

QUINZAINE

DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT
CANNES 2026



Saïd Ben Saïd

presents



THE DIARY OF A CHAMBERMAID
Le journal d'une femme de chambre
by
Radu Jude

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Gianina, a young Romanian, works as a housekeeper for a bourgeois family in Bordeaux.

In the evenings, she rehearses the role of a maid with an amateur theater troupe in an adaptation of *The Diary of a Chambermaid* by Octave Mirbeau.

She takes care of Louen, her employers' son, while her own daughter is growing up far from her, in Romania. The maternal absence deepens into a wound but, as Christmas approaches, the promise of a reunion begins to take shape.



INTERVIEW WITH RADU JUDE

*In which context did you first come across Octave Mirbeau's novel, *The Diary of a Chambermaid*?*

I remember, as a teen starting to explore cinema, seeing the Buñuel movie on TV in Romania after the Revolution. First time around, I didn't really like it, then I came across it again a few years later and liked it far better. As for the novel, there is only one Romanian edition, with a very sexualized cover, which brings to mind a porn novel. Actually, you glimpse it in the film, when Gianina sits alone in her room eating out of a tin of tuna fish. When I read it, I found Mirbeau's novel way better than the film adaptations of it. Way more radical, way more anarchistic somehow, more experimental and, above all, funnier. It stuck in my mind.

What storytelling urge gave birth to your film?

I often reflect on migration from Romania to the West, which involves somewhere around 4-5 million people. In other words, a quarter of the population has left the country to live and work someplace else. Part of my own family has left. Of course, their stories are not those that Mirbeau tells in his novel, but it remained a kind of reference point for situations of which I am personally aware or have heard about, and which resonate in some way with the situations described in *The Diary of a Chambermaid*.

At one point, the theater group discusses Mirbeau's provocative inclinations. Some of your films are also quite provocative, even if it is never gratuitous.

Absolutely, although I don't find this film in particular to be one of those. On the other hand, it's fair to say that the provocative dimension of Mirbeau is something that touches me deeply. In the 1930s, there was a major avant-garde Romanian art movement that has faded from memory somewhat, since it was annihilated by fascist regimes and then by communist regimes, but all the young artists of the period, including Eugène Ionesco and Constantin Brâncuși closely followed the Western avant-garde movement and their work echoes it. The latent, to my mind, connections between the two movements are obvious, and Octave Mirbeau was a major reference for those budding talents.

On the title card, you speak of a "variation" on the novel.

I wonder, in fact, if that is the right word. I teach cinema in Romania, and I often look at my students with a kind of jealousy and suspicion because, when I ask them how they go about writing a script, they almost all say that they open up a blank page on their computer and start putting down scene headings, such as Interior. Kitchen - Day... That process is beyond me. Before I start working on a script, I always need to do dig deep and define a structure. A bit like a riverbed channeling the flow of the river.

My previous film, *Dracula*, was built around the cinematic myth, and *Kontinental '25* was connected to the work of Rossellini. And even if this particular variation is an original story, it would not exist without that connection to Mirbeau's work and the great films based on it. For example, I have in some small way kept the diary structure. The novel is over one hundred years old, and I asked myself how, as a Romanian writer-director, I could come up with a story today that would echo the book. Those questions made me want to not take the direction of an adaptation, however free. Instead, they made me want to engage in a dialogue with the novel, to develop a contemporary variation on Mirbeau's themes. Painters often resort to this creative principle. And I find it interesting for the cinema to also play on the echo principle.

How did you construct the screenplay?

Two or three main threads soon emerged. As a starting point, I wanted to tell one of those stories that we Romanians know well because they are picked up by the national media. The story of a woman working in another country, whose child has stayed back home. It's an immigration situation that creates a sort of fake paradox since the situation brings with it a little economic prosperity, as well as major emotional, psychological and relational fallout. Especially for the family members back home. Also, I wanted to take the opposite angle to Mirbeau's novel, which describes horrible or crazy bosses who exploit Célestine.

I wanted the couple that she works for to be nice people. I wanted to explore a "social" relationship with likable, honest and decent people, such as this Bordeaux family. Everything is calm in the family. The real drama is far away, in Romania. I wanted to mark the difference in the human, economic and social structures that result from immigration. So the script was structured at the outset on those two directions. Then the idea came along of Gianina and her daughter communicating only by smartphone. That became the film's third narrative thread. And its construction hinged on the way they were woven together.

It is also a kind of Christmas carol, with a near-happy ending, even if a little acidity, a little bitterness remains...

It's a false-positive ending. The story seems to end well, but a happy ending always depends, in fact, on the moment when you decide to cut. And this particular ending carries on after the end of the film!

How did you develop the character of Gianina, who is made up of multiple facets—maid, concerned mother, actress playing the role of Célestine on stage?

The writing process was not very complicated, and Ana Dumitrașcu, the actress who plays Gianina, contributed hugely to sketching the character. Meeting her was an enormous stroke of luck.



She possesses a kind of innocence and sense of humor that we could build upon. On top of that, she is a smart, rigorous woman. We had far-reaching discussions about the character. Ana really got her, and all I had to do on set was a little fine-tuning. Gianina is not naive but she tries to remain neutral. When she is asked about Ukraine, she prefers to say she does not know. She refuses to be drawn into the discussion. We wanted to show a woman who is the opposite of fictional heroines that are often incredibly active characters. Gianina is not one of those. She has no objective, in the traditional storytelling sense. Her sole aim is to remain discreet. Her only quest is for stability, and she is waiting for Christmas to come along to be able to go back to see her daughter. That might be the only real provocation in the film: developing a character who does not try at all costs to achieve something. Who creates neither tension, nor suspense around herself.

But it's easy to imagine those gentle first impressions to be deceiving. There is something in the woman's taste and talent for telling stories that hint at trickery, as if her narrative of her life might be false.

Your intuition is spot-on. At some point in the script, as well as in scenes as we shot them, that slightly beguiling aspect of the character emerged. Slightly duplicitous, without her true motivations becoming apparent. A survival strategy perhaps?

Whatever the reason, I cut that out at the end of the editing process. But I am happy for the suspicion to persist. There is a hint of dark shadows under the surface.

The footage of Romania, besides Gianina's conversations with her daughter, offer a particular insight into your country's current state, especially the backdrop to the story of the prince and his immortality...

In preparation for the shoot, I had my mind set on filming a long take of Gianina telling the story. Just her words, no illustration. Then the shoot began. We started with the scenes in Bordeaux before heading to Romania to shoot that part. When I got there, I began to wonder what the idea of inserting some illustration into the story might look like. Like an innate contradiction in the pictures and their meaning between the fairytale and the reality of the village where we were filming. There were a lot of derelict houses in the region where we were shooting. Either as a result of a falling population, in the sense that a new generation had not been born to take over those houses, or because the village had been deserted due to massive migration overseas or to major Romanian cities. There are now a lot of empty ghost villages like the one we show in the film. The idea of ruins has always fascinated me, and here it possesses a metaphysical and historical dimension that serves the story and is highly revealing of the sociological reality in our country today.

In contrast with the opulence of the Donnadius' trinket-filled apartment, which speaks to the class differences that play out there and that were central to Mirbeau's novel.

It's the story of the film. The story of a country girl who ends up in a huge, bourgeois apartment in Bordeaux. And I chose Bordeaux partly for its past and the legacy of slavery, which enriched the city. We looked for a vast apartment in a historic building, and we came up with this one, which used to belong to a family of doctors. There were still a lot of artifacts dating back generations. Paintings and furniture that were over a century old. All the Bordeaux exteriors were shot in the old part of the city. I wanted to show a bygone world, stuck in history. With, on the other hand, Romania representing today's world, with the countryside that seems to have remained unchanged since the middle ages. A country without history almost. Actually, I wanted the film to be based in striking contrasts and oppositions between Romania and France, literature and cinema, documentary and fiction, theater and filmmaking.

The scene where Monsieur Donnadius hands Gianina money next to a king-size bed in front of a huge window seems to hint at off-the-books services between boss and maid, which takes us back to Mirbeau...

Even if that is not expanded upon, it is another dimension of the film. A story of male-female relationships, and the possibility that Gianina, a beautiful young Romanian woman,

might be desired by men in France. At another point in the film, I kept a moment of furtive eye contact that might also hint at that, but nothing official. It's just one of the multiple potentialities in the film. I wanted to create a sense that it could strike out in other directions. To speak of exploitation or the couple's latent perversity. But nothing is made clear. The story does not open up.

Was it according to that principle of off-screen possibilities that the choices of extracts from The Diary of a Chambermaid were made, taking us back to themes of domination and submission?

I chose those scenes, which are very loaded and extreme, in opposition to the young woman's relatively quiet and sedate life. They are aspects of the narrative that could no longer play out today, but offer a powerful contrast between the gentility of relationships within this almost perfect, poster-family with barely any flaws, and the violence and perversity of the relationships described in Mirbeau's novel. But even that gentility cannot prevent exploitation because deep down it is a system. And that is what I wanted to show.

What were the challenges you faced in directing the film?

The main one is that because of all the interwoven threads that make up the structure of the script, I envisioned the film as one that would be made in the editing suite.

That's where the narrative complexity would be brought out. And that's why my directing had to be quite limpid, clear, precise and simple. Using mainly shot-reverse shot and a locked-off camera. The theater scenes are shot as long takes with framing that does not move, just like in the early days of cinema. And for the scenes on the phone, I wanted them to have a home movie feel. Over time, as a director and as an audience member, I have become less interested in virtuoso filmmaking. For me, cinema is a tool of the mind. Not spectacular movement. I think that the true act of modernity is returning to the source of cinema. Warhol reinvented cinema by taking it back to its roots. The cinema of the Lumière brothers, Méliès and Edison. And I think there are so many potentialities there that are yet to be exploited.

Mélanie Thierry, Vincent Macaigne and Marie Rivière seem to bring with them the memory of roles that they have played in their careers.

Absolutely. And I am very happy you should mention it. When I began to think about who might play Gianina's bosses, never having lived in France and without any experience of the French film industry, I was concerned that I might not be able to create credible characters on screen. I am very familiar with French cinema, however, so I thought about characters in films that I like. That enabled me to have a very clear mental image of my characters. I started with Marie Rivière and, suddenly, everything became very clear. She was perfect for the role of the mother.

Next, I chose Vincent Macaigne, who is an actor I greatly admire. The same is true of Mélanie Thierry. The roles I have seen her play shaped my approach to her role as the wife, in her ostensible sweetness and ambiguity.

Selective filmography

The happiest girl in the world (2009)
Everybody in our family (2012)
Aferim! (2015)
Scarred hearts(2016)
The Dead Nation (2017)
**I do not care if we go down in history as
barbarians (2018)**
Uppercase Print (2020)
Bad Luck Banging or Loony Porn (2021)
**Do not expect too much from the end of the
world (2023)**
Eight Postcards from Utopia (2024)
Kontinental '25 (2025)
Dracula (2025)



CAST & CREW LIST

Ana Dumitrașcu – Gianina

Mélanie Thierry– Marguerite Donnadiou

Vincent Macaigne–Pierre Donnadiou

Marie Rivière – Madame Anne

Louen Bouteiller –Louen

Arnaud Baudoin – Kalil

Ilinca Manolache –Ilinca

Sofia Dragoman – Maria

Liliana Ghiță – Bunica

Written and directed by : **Radu Jude**

Producer : **SBS Productions, Saïd Ben Saïd**

Coproducer : **Avanpost (Romania), Vlad Răduleșcu and Carmen Rizac**

Associate producer : **Kevin Chneiweiss**

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