during screen tests for the part.

All the characters in "La Petite Lili" are people who are suffering. Like all of us. Life is never a piece of cake. We all have slices of bitterness we have to swallow.

"La Petite Lili" is a choral film with very symmetrical characters. Absolutely. There's Lili, the young actress, and Mado, the mature actress. There's Julien, the young filmmaker, and Brice, the established director. As for Simon, played by Jean-Pierre Marielle, he's a kind of old child, conscious of the passing years. Seeing the drama unfold before his eyes, he is philosophical and lucid about it. And his view of it all is extremely benevolent, a view rather close to my own. His character is directly inspired by Sorin, "The Man Who Wanted To" by Chekhov. Jeanne-Marie, played by Julie Depardieu, has the same honesty to her. She has dignity, courage, and compassion. She is in love with Julien but, at first, it is totally unrequited. She is prepared to devote her body and soul to Julien and in the end, she has the last word. There are no good or bad characters in this story. There are just characters who confront each other, passions which collide. And then, everything is resolved. Five years after the drama, Julien is making a film in which everyone comes together during the shoot, in a kind of nostalgia of summers past in the family home at L'Espérance, the house of youth where every hope was possible. I needed a house beside the sea, and the Ile aux Moines was the ideal place to set the story. Despite the violence of the story, the landscape had to be both heavenly and feverish.

By giving us a look behind the scenes, with the making of Julien's highly autobiographical film inspired by the last tragic summer on the Ile aux Moines, are you, in a way, making your own "Day for Night" ("Nuit américaine")? So I've been told... But it's a little irritating. I find it trite of journalists to refer to "Day for Night" just because I worked with Truffaut! "La Petite Lili" has nothing in common with "Day for Night," a film on how movies are made. "La Petite Lili" could be more readily compared to "Contempt" ("Le Mépris") by Godard or to "The Bad and the Beautiful" by Minnelli.

JULIE DEPARDIEU

What moves you in Claude Miller's films? Miller is a very sincere, very sensitive person who sees things that others don't see. Special things about fragility and people's flaws. That's what makes his films so special. He's an emotional man, which is rare. He tackles the mystery of people. The Jeanne-Marie character suffers. She is passionately in love with Julien. Disproportionately in love. And he doesn't even look at her. She's part of the furniture. In "La Petite Lili," Miller also shows the confusion of an actress played by Nicole Garcia, the confusion of Simon, an old man who thinks about death the whole time, played by Jean-Pierre Marielle, and the ambition of Lili, played by Ludivine Sagnier.

Brice, the established filmmaker, played by Bernard Giraudeau, explains to Jeanne-Marie that she is one of the most interesting people in L'Espérance, that the supporting roles are often the best. Do you share this opinion? The supporting roles are often attributed to people with plenty of temperament. But every actor in the world, even extras, feel that they should have the lead role! And I consider myself above all an actor in my life!

In "La Petite Lili" there are also discussions on cinema with amusing clichés of the character actors of the past and actors today who have a "more natural" acting style. What register do you consider yourself to be in? I like the power of emotion there is, say, in Pialat's films. I don't really like character acting. What interests me is the point of view, the directing style, and the actors who are sublimated by this point of view. Miller has a floating way of filming, he gives the actors freedom, he listens to suggestions, and out of all that, comes a gentle form of poetry.

Which character moved you the most in "La Petite Lili?" Simon, played by Jean-Pierre Marielle. I hung out with Marielle the whole time! He had to put up with me! Marielle has an attitude I really like, like the jazz-swingers of the 1940s. There's Mado, too. I was moved by her fear of no longer being seductive and by her fragility. A little girl who's desperate not to be 10 years old anymore! Chekhov's characters always have great, lofty aspirations, and life kills them.

Would you like to act in "The Seagull" in the theater? Yes, but I've seen it massacred so often by the French that I'd like to play it with Slavs. And I'd keep the same role, Masha / Jeanne-Marie.

NICOLE GARCIA

This is the second time you've been directed by Claude Miller. What do you remember of your first experience in "Alias Betty" / "Betty Fisher & Other Stories" ("Betty Fisher et autres histoires")?

What we achieved together with the role of Margo surprised us both. You realize when you surpass or go beyond the dreams a director put into a character. And I realized that the result was even more interesting than I'd imagined. It's like when you gamble a small amount in a casino and you get much more back. And then, one day, he told me he had written the role of Mado in "La Petite Lili" for me.

Claude Miller says of Mado that she is both "harsh and fragile." What do you think? Mado is wildly selfish. She lives very much like a lover in danger rather than a generous mother. She doesn't have enough serenity in her as a woman or as an actress to give her son Julien the attention and the love he expects of her. Her fight is on other fronts. The certainties in her life are starting to crack, and her foundations are becoming shaky. That's what so wonderful about the character.

She is very fierce though when she calls her son a "provincial Bergman" and a "pretentious little fool..." When Julien shows his short film, she is too irritated to listen. It's rather symbolic of her whole attitude. It was on one of the last afternoons of the summer and Julien came and disturbed her with his screening. She has a bad feeling that her lover is attracted to young Lili. She is unstable, irritable, and is afraid that her relationship with Brice is coming to an end. As Chekhov put it so well, she is a woman in love - that is virtually what defines her character. Brice is a womanizer, a seducer, a lover of women. It is hard, in any case, for Brice to resist Lili when such an alluring young girl throws herself at him. Claude replaced the act of death in Act IV of "The Seagull" with an act of cinema in "La Petite Lili." Life returns

thanks to the cinema. Mado and Brice get back together. There is a very strong, deep, indestructible bond which has weathered this storm. It's the most positive view of a couple I've seen in a long time!

At one point, Mado cries out “Down with young people!” Is it just said in jest? I think it's very funny when she comes out with that. It's a kind of rebellion against the terrorism of youth, and a way of saying that it won't win! But it's also a defensive statement. She senses that there is an erotic undercurrent which she is not part of. The power of seduction which she has had all her life is starting to fail her.

Do you share her fear? I don't feel at all threatened by young people! Everyone has to deal with the inconveniences of growing old. But, at the same time, it's absurd to become obsessed with it, not to overcome it. It's just a fact of life.

“La Petite Lili” is loosely based on “The Seagull.” Would you like to play Chekhov in the theater?

Oh, yes, I'd love to. I have a passion for Chekhov. I'm very tempted by the idea of reinterpreting Arkadina in the light of Mado. There are unexplored depths under the surface of the most everyday things. Unfathomable hopes and joys. Gorky said of Chekhov that “he trembles in fear for us all, for our miserable, colorless lives.”