

Les Films Pélleas

presents

A film by Philippe Béziat

BECOMING TRAVIATA

(La Traviata et nous)

2012 – Documentary France - 113 min – DCP – 1:1,85

US Distributor

Distrib Films

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Production company

Les Films Pélleas

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SYNOPSIS

How can emotion come to light on the opera set ? Does it come from singing, action or music?

How can someone become the incarnation of Verdi's masterpiece?

Following world famous French soprano Natalie Dessay from the first repetitions until the premiere under the direction of Jean-Francois Sivadier, we meet a very special woman, a piece of art, a myth:

LA TRAVIATA

INTERVIEW WITH PHILIPPE BEZIAT

What is your connection with Verdi and La Traviata?

I've been passionately interested in Verdi for a very long time. On the one hand, because I am enamored of the Italian language, the country and its culture, and on the other hand, because what I'm interested in, in opera, is the relationship one has with the texts, with the lyrics. As far as Verdi is concerned, you find an extraordinary playwright behind the composer. I sometimes play a little game in which I imagine that if Verdi had been born in 1900 rather than in 1813, he would have made films, not operas. For he seemed to have but one goal: to bring onto the theater stage the spark of life, the magic of words. When you delve into one of his scores, you see the way the notes stick to the words, the way speech brings about music. Herein lies the mystery, and the strength of this music. There is an extraordinary truth in it, and it is the first time that the characters are truly human, meaning as human as they are in Zola or Balzac's work. Violetta is already an Ozu or Mizoguchi character.

When we see your film, we can't help but think of Jean-François Sivadier's previous show, Italienne avec orchestre. Had you seen this show before? Could you explain its principle?

The principle of this rather unique show was to invite the spectators to the musical rehearsals of *La Traviata*. The public entered through the stage door, went through the dressing rooms, and then was taken to the orchestra pit, where there were as many chairs as there were spectators, as many as the number of musicians in an orchestra about to play Verdi's *Traviata*. You were facing an empty theater, sitting by chance in the chair of the first violin or the clarinet player. Jean-François Sivadier played the role of the conductor himself. He directed the spectators, had them play, spoke to them as he would have to musicians; and made comments. There was also a stage director, a star – who obviously arrived late – and a young singer who barged in, filled with grand ideas and rather naïve. It's was a game with the spectators. It's quite extraordinary to thus be able to offer such a radically different point of view in a theater.

How did the Becoming Traviata project come about?

Since we often saw *Italienne avec orchestre*, in particular, Philippe Martin and I wanted to work with Jean-François Sivadier on something that would be close to his approach. After *Italienne*, Jean-François Sivadier had yet another opportunity to prove his immense passion for lyrical art at the Lille Opera House. In *Wozzeck*, *Butterfly*, *The Marriage of Figaro* and *Carmen*, we saw how he mastered the operatic material, and what a formidable directing job he did with the actors. Our opportunity came up in Aix-en-Provence, with *La Traviata*, precisely the opera that was at the root of *Italienne avec orchestre*; the text and the situation that was the subject of Jean-François' delightful play were in a certain way going to become a reality in Aix-en-Provence. It made us wish to be present to see it, and to compare the play's fiction with reality.

How did the shoot go? How long did it take and what were you able to film?

An extremely rare opportunity was given to us by the festival, by Jean-François Sivadier and by Natalie Dessay, as well as by Louis Langrée and the whole team: that of accepting us into the rehearsal studio, not on the first day but as early as the second day, and tolerating our presence in all the rehearsals. We started from the idea that we wouldn't really know in advance what we were looking for, what we were going to see. Although the interviews we had with each of them did, of course, inform our vision and our reflection, it was a true field documentary approach. We shared the daily toils of rehearsal with them, the great – and not so great – rehearsals. It was a long companionship and we came back with 90 hours worth of footage. We had a very special opportunity to see each stage of the process, from the early steps in the studio until the premiere on stage. Only the work to prepare rehearsals, which can last up to two years, isn't in the film. Knowing that the show was going to be captured live for Arte by Don Kent, it was for me an opportunity to make a film focused on work, to try and share these moments of searching, the slices of life, this constructing and growing of *La Traviata*.

Your film gives an account of what some might call the “Sivadier Method”.

On Jean-François Sivadier's opera stage, we perceive a true joy in acting and singing, a form of simplicity and, as he says himself, or kind of originality in the literal sense of the term, striving to find what's original, what's at the origin. There is also the somewhat political idea of considering the artists and the public on an equal footing. On the stage, JFS tries to create the conditions for the singers to feel as connected as possible to the public. He gives them a specific acting, moving and operational framework. He gives them “acting mechanisms” within which they can take their destiny into their hands, without reservation, naturally and collectively.

The entire film aims for a sort of pure outline of Jean-François Sivadier's directing

It mirrors the director's thinking. He endeavors to make sure that the actors and the singers do not get enwrapped in a choreography that is too heavy and overwhelming. The nucleus of the operatic process is the singer; there is no other “nuclear reactor”. Natalie, in an interview we had with her that isn't in the film, said: “I am tired of all the sets and backdrops, of all these overly heavy things that prevent us from acting.” I don't know if she ever discussed it with Jean-François Sivadier but I believe this is exactly the way he feels: a bare stage and a chair are heaven for an actor, since it is with this only that he or she must represent all. For us, this streamlined background is extremely conducive to filming. It brought us closer together. There are simply beautiful canvass-like scenes, beautiful skies, and beautiful lights. A camera becomes the perfect instrument to capture such acting moments.

Once again, you filmed work as it was being done.

Natalie and Jean François can both say: “We wish we could always be in rehearsals. If we could do nothing besides rehearse, it would be ideal.” I film music but above all I film musicians at work, music through the musicians. Whether they are singers or instrumentalists, they are, for me, beautiful film characters. Even if you don’t precisely understand the stakes of musical work or understand exactly what Jean-François wants, even if it is all a bit hazy, you have the impression that you can feel – intuitively – that you can grasp something and walk away with more than if you had only seen the final result. Jean-François Sivadier agreed to wear a microphone all the time, in addition to the boom we use in documentary filming. We therefore always had this voice, this first-person presence, that of this director whose apparent natural and simple demeanor is so disconcerting. As though the entire film had been shot as a POV frame. I consider myself a little bit of a performer, like the musicians. A documentary film conveys my vision, yet it mirrors above all the personality of the people I film. This is why the film on *Pelléas and Mélisande* with Olivier Py and Marc Minkowski is very different from that on *La Traviata* with Jean-François and Natalie. I think the film is like the persons and personas we spend time with. It was extraordinary to be able to film Natalie as she became Traviata, Traviata as she became Natalie... *Becoming Traviata*, as the English title says.

As a matter of fact, LA TRAVIATA is Violetta, and for you, an opportunity to film a star – Natalie Dessay – at work.

For someone who enjoys seeing artists at work, it was a godsend: Natalie Dessay is a relentless worker! *La Traviata* is a star character in a way; when Natalie enters the stage, it becomes her territory. She is a theater woman, a singing woman. When she advances on the slightly sloping stage towards the public to perform *La Traviata*, all is already there. There is no need to reconstitute a Traviata. There is no need, as Jean-François Sivadier says, for a great crinoline, 25 fireplaces, 14 chandeliers and flowing champagne. The theater situation itself, with its star, Natalie, is already Verdi’s situation, that of the libretto: the lyrical situation.

When did the film actually take shape?

When we were editing. There are many characters in this work, many interesting singers, like young Charles Castronovo, the American tenor whose life is unbelievable, or Ludovic Tézier, who is a fantastic figure in French lyrical singing, yet we quickly realized that the pair comprising Jean-François Sivadier and Natalie Dessay had already been formed. The film took shape during the editing process, from a gradual selection of the best moments. I like orienting my films towards an achievement: at first there is nothing, and at the end there is something like an opera. It underlies the structure. You also progress within the libretto. You progress within the stages of the work and at the same time you progress in the various stages of Act I, Act II, Act III... It’s not as rigorous as a matrix or a pattern but it’s something you can feel. Even if you follow it from afar, *La Traviata*’s dramatic unfolding is quite sophisticated. It centers again on the main character, with her slow death being the emotional peak. I have to pay tribute to Cyril Leuthy, who has been my film editor for many years. It really took the two of us to develop this contrapuntal writing.

Counterpoint, in music, consists in having two instruments, words or notes dialog together as in opera. For our part, we attempt to associate musical moments and life moments and to construct the film like a score, using documentary elements as well as sound and visual elements that enable us to build sequences. I consider this akin to composing a suite, or a rhapsody; there are slow and rapid movements, adagios, prestos, effects. I hope that the film is “Verdian” in its writing too. Verdi’s works are an extraordinary science of theatrical effects. The film is composed of a succession of moments expressing different forms of energy that echo one another. Musical films allow us to put to the test a kind of writing that wouldn’t work with pure fiction. There are sequences that are true documentary filming, cinema verite, where we witness things that are said or happen only once, and they are followed by things that belong more to filmmaking, where music comes to the forefront and becomes a veritable “film score”. Film counterpoints are also moments when you hear something while something else is happening on screen. That is one thing that can be done with musical films.

Where do you place BECOMING TRAVIATA in relation to your two previous films?

In *Pelléas and Mélisande: the Song of the Blind* there was a path, following the perception that the Russian musicians had of this work that they were discovering. There was something of an initiation, a discovery. *Noces (Stravinsky/Ramuz)* is really built like a diptych: the first part presents numerous approaches concerning a work that we hear in its entirety in the second part. *Becoming Traviata* is the film that functions the least in that way, especially given the way it ends. We can imagine that the performance is going to take place, yet at the same time, the film ends like a perpetual movement. The leitmotiv of the rehearsal takes on the literal meaning of the French word for it: repetition. This became very significant as such during editing. No form of joy equals that of work that can be taken up again, redone, reinvented, re-explored infinitely. For the performers, it is a form of immortality. In *Becoming Traviata*, we have a form that expresses the non-definite nature of work and art through the patterns of variations and repetitions. The film expresses the wariness towards the final result.

In BECOMING TRAVIATA, the orchestra is less physically present on screen than in your previous films.

Within the film’s timeframe, the orchestra’s place corresponds proportionally to the time it takes in the rehearsal of an opera. The London Symphony Orchestra arrives at the last moment; there is very little space for the conductor. The film could have gone in more musicology-related directions. This magnificent symphonic orchestra had little experience with operatic work. It was the first time it played in Aix-en-Provence, in an orchestra pit. Yet I believe that the film does convey the musicians’ extraordinary reactivity when they instantly respond to Louis Langrée’s indications as though they were only one person.

Why the title, "Becoming Traviata"?

For starters, it's not "*Becoming La Traviata*". *La Traviata* is the work's title, and this isn't the opera. This is a somewhat lighthearted appropriation of the character and the myth. In notes that I had written during the early days in Aix-en-Provence, I mentioned that for the next two months, we were going to live a myth. It was on the program! We were going to live a myth on a daily basis, a myth that is at once a character, a work, a score, a music. Except for *Carmen*, it probably is the most frequently played opera in the world, the most well-known, and the most overused in advertising jingles. This is a work that is so famous that no one knows any longer whether it's a work or a character, as in all the great myths: Icarus, Orpheus, Traviata or Don Juan. And what about 'becoming'? Becoming is what happens to Natalie, Jean-François Sivadier, Louis Langrée and all those who are confronted with the myth; and this confrontation is always intimate. Whether you are an actor, or a spectator of the myth, it touches your soul.

Interview by Florian Môle, August 2, 2012

Biography - Philippe Béziat

Philippe Béziat has directed numerous documentary films such as *Passions d'opéra – 60 ans d'art lyrique à Aix-en-Provence* (2008, 55' for the INA, Arte and France 2), *Rinaldo Alessandrini enregistre les Concertos Brandebourgeois* (2005, 43' for Naïve, Mezzo and Classica), *De mémoire d'orchestre* (2004, 2 x 43' with the French National Orchestra for Arte), *Trois Falstaff* (2002, 26' for Mezzo) or *Mozart, Ligeti et Le Banquet* (2001, 52' for Mezzo).

His documentary work has given him the opportunity to work twice with Marc Minkowski, first on *Les Musiciens du Louvre - Paroles d'orchestre* (2003, 52' for France 2) and then on *Marc Minkowski répète La Belle Hélène*, (2000, 26' for Mezzo).

Philippe Béziat has also directed several fiction shorts, including *Musica da camera*, based on *Madrigals 3* by Georges Crumb; *Le JT, petit opéra* based on *Fearful Symmetries* by John Adams and *5 heure 5*, based on *Hungarian Rock*, a piece for harpsichord by Ligeti.

During the 2007 edition of the *Verbier Festival*, Philippe Béziat directed the first live web broadcasting of 11 concerts (five of which were later shown on television). He also did a live capture of *La pietra del paragone*, by Gioacchino Rossini, directed by G.B. Corsetti and Pierrick Sorin (whose DVD received the Golden Tuning Fork); *Des Ring des Nibelungen*, by Richard Wagner, directed by Robert Wilson; *Tourbillons*, by Georges Aperghis and Olivier Cadiot; *Ta Bouche* by Maurice Yvain, by the 'Les Brigands' troupe; *Docteur Ox* by Jacques Offenbach, performed by 'Les Brigands', and lately *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*, directed by Olivier Py.

Philippe Béziat also directed portraits of Jean Dubuffet, James Ensor, Albrecht Dürer, Giorgio Morandi and Jean Tinguely within the radio series *Une vie, une œuvre* broadcasted on France Culture.

Biography - Jean-François Sivadier

An alumnus of the Ecole du Théâtre National de Strasbourg, Jean-François Sivadier is an actor, author and director. On stage, he played, among others, under the direction of Didier-Georges Gabily, Laurent Pelly, Stanislas Nordey, Jacques Lassalle, Daniel Mesguich, Christian Rist, Alain Françon, Dominique Pitoiset, Serge Tranvouez, and Yann-Joel Collin.

In 1996, at the Cargo Theater in Grenoble, he wrote, directed and played in *Italienne avec Orchestre*. The show then toured for nearly two hundred performances, notably at the Odéon, the Théâtre du Châtelet, the Opéra-comique, the Lyons Opera House...

The same year, at the Théâtre National de Bretagne (European Theatrical and Choreographic Production Center), he took over the direction – left unfinished by Didier-Georges Gabily (who passed away) – of Molière's *Don Juan* and Gabily's *Chimères*. Then on the occasion of the 1998 Mettre en Scène Festival, he wrote and directed an early version of his play, *Noli me tangere*, which was later recreated for France Culture at the Avignon Festival. In 2000, he became an associate artist at the Théâtre National de Bretagne, where he directed Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro*, later performed at the Nanterre Théâtre des Amandiers before a nation-wide tour. In 2001, he directed Brecht's *Life of Galileo*, presented at the Gennevilliers Theater, in a nation-wide tour and at the Avignon Festival. In 2003, back at the TNB, he wrote and directed a new version of his play, *Italienne scène et orchestre* (published by Les Solitaires Intempestifs). The show was then performed at the Opéra-Comique, at the Lille Opera House, the Nanterre Amandiers, and further on tour, and received the Syndicat de la Critique Grand Prize. It also became the subject of a documentary by Lucie Caries, *La place du cœur*, produced by Arte. In 2005, Jean-François Sivadier received a Molière for his direction of Büchner's *Danton's Death*. At the 2007 Avignon Festival, he produced and directed Shakespeare's *King Lear* in the main courtyard of the Papal Palace. At the 2008 edition of the festival, he played and co-directed Claudel's *The Break of Noon*, in the rock quarry of Boulbon. In 2009, he created Feydeau's *The Girl from Maxim's* at the Théâtre National de Bretagne then at the Théâtre National de l'Odéon (the show was filmed by Don Kent for a live broadcast on Arte). In 2011, he

wrote and directed the second version of his play, *Noli me tangere* (published by Les Solitaires Intempestifs) for the Théâtre National de Bretagne, before presenting it on tour and at the Théâtre de l'Odéon.

In 2004, at the Lille Opera House, he directed Puccini's *Madama Butterfly* (conducted by Pascal Verrot), then in 2006 Berg's *Wozzeck* (conducted by Lorraine Vaillancourt), Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* (conducted by Emmanuelle Haïm) in 2008, and Bizet's *Carmen* (conducted by Jean-Claude Casadesus) in 2010 (the show was filmed by Thomas Grimm for a DVD release). At the 2011 Aix-en-Provence Festival, he produced Verdi's *La Traviata* (conducted by Louis Langrée) and the show entered the Vienna State Opera repertoire. In 2012, he created Monteverdi's *The Coronation of Poppea* (conducted by Emmanuelle Haïm), which was filmed by Philippe Béziat for a special Arte live web broadcast and for a DVD.

Biography – Natalie Dessay

Soprano (www.natalie-dessay.com)

After beginning her career in soprano coloratura roles (la Reine de la Nuit, Lakmé, Zerbinette, Olympia), the soprano Natalie Dessay broadened her repertoire over the years in order to sing bel canto heroines. She performed for the first time as Lucia (Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*) in Chicago and then Bellini's *La Sonnambula* at the New York Metropolitan Opera. She was Ophélie (Ambroise Thomas' *Hamlet*) at the Grand Théâtre of Geneva and the Théâtre du Capitole in Toulouse and made her debut in London at the Covent Garden Royal Opera and in Barcelona's Liceu with the same role. She later performed again in *Lucia di Lammermoor* at the Opéra national de Paris and the Metropolitan Opera. She then tackled the part of Manon (Massenet's *Manon*), a role she is particularly fond of, at the Grand Théâtre of Geneva, and then became Juliet (Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet*) at the Metropolitan Opera, and Marie (Donizetti's *La Fille du Régiment*) in London, Vienna and New York, before taking up the role of Manon again in Barcelona in a staging by David McVicar.

In 2009, she made her debut in the role of Mélisande (Debussy's *Pelléas and Mélisande*) at the Theater an der Wien, and in the role of Violetta (*La Traviata*) at the Santa Fe Festival, a role she later played again in Japan in a tour with the Turin's Teatro Regio. In 2011, she sang as Cleopatra (Haendel's *Julius Caesar in Egypt*) at the Opéra national of Paris. In April 2010, she became the first French female singer to receive the title of "Österreichische Kammersängerin" at the Vienna Opera. She recently took up the role of Violetta at the Vienna Opera (in a production by Jean-François Sivadier), the Liceu in Barcelona and the New York Metropolitan Opera.

Cast

Natalie Dessay – Violetta Valéry

Jean-Francois Sivadier – Director

Louis Langrée – Music Direction

Charles Castronovo – Alfredo Germont

Adelina Scarabelli – Annina

Ludovic Tézier – Giorgio Germont

Crew

Director : Philippe Béziat

Camera: Raphaël O'Byrne, Hichame Alaouié, Ned Burgess, Matthieu Poirot-Delpech

Sound : Laurent Gabiot

Editor : Cyril Leuthy

Sound editor : François Méreu

Sound editor/ music premix: Thomas Dappelo

Sound mix : Emmanuel Croset

Producer : Philippe Martin

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