



Wild Side

a film by Sébastien Lifshitz

A Wellspring Release
93 Minutes / Not Yet Rated by the MPAA
35mm / Color / 2.35 Scope

Official Selection

Berlin (Panorama) / Seattle / London / Karlovy Vary / Outfest (LA) / New Festival (NYC)

Winner

Teddy for Best Feature & Manfred Salzgeber Award - Berlin 2004
Special Jury Award - Gijon 2004
Grand Jury Award for Outstanding International Narrative Feature - L.A. Outfest 2004
New Directors Showcase Award - Seattle 2004

www.wellspring.com/wildside

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Synopsis

Stéphanie is a transsexual prostitute who plies her trade in Parisian discos, parks and hotel rooms. She lives with Jamel, a thirty-year-old North African who also turns tricks. Together they manage to enjoy brief moments of happiness here and there when they go out dancing or spend time with her friends, many of whom are also transsexual. For Jamel, this is a welcome alternative to his dour home life in a bleak housing project, replete with a mother who doesn't accept his sexuality.

One night Stéphanie meets Mikhail, a down-on-his-luck Russian immigrant living illegally in France. Soon, Mikhail falls in love with Stéphanie, and she ultimately makes a surprising decision to include both partners in her life.

Summoned to her childhood home in the north of France by her dying mother Liliane, Stéphanie (whose birth name was Pierre) tries to provide comfort to a woman who never really accepted her son's unconventional sexuality. She is joined by Mikhail and Jamel, who together with Stéphanie form a nurturing web of comfort and support.

While back at her childhood home, Stéphanie gradually makes up with her mother after years of distance and silence. She also visits Nicolas, a friend she hasn't seen in seventeen years. It's clear that Pierre was Nicolas's childhood paramour, even though Nicolas is now happily married with two young children. But he is delighted to be reacquainted with the former Pierre, and his company provides a relief for Stéphanie from Liliane's illness.

Liliane finally dies in her sleep. Stéphanie, with the help of Mikhail and Jamel, buries her mother and closes up the family home, destroying all of Liliane's possessions and family mementos. En route to Paris, the three lovers are shown entwined in the same train compartment, an alternative family of sorts. But they are headed for an uncertain future, living on the margins of a society that is still not comfortable with outcasts, others and those living in-between.

Cast

STÉPHANIE
MIKHAIL
JAMEL
THE MOTHER

STÉPHANIE MICHELINI
EDOUARD NIKITINE
YASMINE BELMADI
JOSIANE STORELU

Credits

DIRECTOR
PRODUCER
CO-PRODUCERS

SCREENPLAY
PHOTOGRAPHY
MUSIC
EDITING

SÉBASTIEN LIFSHITZ
GILLES SANDOZ
Y.C. ALIGATOR FILM
ZEPHYR FILMS
ARTE FRANCE CINEMA
AB3
STEPHANE BOUQUET
AGNÈS GODARD
JOCELYN POOK
STÉPHANIE MAHET

SÉBASTIEN LIFSHITZ (DIRECTOR)

WILD SIDE is Sébastien Lifshitz's third feature film. The French director gained international attention for his 1998 short film *LES CORPS OUVERTS*, the story of a young man's sexual awakening initiated by a casting session. Lifshitz's first feature length film, *PRESQUE REIN (COME UNDONE)*, a gay summer love story, was a strong critical success upon its release in 2001. According to Stephen Holden in his rave *New York Times* review: "With the movies and television so glutted with psychological jargon that reduces every relationship and situation to the same formulaic banalities, it's almost an event when a serious movie scrupulously refuses to connect the dots with the usual cookie-cutter analyses. *COME UNDONE*, the French director Sébastien Lifshitz's beautifully acted film about an introspective 18-year-old boy's homosexual initiation, first love, suicide attempt and subsequent recovery leaves so much unsaid and unexplained that it captures the uncertainty and emotional turbulence of late adolescence with a poignancy that a more clinically articulate movie never could."

LA TRAVERSEE (THE CROSSING), a docudrama about a young man's search for the father he never knew, was presented in Cannes' Directors Fortnight 2002.

FILMOGRAPHY

1998 (short) *CORPS OUVERTS*
1999 (short) *LES TERRES FROIDES*
2000 *PRESQUE REIN (COME UNDONE)*
2002 *LA TRAVERSEE (THE CROSSING)*
2004 *WILD SIDE*

AGNÉS GODARD (CINEMATOGRAPHER)

Agnés Godard is one of contemporary cinema's most acclaimed cinematographers. She is perhaps best known for her collaboration with Claire Denis on films such as *BEAU TRAVAIL*, *TROUBLE EVERY DAY*, *FRIDAY NIGHT*, *NENETTE AND BONI*, and *I CAN'T SLEEP*. Her recent credits include Andre Techine's *STRAYED* and Tonie Marshall's *NEAREST TO HEAVEN*. Her other credits include Catherine Corsini's *LA REPETITION*, Erik Zonca's *THE DREAMLIFE OF ANGELS* and Peter Handke's *THE ABSENCE*. Early in her career as a camera operator or assistant, she worked on numerous films, including Joseph Losey's *THE TROUT*, Peter Greenaway's *A ZED AND TWO NOUGHTS* and Wim Wenders' *WINGS OF DESIRE* and *PARIS TEXAS*.

Interview with Director Sébastien Lifshitz

Why did you choose the title WILD SIDE?

The production company asked me to come up with a title at short notice. I didn't have any ideas. It was hard finding a generic term that could sum up the whole film. The story is made up of such opposite elements.

I spent the evening looking through books of poetry, record covers or the screenplay itself and that's when I came across Lou Reed. WILD SIDE seemed appropriate in that it evoked life on the fringe. It's not so much the drugs that the song refers to as its reference to a certain world, almost a community, made up of all types of minorities. I could have just as easily looked at Bowie in his glam rock period. For me WILD SIDE covers rejection of the mainstream, a taste for cross-dressing, rethinking male identity and taking it to its extreme limits, particularly today, at a time when uniformity reigns. I'm not comparing the film to Lou Reed's song. I just think that there's a kinship. They have a group of people in common. And as chance would have it, Anthony, who sings at the start of the film, is a close friend of Lou Reed's. He sang on his last album.

Are the characters minorities?

I'm drawn to impenetrable characters that operate outside the usual norms. I truly love fringe dwellers and people who don't fit with fiction's archetypes. At the same time, I'm aware that the film kicks off with three minority stereotypes: a transsexual prostitute, an aimless young French-Arab who prostitutes himself from time to time and an illegal Russian immigrant. Add that to a trip to the north of France because the transsexual's mother's is dying and you have a heavily loaded, even over the top screenplay. It hangs together by a thread. What interested me was taking these archetypes as a starting point, with everything people assume they know and even despise about them, and as the film unwinds, revealing the ordinary, human side of the lives of these three lame ducks.

The film soon moves beyond what defines them socially to concentrate on their intimacy and their inner lives. At first, they are loners who meet. Individually, they have become almost nothing. They are falling apart, perched at the edge of a cliff. I was interested in the relationship the three of them build, which makes life easier and gives it meaning; in creating hope. Not saving them from their minority status, because there is nothing to save, but from their desperate solitude. Deep down WILD SIDE is a love story.

Transsexuality

For me, transsexuality is not a subject, just as homosexuality is not a subject... and I definitely don't want to reduce the film to that. My other films were not films about homosexuality. They included homosexuality, which is very different. Here, there is transsexuality because one of the characters is transsexual but that's as far as it goes. I rendered that state of things ordinary. I didn't want to make Stéphanie's phallus an event in the film. That's why I put it in the opening credits, to stop people from wondering and to lift the suspense. In a way, I had to move away from the subject to get closer to the person. I wanted to watch her live and be what she is. I think she generates a real sense of mystery that is both feminine and at times, reflects her male origins. I find the mix disturbing, magnificent even. Personally, I have always considered Stéphanie as a woman.

The love triangle is almost a family

It's true. Agnès Godard often said to me "It's like there's a father, a mother and a son," which I found strange. What I wanted most was to film as close to them as possible, to capture their essence. There is a borderline, despite the traditional filmmaking set up, in trying to film them as they really are. If I chose them it's because I loved who they are in real life. I hope the film bears traces of the desire I have for them. I often tried to eliminate the fiction in the screenplay to get closer to them and put them in situations where they could let go.

Stéphanie

As soon as I saw Stéphanie in a café one night, I was spellbound. She had allure, a way of carrying herself and was incredibly gentle. Before her, I had done casting calls with a lot of transsexuals but without being convinced. I met Stéphanie almost by chance because she has little contact with the transsexual scene. I was lucky. When she came for screen test, she was incredibly right immediately. She imposed herself as the obvious choice. Yet she's very shy and almost suspicious in real life. She has the unfortunate tendency of withdrawing into her shell. Throughout the film, I had to reassure her that she could let go without risk. For the scene in the train, at the end of the film, she had a hard time crying. It was the last day of shooting and her last scene. She knew that's after that, making the film, which she had come to enjoy, was over. In the end, she bursts into sobs. I was bowled over. They weren't movie tears. The scene in the train is also a farewell to her family and her childhood. When she finally turns her back on the little boy, there is something liberating about it, but also incredibly sad.

Choosing the north of France

I filmed the north of France like an extension or transposition of the dying mother's body. Both are harbors of ruin, desolation and death at work. This explains all the scenes of winter landscapes, deserted streets, deserted houses, etc. In the north, I was particularly struck by the

marks of time. Since nothing is ever really renewed, things get older without you being able to do anything about it. When we were scouting for locations, I came across a 1970's grocery store. Nothing had really changed. It had just been deserted and there was still a few products lying around. I was moved, filled with a sense of days gone by. The same thing happened in a church and in a school. All these places were like open graves. Some people could find it morbid but for me it was quite the opposite.

Sex in cinema

I didn't want to present an antiseptic view of sex. At the same time, the erotic scenes aren't gratuitous provocation. Those scenes were necessary to present prostitution frankly, the way it might be experienced in the daily life of a prostitute. Sex isn't the subject of WILD SIDE. It's a dramatic element which adds a certain realism, rawness. To give a sequence what it needs to evoke the right feeling, sometimes the image has to be violent. Sex in cinema is always problematic and I think cinematographer Agnes Godard prefers rendering it as abstract as possible. Strangely enough, in my opinion, the film ended up being fairly tame in regards to sex. Sex is often suggested more than actually being shown.

A Song of Farewell

Stephanie, Mikhail and Jamel are three lonely people who find one another. They have been trying to hold on as best they can in facing the difficulties of their lives. Alone, they felt they were nothing. I was interested in how the relationship they create together would help them to go on and how it would give some meaning to their lives -- meaning which got a little lost in their despair and solitude. For me, WILD SIDE is also a song of farewell to family and childhood, notably with the impending death of Stephanie's mother.

Filming the truth

I wanted to try and film the truth about these people. I wanted to try and film who they really are because I'm deeply moved by who they are. I hope the completed film shows the loving feeling mixed with desire that I had for them during the shoot. When I say 'they' I'm speaking not only about the characters, but the actors who play them as well. I'd go so far as to say I search to progressively erase the 'character' -- to let the real person shine through. I guess I'm not too interested in fictional characters. A role is simply a pretext for me to convince people to join in the adventure of one of my films. For me, the real subject of the film is my attempt to make documentary-like portraits of people who moved me when we met. If they decide to accept my offer, some passionate moments could follow. It's a real tender and emotional human adventure!

Interview with Sébastien Lifshitz

Excerpted from the Belgian film magazine 'Cinopsis'

In WILD SIDE, it seems that you do not want to change the way people think about transsexuality but simply to bear witness...

If my film helps to bring about a change in the way people think, fine, but I do not claim to want to revolutionize the world with a film. I think it is already a political gesture, now, to have chosen such a story and such characters. Afterwards, the manner in which the film is received does not depend on me.

What's more, I think that films can have a very long lifespan. You must trust in time and if you create a work, one day it may find its audience and, as a result, generate the desire to discover your previous work. A film does not find its audience immediately; you must have sufficient belief in time and in your work so that at some point it will be seen or discovered. For me, cinema is not an instrument of power in which I am only looking for box-office success.

In the WILD SIDE press kit, you say that you had to find a name for the film on short notice, one evening, at the producer's request. If you had had more time, would you have given it another name and, if so, what would it have been?

I don't know, because it has become very difficult for me to imagine another. I thought of a title that no one else really approved. I thought of the title "Fragile" because I think that there is something that has a lot to do with fragility when we see these three characters, including the character of the mother. As a title it was somewhat affected, perhaps a little too literary to be used as such. And I find that dangerous. What I like about WILD SIDE is that it incorporates another language into a film that is already marked by different cultures...

How did you meet the actors?

I met Stéphanie (Michelini) and Edouard (Nikitine) by chance. Since I wanted non-actors for certain roles, we did what we call a "casting sauvage". One of Stéphanie's friends saw the announcement and she introduced her to us as a possible extra. As soon as I saw her I was completely taken with her. Physically, she already corresponded exactly to what I was looking for. She had a kind of femininity that was very natural, she was very beautiful, and did not at all have that "creature" quality that some transsexuals have. It was as if she had found a kind of balancing point between male and female and that made her very moving and very beautiful. It was the same for Edouard, we met him the same way, by chance.

Was it the first film for all of them?

Yes, well not for all. Yasmine (Belmadi), who plays the part of Djamel, had already acted in two of my previous films and in other films here and there. Josiane (Stoleru), the mother, is primarily a stage actress.

What was the shooting like for WILD SIDE? Since it gives an impression of being behind closed doors, was this atmosphere felt by the crew, during your work with the actors, during the shooting?

S.L.: The making of the film consisted of four months of preparation and eleven weeks of shooting. The shooting was exhausting and extremely hard for me. First of all, we shot during the winter so it was very tiring. We were chasing after the daylight. Finally, making non-actors work is delightful but it is also very difficult because these are people who have no experience shooting a film, no professional way of managing their energy. So some days they are completely concentrated and available, and other days less so. Everything changes, all of the time.

But that's the way it is during shooting. You must constantly confront reality and that is exhausting. But there are moments of grace that happen all of a sudden. A perfect agreement occurs between what you want and what people are giving you - these are the magical moments. WILD SIDE also had a lot of sets, and filming in Paris in winter was a real nightmare. Also, for various reasons, the film budget had to evolve. At the beginning we had a budget but it was not enough. It became larger as shooting progressed and this needed to be managed. Finally, for any number of reasons, it was hard.

One slightly more specific question about the sex scenes, which are very realistic: how does it remain art and not cross over into pornography?

S.L.: The film requires this type of scene. Given that Stéphanie is a prostitute, at some point she has to speak about her work. I had to film it in the most realistic way possible while taking into account the limits that this realism imposed on me. That is to say, not to cross over into pornography or "prohibited for those under the age of 18" - that sort of thing. What was especially important was that these sequences be equal to what the character could be feeling. This was a very delicate part of the shooting. People on the set were walking on eggs, they were careful. Me, I'm not really bothered by these types of scenes. But I know what they generate in a crew...

This was not the first time that I had filmed this type of thing, so it didn't really bother me. Now I understand the embarrassment that it can create, so it is a matter of simply calling a spade a spade. It was necessary to be very precise, very clear, so at least we would not be beating around the bush. These were not the most agreeable moments, but it had to be done. The actors understood that the script required it, they did it and it was normal. Stéphanie was absolutely adorable, she was determined, courageous...it was the first time that she had done this sort of thing and she was absolutely marvelous.

Did Stéphanie speak to you about any possible feedback that she might have had from her family and friends?

Yes, she was very happy. I think she was proud, in fact, she had very good feedback. As for me, I was somewhat apprehensive because I found she was very exposed in the film and I was a little afraid that it would be somewhat difficult for her to manage, but this was not the case.

As in your other films, WILD SIDE also touches on social, racial and cultural alienation. Are these subjects with particular meaning for you?

In a sense, it goes back to what I said at the very beginning. It's a desire to show a part of French society that is not always well represented and, when it is, it is often done in an exaggerated way. Even if you can say, from the outset, that these are marginal characters, I tried all the same to create sociological figures. First to film the reality of what they are, not what they represent socially. And to go somewhat beyond the clichés.

But in a way, because WILD SIDE is very close to being "behind closed doors," weren't you afraid that, by filming only these characters, it would become a film precisely about what they are?

S.L.: No, because I think the film goes beyond that. Perhaps I am somewhat naive in saying so but WILD SIDE is, after all, a film that speaks about love, that really believes in the connections between people and offers this feeling as an alternative to the struggles and the hard blows that can be experienced throughout life (particularly by these three characters). But they resist, they remain on their feet precisely because of the strength of the relationships they have constructed together. That is why for me, WILD SIDE carries a message of hope.

About Wellspring

Wellspring is one of the leading American distributors of films by leading international filmmakers. Current releases include Todd Solondz's *Palindromes*, Jonathan Caouette's award-winning debut *Tarnation*, executive produced by Gus Van Sant & John Cameron Mitchell, Academy Award winner Jessica Yu's *In the Realms of the Unreal: The Mystery of Henry Darger*, Jean-Luc Godard's *Notre Musique* and Arnaud Desplechin's *Kings and Queen*. Upcoming releases include Thomas Vinterberg's *Dear Wendy* (written by Lars von Trier), and Rupert Murray's documentary *Unknown White Male*, about a man who loses his memory, which premiered in Sundance 2005.

Past releases include some of the most acclaimed and successful arthouse films of recent years such as *Russian Ark*, hailed by Roger Ebert as "one of the most astonishing films ever made.," Akira Kurosawa's masterpiece *Ran*, Cédric Kahn's Spirit Award nominated *Red Lights* starring Carole Bouquet and Jean-Pierre Darroussin, *The Brown Bunny* by Vincent Gallo, *The Circle* by Jafar Panahi, *Yi Yi* by Edward Yang, *Under the Sand* by François Ozon and Lorene Machado's *Notorious C.H.O.* **Wellspring** has fostered the careers of some of the most important directors in world cinema today including Bruno Dumont (*Life of Jesus, Humanité, Twentynine Palms*), Alexander Sokurov (*Russian Ark, Father and Son*) Jafar Panahi (*The Circle, Crimson Gold*), Leos Carax (*Mauvais Sang, Pola X*), Tsai Ming-liang (*What Time is It There? Goodbye Dragon Inn*), Olivier Assayas (*Les Destinées*), Claire Denis (*Friday Night*), Bahman Ghobadi (*Marooned in Iraq*), Liz Garbus (*Girlhood*), Marina de Van (*In My Skin*) and Karim Ainouz (*Madame Satã*). **Wellspring** has also been committed to the theatrical re-release of classic films including the works of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Eric Rohmer, Jacques Demy and François Truffaut.

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