

LES FILMS DU WORSO
POULET-MALASSIS FILMS
PRESENT

OXMO
PUCCINO

DALI
BENSSALAH

A FLOWER IN THE MOUTH



A FILM BY ÉRIC BAUDELAIRE

SCREENPLAY ANNE-LOUISE TRIVIDIC AND ÉRIC BAUDELAIRE AFTER "THE MAN WITH A FLOWER IN HIS MOUTH" BY LUIGI PIранDELLO
IMAGE CLAIRE MATHON SOUND ÉRIC LESACHET AND PHILIPPE WELSH EDITING CLAIRE ATHERTON ART DIRECTION ROY GENTY
FIRST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR ELSA AMIEL SCRIPT SUPERVISOR CHRISTELLE MEAUX PRODUCTION MANAGER DAMIEN GRÉGOIRE UNIT MANAGER MATHIEU GUINONIS
PRODUCED BY SYLVIE PIALAT AND ÉRIC BAUDELAIRE ASSOCIATE PRODUCERS BENOÎT QUINON HILAIRE PERTHUIS SOLÈNE CARON CO-PRODUCER ZSUZSANNA KIRÁLY
A CO-PRODUCTION LES FILMS DU WORSO POULET-MALASSIS FILMS JEONJU INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL FLANEUR FILMS M141 PROARTI
WITH SUPPORT FROM MEDIENBOARD BERLIN-BRANDEBURG FONDATION ANTOINE DE GALBERT KUNST HALLE SANKT GALLEN



A film in two parts: a first act filmed as an observational documentary in the world's largest flower market, followed by a fictional second act about a man, afflicted by a terminal illness, encountering a stranger in a train station bar. A radical reflection about time running out and what remains to be done, adapted from a play by Pirandello.

SOON IN THEATRES
France 2022

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



Luigi Pirandello's original play, *The Man With a Flower in His Mouth* (1922), is set in a railway station where a man with an incurable disease encounters a stranger. The flower at the corner of the protagonist's mouth is an epithelioma, a tumour that was a death sentence in Pirandello's time. The stranger awaits the morning train to return home to the countryside, gnawed by the small worries and setbacks of a day in the city. The protagonist is sitting in a café that he frequents every night because it never closes. He is passing the time he has left, and with the consciousness of his imminent death grows a burning desire to observe the life around him, to feel it, projecting himself through his conversation with the stranger into the minute details of a world he scrutinizes intensely as a way of escaping his pending fate.

To adapt this piece to the present I imagined a dual structure that is part observational documentary, part fiction. The first act is an intense dive into the frantic rhythm of the world's largest flower market in Almeer, Holland. This extended documentary prelude sets the stage for a very personal second act unfolding at night, culminating with a long conversation in a café adapted from Pirandello's play.

A Flower in the Mouth is a work about illness, both real and metaphorical: the certainty of death as a reality that forces us to rethink our relationship with the world of the living, but also illness as a metaphor for man's impact on the planet, producing both beauty and destruction. Pirandello wrote the play shortly after the Spanish flu. I discovered it in the 1990s, and at the time I wanted to adapt it into a film about AIDS. It took me 20 years to get the project started, and then COVID-19 gave it yet another dimension. But every time reality catches up with the text, its literary and philosophical depth allows it to transcend the news and tragedies of the moment. Beyond disease and death, it is a film about life.

Éric Baudelaire

ÉRIC BAUDELAIRE'S BIOGRAPHY



After training as a social-scientist, **ÉRIC BAUDELAIRE** (1973, Salt Lake City) established himself as a photographer and visual artist with a research-based practice before devoting himself to filmmaking since 2009. His feature films have been programmed widely in film festivals including Locarno, TIFF, NYFF, FID Marseille, Viennale, IFFR, Mar del Plata and FICUNAM. Baudelaire has had monographic exhibitions at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Tabakalera in San Sebastian, the Fridericianum in Kassel, Witte de With in Rotterdam, the Beirut Art Center, Gasworks in London and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. In 2019 Baudelaire was the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and the Prix Marcel Duchamp.

FILMOGRAPHY

A Flower in the Mouth (2022) 67 min

When There Is No More Music To Write, and other Roman Stories (2022) 56 min

Un film dramatique (2019) 114 min

Also Known As Jihadi (2017) 99 min

Letters to Max (2014) 103 min

The Ugly One (2013) 101 min

The Anabasis of May and Fusako Shigenobu, Masao Adachi and 27 Years without Images (2011) 66 minutes

An interview with ÉRIC BAUDELAIRE
conducted by Philippe Azoury

How did you come to adapt this play by Pirandello, which is not the most famous play of his that comes to mind?

I came across this play by Pirandello in the early 1990s. I was part of an anglophone theatre troupe in Paris, and we would put on shows. I was in a piece by Gertrude Stein, while the same evening, as a diptych, other members of the troupe put on *The Man with the Flower in his Mouth*. It was the era of AIDS, of Act Up (that my sister was active with, as well as many friends). The play struck a chord, about living with an illness. It was the first time I felt drawn toward cinema. I came to film late, but already at twenty I wanted to adapt this play into a short film. It was an idea that I put away in a corner of my mind for thirty years.

So was it the Covid pandemic that made you think about the play again?

No, the penny dropped in Dakar, during a seminar, a RAW Academy Session I organised in October 2019 with filmmaker John Akomfrah. The previous year I had filmed images of the Aalsmeer flower market, in the suburbs of Amsterdam. It is the biggest flower market in the world, where 46 million flowers are sold at auction every morning. I had gone there with Claire Mathon, the director of photography, to capture images over two days.

Are they the images we see in the film?

Yes, exactly. I had these images, but I didn't know what to do with them right away. They sat on a hard drive in my studio for a year, and it was in Dakar that I realised I wanted to link them to this play by Pirandello I had been wanting to adapt for all these years.

So it was purely intuitive?

Yes. To put it simply, you could say it was about bringing together two stories about diseased flowers.

But the flowers in Aalsmeer market don't carry any illness, strictly speaking? They're not spreading a virus.

To all appearances, no, you're right. They are beautiful flowers. But they're the symptom of all that's gone wrong.

In what way?

The flower market is a place that exhibits a certain beauty, in the gestures of work, the automated workflow, the flowers... It doesn't immediately smell like death. But from the Anthropocene perspective, what emerges from the whole thing is frightening. It's efficient, organised, and the rationalisation of its production process induces us to accept the place. But just think about it: before, we'd cut the flowers, flowers that naturally had a very short life span. They had to be sold quickly, in a short circuit. But today, the logic of globalisation makes it so that it's more efficient to grow roses in Kenya, Ethiopia or Ecuador, refrigerate them at 6 degrees in a container for days or weeks, then fly or ship these 46 million flowers across the ocean to Holland where they're sold at auction and then sent to other countries to be retailed. That's what makes these flowers sickly. Or, rather what is sick is the system and rationalisation of a globalised process. It makes sense from an economic point of view but it is absurd from the Anthropocene point of view. It's a complicated issue – we all buy flowers, and we'll continue to do so, but it is a beautiful dirty business.

How does this link in with the second part, the Pirandello play?

The flower at the corner of the mouth that lends the play its title is a tumour, an epithelioma. In Pirandello's day the illness would wipe you out in three weeks. Today it's treatable. But the idea that this tumour in the shape of a flower is also a cancer was interesting to me, as a metaphor for the disease of the flower. More importantly to me, Pirandello's play is about what art can be in relation to the real, in the observation, translation and impression of reality, and as a way of surviving, of staying alive. This man observes, looks, recounts. Cinema is about the same things. The filming at the flower market is equivalent to what the man does when he walks the streets, observing. This is one way to read the mirroring between the two parts of the film.



In their form, they are total opposites...

No dialogue in the first part, only a ballet of images. Not many images in the second part, mainly the pleasure of language, of performance. A simple dichotomy of what cinema can do, two very different aspects of the medium that I wanted to bring together and place back-to-back.

Nothing connects these two parts of the diptych, yet we get a sense that it is far from being a gratuitous act, so the viewer does the work of weaving together these two sets of images.

That's the risk of the film, and it is what interests me in cinema: a proposition that trusts the spectator's ability to put things together, to work things out. This idea is more accepted in art than in cinema: in contemporary art, the viewer makes the piece. I think it is respectful of people to believe that the pleasure taken in making the film, putting its ideas together, allows the cinematic experience to last longer in people's memory. That said, I don't think it is a difficult film.

Yes, the "flower market" part is all choreography, and there's something muted about this night stranded in a Paris bar...

The proposition can seem radical, with no transition between two very different parts, yet our desire was to have each part flow and convey a pleasure of being there, in these different climates. That's what we were working towards, with Claire Mathon on camera and Claire Atherton in editing. To let time take its course, to enjoy the long takes in the documentary part, and then in the second part to be firmly on the side of fiction in the lighting, the camera work, the pace. Without aiming for a tug-of-war between the two parts.

How do you set about tackling the Pirandello?

I asked Anne-Louise Trividic to start working on adapting the Pirandello in December 2019. In January we learned about the existence of SARS, and a few weeks later we understood it was a pandemic. That's when I considered abandoning the project –I didn't want the film to be drowned out, or over-defined by current events. But we had finished the adaptation and we wanted to continue, sidestepping the too contemporary and circumstantial reading that Covid might give it.

Was the play modified much?

The first part of the dialogue is very loosely based on the first pages of the play, with new sections entirely imagined by Anne-Louise. The second part, however, is taken almost verbatim from the last half of Pirandello's text.

Why did you rewrite the first part?

The play needed to be brought up to date. Partly because this was a film adaptation, and partly because there are things in the play that haven't aged well –I'm thinking of one passage that is pretty misogynistic. I wanted to expand the narrative and give free rein to Anne-Louise Trividic, as she is a great adaptation screenwriter. I was very impressed by the script she wrote for Patrice Chéreau's *Intimacy*, based on two separate short stories by Hanif Kureishi.

When adapting the play, did Anne-Louise Trividic know that the first part of the film would be consecrated to the flower market?

Yes, I showed her a first rough cut, a mock-up, of images from the flower market. She worked on the adaptation as a response to these documentary images.

When did Pirandello write the play?

1922, and it was performed in 1923. It was actually the first play to ever be adapted for television, on the BBC, in 1930.

Does it have the same night-time atmosphere?

All the action of the play takes place on a café terrace at the Milan train station, one night, after a man misses his train and is taken hostage, verbally, by an insomniac. This man is a kind of predator: he no longer sleeps because his condition doesn't allow him to, and during the day he walks around Milan, observing the gestures of people at work, observing reality, which allows him to keep a grip on life, and so hold off death's threshold. And in the evenings, he tells his story to whoever will listen. He contemplates the meaning of it all.

And the casting? Who can carry a text like that?

Ah. That in my opinion was the big question of the film. Neither Anne-Louise nor I wanted to alter the beauty of the text, even though it is somewhat dated, stylistically. We wanted to keep the strangeness of this theatrical century-old language. We worked on the translation ourselves, based on the original text, but without adapting it into contemporary language. So the text has a poetic density that couldn't be entrusted to just anybody. It was producer Sylvie Pialat's idea to give the role to Oxmo Puccino. She felt something in his way of being that connected with the character. He doesn't have a lot of experience in film but as a poet and singer-songwriter, he has tremendous experience with words. I didn't try to make him into an actor, in the full sense of the word, not in the few weeks we had, but just have him take possession of the text, to embody it, to speak it in his own natural and unique way.

Oxmo's character doesn't fit into any social category: his overcoat gives him an imposing air, a natural class, yet when we see him for long stretches of time watching people closing up their shops, we wonder whether he lives on the street. Right away, he's an enigma...

Yes, he subverts codes. He's in this in-between space we wanted for the film. The overcoat makes him look like a prince of the night, that's what we were aiming for with Roy Genty, the artistic director. But as soon as he comes on screen, we have to sense that this man is unplaceable, that there's no box to fit him into, no stereotype: is he a distinguished gentleman? A celestial vagrant?



The part you gave to Dali Benssalah is anything but easy. How do you link up the two: someone who speaks, who soliloquises, and someone who practically only listens?

That's what is beautiful in Pirandello's text: each is in his own tragedy that nothing can bring together; their encounter is not an encounter. Dali handles this to perfection. His anxiety, his awkwardness in the night, this character who has missed his train and spends a night in a Paris bar. To play that, you need an actor whose physical presence can handle being on screen without having huge amounts of dialogue. I had discovered Dali in the video by The Blaze (*Territory*, 2017) where he scorches the screen without uttering a word. After that, I knew I wanted to work with him someday. When we approached them, Oxmo and Dali, we knew after the first reading that these two presences on screen would be interesting.

OXMO PUCCINO'S BIOGRAPHY



With his twenty years of career, eight albums, and numerous collaborations (Damon Albarn, -M-, Ibrahim Maalouf, Orelsan), Oxmo Puccino is a unique artist, passionate about words and music and attentive to others, their lives, their concerns, their dreams.

Revealed in 1997 with the song *Mama Lova*, he has not stopped breaking the codes since then. He always had a strong connection with cinema, and even moved behind the camera, directing *Anti-Trente* for Canal+ and *Le Beau Dormant* with Omar Sy for JM Weston.

In perpetual research, Oxmo Puccino likes to play with codes and appear where he is not expected. Recently, he imagined *Les Histoires de*, a podcast for Arte Radio and presents *Bâtiment B*, a programme dedicated to live music for France TV.

Last May, he released *Les Réveilleurs de Soleil*, his first novel in which he uses the energy of youth to point out the ecological emergency, the vanity of celebrity and the dizziness of passions.

In 2020, he makes his first steps as an actor in Éric Baudelaire's feature film, *A Flower in the Mouth*.



I became involved in the project for *The Man with a Flower in his Mouth* through Sylvie Pialat, the producer of the film. We had met at a festival, in Deauville, where we were both members of the jury. We got along, and a few weeks later she called me to talk about Eric's project. By its very nature, the project surprised me: a lead role in a film adapted from a 1922 Pirandello play by a filmmaker who is also a well-known contemporary artist. Up until then I had already acted, but it hadn't resulted in much, and nothing predisposed me to enter this world.

Why hadn't it resulted in much up until then?

Oh, simply because nobody had told me how to act yet. Often the roles were cameos, one day shoots, maybe two, a few lines. People called me because I'm a rapper. After thirty years of rap, eventually there's going to be somebody who says, "Hey, that's something Oxmo can do." Usually I'd show up without having prepared anything, I was asked to read something, and that's it.

Rapper roles?

No, because in fact I was careful about that: I always made sure I played roles that were against type. Except I was not prepared for this casting against type, and until now nobody had taken the time to direct me. The results were never truly satisfying, let's put it that way [laughs]. And as I kept finding myself in situations like that, leaving me unsatisfied, where I could see that nothing was really happening, I finally gave up on my desire to do cinema. I was in that typical situation of people who have never been directed as an actor.

That's where you were when the project presented itself?

No, not quite anymore. I wanted to improve. I started working for auditions, hired a coach, actor friends gave me advice. My training took a path with lots of failures, and then friends, Ludvine Sagnier first up, helped me lay the foundations: learning how to read a script, how to act without overacting. That's when the pleasure came, when I started to understand things. My relationship to the job of acting was like my relationship to the piano.

What do you mean?

It took years for me to draw up the courage to approach the piano, and it took a while to understand its logic. Musicians know this: that every instrument has its own logic. This is also true for the job of the actor. Everything you do has its own mechanism.

For actors, how do you see this logic?

Simply being true. Being credible. Talent and work make it so that this truth gradually becomes more specific, but the starting point is about being true. "You have to react at least like everybody would have reacted."
Samuel Jackson often says this in his masterclass. It may seem like nothing, but it's everything, and truly so. Because a bad actor will over-react, he'll want to do something absurd, off kilter. It's over the top, you're playing an actor, it's bad acting.

Is there a big difference between rapping on stage and acting in a film?

First you have to learn to take acting seriously, like I learned very young to take rap seriously. But if there is a parallel between my life as a rapper and this other field, the job of acting, I think it happened ten years ago, during the tour for *Larmes de paix* [his fifth album, from 2009, for which Oxmo Puccino was awarded a Victoire de la Musique (the French equivalent of a Grammy)] where I was doing concerts a third of which I would have an improvised exchange with the audience. I'd talk. It was almost acting. I'd riff on a topic, develop it. Kim Chapiron (filmmaker and cofounder of the Kourtrajmé collective), when he saw the concerts on this tour, he was the first to tell me, "Oxmo, you should get into theatre, clearly it's for you."

When I met Éric Baudelaire, I was beginning to realise that everything I had done up until then was headed in the wrong direction. And the beauty of Éric's film is that the time set aside for directing the actors is taken largely into account. We work as a group, it's not pure realism, nor is it too theatrical, we're hitting a note at just the right spot to have a very particular music be heard. We worked beforehand, took the time to do that. This is what brings out the pleasure of acting.

How did you find that note, the music so particular to your character in *The Man with a Flower in his Mouth*?

Éric asked me above all to take possession of the text, to live it, to understand what the character is going through at this precise moment in his life, to consider how much this night might be his very last one. We talked mostly about the character, and afterwards came the long, impressive work of reading. To create an empathetic character, who philosophises, who looks back at his whole life, who still wants to make sense of what he's done and at the same time is curious about this other guy, played by Dali Benssalah, whom he meets by chance in a bar one night.

My role in *The Man with a Flower in his Mouth* is a solo. I monologue, Dali listens –which is very important because his presence guides the acting, but my character speaks most of the text. And it is a massive text, an impressive number of words. Fifteen pages of text, alone on screen. We started working on it right away. At first it went well, then one day I messed up the reading. I had just come back from touring, I was tired, exhausted, and I could sense in Eric's eyes that he was wondering whether he had made a mistake by putting his trust in me. So I worked twice as hard, to earn back his trust. The trust between an actor and a director must be earned.

In the film, you seem to be working with well-defined ingredients: your body, your voice, your presence, the suit, the text and one last ingredient: the night...

Yes, night in Paris. It was difficult to film in 2021 in the winter, in the centre of Paris near the Faubourg St-Antoine: the cold, the exhaustion, the people in the street that want to interfere during the shoot, the masks, all that creates this tension, a balance to strike.

And the night has a story. This Paris is inhabited; I found it in the film, too. Inevitably it all comes back to you when you're acting at night, in the street. There's a whole way of speaking that comes out. In the film, I play an insomniac, someone who can't find a way into sleep, who is haunted by something. The thought of death. Living with an illness. He knows that this night could be his last one, he observes the world as if for the last time. The guy he's going to talk to all night has missed his train. That is his tragedy, but my character is going to die: it is a bigger tragedy. It's all about this gap. It is something to have to play –not an encounter over a drink between two strangers in Paris one night– but two men who speak to each other without their stories ever connecting, ever crossing paths. So you have to find a beat, a music to express this. The text is a hundred years old, the language is rich, you have to respect it, not flatten it out. You have to find the voice, that place in your throat, to speak this language differently, not like it was nothing –that would be a shame, it's a literary language, first of all it has to sound enigmatic– nor speak it as if it were theatre, because it is something else. You're not in a studio some afternoon. You're in a real café, filming late into the night. So you remember the greats, the people who actually lived in that Paris: they are the ones you keep in your ear. Sacha Guitry, undoubtedly the greatest of all in my opinion. Raymond Devos, also. They are the ones to whom I turned to find my character's music.

DALI BENSSALAH'S BIOGRAPHY



After high-school graduation, Dali studied economics at the university of Rennes and, at the same, was training hard for thai boxing competitions.

In 2012, he left college and moved to Paris with a real desire to work in cinema. He joined the cours Florent where he discovered the dramatic arts and decided to devote his full time to it. He continued his training at the National Theatres of la Colline, then of Strasbourg with Stanislas Nordey and at the Fabrice d'Avignon with Olivier Py.

In 2017, he made his breakthrough to the public in the video clip for The Blaze *Territory*, which went on to win multiple awards at festivals.

Several directors noticed him and asked to meet him for TV and cinema projects. He played in *Nox* by Mabrouk El Mechri (Canal+), in Louis Garrel's *A Faithful Man*, Kery James and Leïla Sy's *Banlieusards* and most recently in Canal+ new original creation, *The Savages*, series directed by Rebecca Zlotowski, with Roschdy Zem and Marina Foïs.

He has joined the cast of new James Bond *No Time to Die* by Cary Joji Fukunaga with Daniel Craig, Rami Malek, Ralph Fiennes, Lea Seydoux.

In 2020, he filmed *My Brothers and I* by Yohan Manca, *Tropique de la violence* by Manuel Schapira, *A Flower in the Mouth* by Éric Baudelaire and for Arte, *Alger Confidential* by Frédéric Jardin. This year he shot *The Line* by Ursula Meier, *War* by Romain Gavras for Netflix and *The Last Queen* by Damien Ounouri.

A FLOWER IN THE MOUTH

Screenplay Anne-Louise Trividic, Éric Baudelaire
after *The Man With a Flower in His Mouth* by Luigi Pirandello

Image Claire Mathon

Sound Éric Lesachet, Philippe Welsh

Editing Claire Atherton

Art direction Roy Genty

First assistant director Elsa Amiel

Script supervisor Christelle Meaux

Production manager Damien Grégoire

Unit manager Mathieu Guniois

Producers Sylvie Pialat, Éric Baudelaire

Associate producers Benoît Quainon, Hilaire Perthuis, Solène Caron

Co-producer Zsuzsanna Király–Flaneur Films

Starring Oxmo Puccino
Dali Benssalah

Production Les films du Worso
Poulet-Malassis Films
JEONJU International Film Festival
Flaneur Films
M141
Proarti

With support from Medienboard Berlin-Brandenburg
Fondation Antoine de Galbert
Kunst Halle Sankt Gallen



French with English subtitles
67 minutes
HD (DCP 4K) 1.85
Dolby 5.1
24fps

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OXMO PUCCINO

DALI BENSSALAH



A FLOWER IN THE MOUTH

A FILM BY ÉRIC BAUDELAIRE

SCREENPLAY ANNE-LOUISE TRIVIDIC AND ÉRIC BAUDELAIRE AFTER "THE MAN WITH A FLOWER IN HIS MOUTH" BY LUIGI PIRANDELLO
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