



MEZZANINE FILMS

presents

with the support of CANAL+, CINECINEMA, the Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée, the Agence nationale pour la cohésion sociale et l'égalité des chances – ACSE, and with the help of the Région de Ile de France and Emergence

## FREE HANDS

directed by  
Brigitte Sy

written by  
Brigitte Sy and Gaëlle Macé

with  
Ronit Eklabetz, Carlo Brandt, Noemie Lvovsky

France 2010  
1 hour 40 minutes  
35mm, 1:1.85, Dolby SR

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## **SYNOPSIS**

Barbara is a filmmaker who has been working within the prison system for several years. She is making a film that is being both written and performed by long-term inmates of a prison in a Paris suburb.

Barbara visits the prison twice a week, where she is conducting a series of interviews with the inmates that will form the basis of the screenplay.

But when Barbara meets Michel, one of the prisoners, their love affair leads her to break the law.

## **DIRECTOR'S NOTES**

### **SCREENPLAY**

FREE HANDS is a story which brings together a man and a woman inside a prison. It is a love story and the story of a film shoot in a place that is as unlikely a setting for one as for the other.

I wanted to recreate my experience of writing with inmates, the emergence of their stories and the way they deal with filmmaking. The interviews in the film actually took place. The condition of being a prisoner does not make what the prisoner says more interesting but, because his words describe a struggle in the moment it is taking place, they fascinated me... 'My thoughts can't be distinguished from my body, just as my imagination is trapped within my body', an inmate once wrote to me.

### **THE THEME OF THE PRISON IN CINEMA**

Prison is a subject that has often been tackled in the cinema; it is a highly cinematic subject, dealing with a closed world, the boiled down essence of humanity, in a way. Our imaginative world is often short-circuited by the sheer spectacle of American cinema. I wanted to try to restore some dignity to the relationship between individuals as it develops in this hostile environment.

### **STORY WITHIN A STORY**

I like the idea of the 'mise en abyme', a story within a story – the depiction of an image within the same image – and the way it is used artistically. Having said that, FREE HANDS is not a self-reflexive film, it is not a film within a film. It is a film about a film project that does not come to fruition.

The prison system is itself a metaphor for the very idea of a 'system'. We talk of 'the prison system.' Absolutely everything in prison combines to 'systematise', to contain within both time and space the men and women who are incarcerated there. I have tried to represent the cinematographic system within the prison system, to play with the camera lens which itself echoes the peephole in the cell doors. Because the prison world is above all a universe of the watched body, of suspicion....

of possible denunciation. In the film that is what destroys the love affair between Barbara and Michel.

Barbara uses the concept of the story within a story as a way to represent prison. Her decision to marry Michel inside the prison from which she has been shut out is inseparable from her aesthetic choices regarding her film. In the course of making a film in prison, she falls in love with a prisoner, she integrates this love story into her screenplay, she marries Michel in prison....The romantic dimension which this last factor represents for Barbara is itself inseparable from her aesthetic perspective.

### **PRISON, A PLACE THAT CANNOT BE REPRESENTED**

The prison experience is internal and abstract. The usual ways of representing prison - the noise, the sound of metal doors slamming, violence towards prisoners, screams - not only do they not remotely deal with the loss of identity, but they are actually the things that prisoners mind the least.

The period of imprisonment is a period of immobility. When a prisoner goes inside, every effort is made for him to abandon any previous notion of time for a new kind of time that belongs uniquely to prison.

### **THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE**

The importance of speech that is recognised or denied, of all the different kinds of subterfuge which the prisoner uses to communicate beyond his cell - letters, recorded messages, whispered secrets - is used by inmates in real life and, of course, in the film.

From the point of view of Barbara, all that matters is the resumption of speech by the inmates and the rediscovery of their own thoughts, spoken to the other (to speak to someone is to express something that is important to you). It is the only way to enter into the prison world and to represent it. The carrying out of an artistic project with inmates makes this speech both possible and indispensable. To be an actor, whether amateur or professional, demands a formidable focus on the self. If this focus on the self is useful in real life, in prison, it is even more so.

### **LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP**

My film is above all a story about love and friendship, and in that sense it is not hopeless: Barbara chooses to do what she should not to do for love, and Rita agrees to cover for her out of friendship.

Would Barbara and Michel have fallen in love if it weren't for the film project? It is the desire of the one to film the other which provokes their desire. Would they have passed each other by in the outside world? The fact that the film takes place in prison necessarily provokes a variety of feelings and I prefer that the question remains unanswered.

## **CASTING AND CHARACTERS**

The characters in FREE HANDS all exist in real life. Some have been and are still part of my life. Something in the actors had to come close in some way to the characters they were playing. Sometimes it was just a little something, just one thing ....The trickiest part to cast was Barbara: in other words, me.

### **RONIT ELKABETZ**

'If I hadn't been me I would have wanted to be you,' was the first sentence of the letter that I wrote to her....meaning both everything and nothing. Ronit literally stole my heart the first time I saw her on a cinema screen in Keren Yedaya's film MON TRESOR. I knew that it had to be her. Her presence, her face, her body, the force of character that she evokes, made it impossible to imagine anyone else being cast in this role. It was like an order from, I don't know where. I had to film her, I wanted to film her. I wanted her expression, her voice, her accent, and without knowing why it seemed to augur well that she was foreign, as though the distance established at first glance by her accent and culture were necessary in order for me to be able to direct her.

### **CARLO BRANDT**

I knew Carlo primarily as a theatre actor – and I knew what a great actor he is. It was whilst I was watching him in Siegrid Alnoy's film SHE IS ONE OF US that I felt the full force of his presence, a sort of explosive calm, a characteristic which he shares with Michel. I didn't know why but I knew that the couple 'would work'. I knew that the audience needed to fall in love with Carlo as well as Barbara. As Carlo's first audience, I knew that yes, I might well have fallen in love with him.

### **NOEMIE LVOVSKY**

The character of Rita needed to possess the strength of my childhood friend, the character that she is playing. She is Barbara's Jiminy Crickett, with an awareness that is wise, humorous and protective. Noémie has the power of a body that is outstretched towards cinema, a spirit that breathes cinema. I would shout 'Action', but Noémie would have been in the scene for a long time already. I watch her and – this is a wonderful thing – I feel free. Her presence and her generosity were helpful on many different occasions.

### **FRANCOIS NEGRET**

It was vital that the casting of Serguei be right. I had seen François acting in Jean-Claude Brisseau's film OF SOUND AND FURY and the impression he made on me then had stayed with me. I only met one actor who could play Serguei: him. It was instinctive. I was sure of his voice, his face, the way he moves. François is a quiet person, but his voice makes the viewer shudder the length of their spine and his expression, when it fixes on you, holds you there for an eternal moment.

## **ALAIN OLLIVIER AND DOMINIQUE FROT**

To play the parts of the people who represent the institution I was looking for actors who are not film actors. There needed to be a very slight incongruity to avoid any stereotypical representation. Alain and Dominique have a true understanding of silence. We sense the prison director's disquiet, whilst the judge reveals to us the nervousness of someone who has the power to send us to prison.

The men who made up the group which I led at the prison where I worked (played by Adama Doumbia, Gurgon Kyap, Denis Maréchal, Ahmed M'hemdi, Xavier Laurent, Abdelhafid Metalssi and Carlo Brandt) were men whose ages and nationalities are the same as those of the actors in the film.

I was looking for actors who radiate the same immediate gentleness. Their gestures and their voices hint just faintly at the offences that they committed. The sharpness of their gaze, the quality of their silence, occasionally hint at what led to the act itself...

## CREDITS

Directed by BRIGITTE SY

Brigitte Sy is an actress and director. For ten years she worked with both male and female prisoners in prison. In 1997 she directed a play, 'Annette raises the Inchor', with a dual structure that was broadcast from the Santé Prison to the National Theatre of Chaillot in Paris. In 2008 she made her debut as a film director with a short film, L'ENDROIT IDEAL. In 2009 she directed her first full-length feature film, FREE HANDS.

Screenplay

BRIGITTE SY and GAELLE MACE

### CAST

Barbara	RONIT ELKABETZ
Michel	CARLO BRANDT
Rita	NOEMIE LVOVSKY
Chloé	CAMILLE FIGUEROO
Roel	ADAMA DOUMBIA
Fifi	DENIS MARECHAL
James	GURGON KYAP
Mouloud	ABDELHAFID METALSI
Laurent	XAVIER LEGRAND
Bouda	AHMED M'HEMDI
Sergei	FANCOIS NEGRET
Prison director	ALAIN OLLIVIER
Marie-Pierre	SASHA ANDRES
La juge	DOMINIQUE FROT
Fortune teller	MIREILLE ROUSSEL
Father	ROMAIN GOUPIL
Jocelyne	JOCELYNE DESVERCHERE
Social worker	JEAN-CHARLES DUMAY

### PRODUCTION

Cinematography	FREDERIC SERVE
Production and costume design	FRANCOISE ARNAUD
Sound	LUC MEILLAND
Film editing	JULIE DUPRE
Mixing	MELISSA PETITJEAN
Music	DANIEL MILLE
Producers	MATHIEU BOMPOINT
	CLAIRE TRINQUET