



Peccadillo Pictures Presents



UK Cinema Release Date: 25 June
Running Time: 94 mins / Cert: PG

BAFTA award-winner, Cannes Best Actress and César Award-winner **Isabelle Huppert** (*I Heart Huckabees*, *8 Women*) stars opposite **Jean-Hugues Anglade** (*Taking Lives*, *The Professional*) in her fifth collaboration with **Benoît Jacquot**. *Villa Amalia* is an assured and intriguing exploration of the experiences of a woman who abandons her career and liquidates her possessions to head off towards an unknown future.

Legendary French screen actress Isabelle Huppert headlines this sumptuous, passionate tale, adapted from the acclaimed novel by **Pascal Quignard** (*All the Mornings of the World*). Huppert stars as Ann, a gifted and brilliant musician whose sense of security falls to pieces when she witnesses her husband kissing another woman. Without hesitation, she abandons him and takes a headlong rush into the arms of a new beginning, embarking on a transnational journey that ultimately takes her to an isolated villa on the secluded island of Ischia, Italy. Once settled, Ann insists on goading herself to fresh extremes, and takes it upon herself to swim out as far into the ocean as possible. Fainting under the scorching summer rays, her floating body is pulled out of the water by local woman Giulia, with whom Ann begins to explore a whole new facet of life.

www.peccapics.com





Director's Statement:

I met Pascal Quignard several times over the last few years with the shared idea that a film would come out of it, but without knowing or finding exactly what until now. Last year, he kindly sent me his book *Villa Amalia* and after reading the first few pages, I sensed that a film could emerge from what the words brought—bring—to my mind. A personal film. I'm profoundly touched by the way he introduces a character at the precise moment that her lifeline forks off in a new direction, of which she knows nothing except that there is a door to open—or break open—a threshold to cross, and that it's a question of life or death, that nothing will ever be the same again. We were lost, we didn't know, we suddenly realize it, and we must leave what we have as far behind as possible to rediscover—or find—ourselves. It's enough for Ann, the character, to witness a scene that "doesn't really matter" for her to decide irrevocably to change her life, change lives and become someone else in order to be herself. I picture a series of stops and starts, attractions and gentle or brutal break-ups, noise and silence, an itinerary, from place to place, that reflects the mental journey of a woman who's leaving. I picture a beautiful film. I picture the portrait of a woman, with enigmas and abrupt bursts of clarity, seeking a light only she knows, possessed by the music she plays as if playing with a lock or with fire. I asked Isabelle Huppert to play that woman. She immediately accepted.

Cast:

Isabelle Huppert	...	Ann
Jean-Hugues Anglade	...	Georges
Xavier Beauvois	...	Thomas
Maya Sansa	...	Giula
Clara Bindi	...	Marion
Viviana Aliberti	...	Veri
Michelle Marquais	...	Ann's Mother
Peter Arens	...	Ann's Father
Ignazio Oliva	...	Carlo
Jean-Pierre Gos	...	Estate Agent
Jean-Michel Portal	...	Piano Vendor
Jean Coulon	...	Concert organiser

Interview with Benoît Jacquot (BJ) and Isabelle Huppert (IH) by Bertrand Tavernier (BT).

BT: When I watched *Villa Amalia*, which I enjoyed very much, I thought of what Michael Powell once said of Selznik: "He wanted to understand, understand everything, even what was not meant to be understood, but meant to be felt instead." The film relies heavily on the curious dichotomy between what must be understood and what must be simply felt. When you launched into this project, were you able to identify a separation between the two?

BJ: In all honesty, while we were shooting the film - and I'm sure Isabelle will tell you her view - throughout the entire shoot, we would ask ourselves, "What is the meaning behind this? Where are we going with this?" There was a feeling that the film had a kind of pre-determined imperative that we worked from. But at the same time, I didn't know the precise nature of this imperative. I knew what we were aiming for, but not entirely what it meant.

IH: I knew that the film was going somewhere. I even had a very strong conviction that it was. But mainly what I knew was how to get there. Benoît often says: "We don't know why we make films, but we do know how we want to make them". Knowing how to make them is in a sense the explanation for why we make them. Do you remember?

BJ: Yes it's true, I often say that.

IH: I knew that the development of the film corresponded to an everyday necessity to say something different each day, so that little by little something builds, or gets deconstructed. We told the story of someone who renounces everything, who erases themselves little by little, who deletes their universe.... But in order to deconstruct, one needs to know how to construct to begin with. So, I knew I had something very reassuring and precise that I could rely on, this idea of construction. But rarely on a film set have I had the feeling that I knew as little as I did, or rather that nothing had been prepared.

BT: It's about deconstructing a role. And this dispossession relies on an accumulation of little acts, of small actions and sensations that suddenly appear spontaneously, and in no particular order. We don't notice the points of motivation that enter into other scenarios.

BJ: Well it's the fifth film that we've made together. So, the fact that we really know each other well means that we can work together in a more authentic way I think. We can just react to each other, by way of reflex almost, not having to think or decide, but to be completely open to possibilities the whole time.

BT: I've often thought of your relationship to Benoît, in the way that you work together, being comparable to the way certain Jazz musicians find common harmonies, even when they sound distant from the melody. Is that a comparison that you'd agree with?

IH: Yes. I like that comparison as I often reference music in what I try to do in films. I've always thought that acting is similar to playing music; it's about finding the right rhythm. I think that the dramatic arts are very close to music. I also tell Benoît that, to me, it seems like he films the state of people, rather than their actions...

BT: When I saw *Villa Amalia*, I was moved, but it was difficult to ascertain why.

IH: If one wants to speak more objectively, *Villa Amalia* is a film that talks about solitude. It's about someone who lives and breathes it, and who loves it.

BJ: I wanted to show how one is alone in the world, but at the same time, just how beautiful the world is. It is not a depressing film, nor is it about depression.

BT: How did the film come about in the first place?

BJ: To start with, it began out of the fact that it's very important for me to regularly meet up with Isabelle. When I've made too many films without her, it occurs to me that I absolutely must make another with her. It's like a reference point. I need to know where we're at, where I'm at, and if she's doing well. And in the films that I've made with her, I never got the feeling that I had reached a final capacity or final goal. So that's the first reason.

Then the time comes when one has to find something to work on. In this case, I didn't know Pascal Quignard, the author of *Villa Amalia*, very well. I got the book before it was widely available and felt a very strange intuition, even after only reading the title and the first few pages, that this was the next film that I would make with Isabelle. In fact, I told the producer to buy the rights to it straight away.

BT: And you Isabelle?

IH: Making films, one after the other, for an actress, is like a quest for the Holy Grail. I try to tell my own story, from a bigger story. And so with Benoit, one feels as if there's always the possibility of getting closer to hitting the right note and letting it ring out.

Why do we make films? Because we want to meet directors of course, and discover a new universe. But actresses make films for much less altruistic reasons, and much more egocentric ones that bring them full circle, back to themselves.

With Benoît, I feel like we're reaching the right note. I think this comes from his ability to look at the actress in front of him in an objective fashion. It's a bit as if for each scene, he finds an infinite tolerance for who she is; it's his incredibly special ability to pay attention. Being attentive is key for me. This may seem obvious, but it isn't as much as one would think.

BT: The element of solitude in the film is an open one; it's not one that rejects the world or nature....

BJ: It is not a kind of grieving solitude; it's solitude of joy and of agreement. All of this seems a bit religious.

BT: But there is a side that is, if not religious, than at least pantheist...

BJ: Yes pantheist. Because she travels the world and she repositions herself in it. This is very important for me. This leads to a kind of suffering, or even a kind of madness.

BT: One says to oneself: "What will the next scene be? The next move? What will she do? Will she throw that bag away in order to get another? What will she wear?" And many times, we feel thrilled. I want to cite the scene where she gets her hair cut. That scene has all the right guarded configurations; it's got the same kind of power as a bank robbery scene would have. (Laughs).

BJ: I think this is fed by the fact that I know Isabelle so well, and that she allows me to have that kind of familiarity with her. She really did have very long hair and we had her hair cut on camera just like that. I think for her, during the days prior to filming that scene, the idea of it completely overwhelmed her. "What would it be like? But it'll be awful!" And at the same time, "but it'll be wonderful!" All of this became like a documentary, a slant on the film which was very important to me.

BT: That's what I thought had happened in that scene.

BJ: For any woman, it is an event.

IH: Once it was cut, I was neither happy or sad, it was simply necessary and this necessity removed any kind of drama there may have been otherwise.

BT: Isabelle, what was your reaction when you discovered the book?

IH: I liked the book very much; it doesn't have a classical novelistic narrative, with lots of events that one can identify with in a very specific way. And I didn't try and imagine anything else. Or rather, I imagined so many things from having read the book that I simply waited for the script and for the film to be made. It went straight to my unconsciousness... There's so much to think about that in the end one thinks of nothing. But the book speaks for itself and so, informs the film in that way.

BJ: It was great because she read the book as if it was protocol, even if she liked it, she read it so that she could condition herself to it and render herself more easily to the script. So that when she read the script, she was able to forget about it and render herself more easily to the shoot.

BT: But when one begins a project like this, everyone, the director, the actress, relies heavily on one element - a situation, a sentence, an image - that will kick start the imagination... What was the defining moment for you, Benoît?

BJ: For me? It was one scene, and in fact, I cut it slightly.

IH: Ah...the piano scene?

BJ: Yes, it was a scene where she was playing alone and Xavier Beauvois, who plays the man whom she separates from, returns - it's the last time we see him in fact -, in their shared apartment. She carries on playing while he enters, and he sits behind her. Night falls, there's no light on and he begins smoking and we can see the smoke coming up from the piano. All of a sudden she gets up and leaves without saying a word to him.

It's a scene that condenses a lot of elements of the film, it was one shot and it was only right at the end that I decided it had to be cut, which was very hard for me to do.

In this film, Isabelle is very physical, she plays the piano and she swims. During the two months prior to the start of shoot, she spent a lot of time swimming and practicing the piano. It began like this, with this sporty prepping, where she had piano lessons several times a week, learning specific pieces that the musician Bruno Coulais came up with, as well as the Purcell piece that became the heart of the score in the film.

BT: And that is in the book?

IH: No

BJ: Yes it is.

IH: Oh really? I don't remember it... It must be because when I read the book, I couldn't "hear" it so to speak.

BJ: Because Quignard is very musical.

IH: The two polar opposite essentials for me were swimming and composing; these make up the core of the central character. In order to work from the imaginary character, these concrete elements were a good antidote to the supposed otherwise intellectual role. Because what I love more than anything about this film, is that what is both concrete and abstract! There's a constant paradox between private and public, tempo and silence, cold and hot... It gives one an axis that one wouldn't necessarily think about.

BT: I would have thought that swimming would have been the defining moment for the character. A way of taming her... Simply by the very act of swimming, by the effort in it, in the breathing...

IH: Yes swimming is like a silent cry, something that one has to let out. I went every morning, as if obliged to do so. And then I had the piano lessons. Benoît said I wasn't that great a swimmer either. (Laughs).

BJ: Just to come back to something that I know is important to you, it's a lesson that I got from American cinema. In some Hollywood films, the central character starts out almost isolated, and then towards the end is able to reach out and grasp the whole world. The world opens up to him and becomes attainable, it isn't separate from the main character, the character holds onto it.

IH: If one wanted to summarise the story, one could say that the character and the film explore a universal fantasy that's quite simple. Who hasn't dreamt of cutting ties? Of becoming someone else? Of changing their life?

BJ: To leave everything in order to find oneself? But in order to find oneself, one must do this by exploring the world. One can't move from oneself to a new self without going via the world, and this is what the film tells us, this passage via the world in order to find oneself.

IH: The film isn't only about solitude or a descent into oneself that can cut oneself off from others. On the contrary it's someone who ceases one life, but with resourcefulness, with suspense, a rhythm, an internal investigation which in turn gives birth to a new relationship to the world. It could be a grievance. But it becomes a birth.

BT: Can we talk about Jean-Hugues Anglade?

BJ: Getting Jean-Hugues Anglade involved was a long process. I had made a TV film with him and got along with him very well. When I wrote the script for *Villa Amalia*, I thought of him a little vaguely at first, but I thought of him all the same. I even think I spoke to him about the idea. Then Edouard Weil, the producer and I got together and began thinking about one or two others, but we always came back to him. What's funny is that physically, he's a naturally slim man, and it was only when we began the shoot that I realised he had put on a little weight.

BT: I think that what he brings is something very impressive, very moving, a sort of inverted interpretation that doesn't try to impose its colours in order to exist. Little by little, his character develops and he becomes more powerful.

BJ: Jean-Hugues Anglade and his character in the film give such huge sentiment in the film. One must know that the great actors - and God knows he is one - give as much to a scene as the director and their fellow actor do. Instead of beating to his own drum, he knows that it's Isabelle who inhabits the core of the film. He acts with her, to her music, knowing that it's also my music he's playing to.

BT: Finally, I would say that *Villa Amalia* is a film that isn't "searching" for something, but that is "finding" something instead.

BJ: That is a great saying. Thank you!