

Margo Cinema

Presents

LA NUIT D'EN FACE

La Noche de Enfrente

(Night Across the Street)

A film by **Raoul Ruiz**

Produced by **François Margolin** and **Christian Aspee**

A Franco-Chilean coproduction by Margo Cinema & Suricato

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Starring:

Christian Vadim
Sergio Hernandez
Valentina Vargad
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Image:

Inti Briones

Editing:

Valeria Sarmiento
Raoul Ruiz
Christian Aspee

Music:

Jorge Arriagada

Sound:

Roberto Espinoza
Felipe Zabala

Production Manager:

Daniela Salazar

Duration: 110 minutes

Format: 1.85

Sound: 5.1

Synopsis:

Three intersecting ages of a man who can see the approach of death. Three rival souls. The final testament of Raoul Ruiz.

About:

Raoul Ruiz died of a lung infection in Paris on the 19th of August 2011. Born in Puerto-Montt, in Chilean Patagonia, he had just turned seventy at the time of his death.

“La Nuit d’en Face” (Night Across the Street) is his last film. Shot between March and April 2011 in Santiago de Chile, it is a mysterious testament, the true meaning of which was not understood even by those who worked with him on the shoot.

Raoul Ruiz conceived this film to be seen only after his death, a death which he knew was not far off.

He told those close to him, his friends, that he was inspired by the tales of Hernan de Solar, by the father of one of his oldest friends, or again, to the most switched on, that it told of his own childhood, or the childhood of another of his friends. All of these false leads had one simple goal: to lead those close to him astray, so as not to worry or sadden them.

Raoul Ruiz knew that “Night Across the Street” would be his last film, that he would speak to us one final time, from beyond the grave, and that there would be no further films from him after that.

“Night Across the Street” is a summary of his work. A moving and funny film.

A Statement from Raoul Ruiz

My purpose is to immerse myself in the poetic world of one of the most secretive and surprising writers of Chilean literature, Hernan del Solar. He was a member of the eminent group of writers known as the "Imaginists". The "Imaginists" pushed against the grain of naturalism that reigned in the forties and fifties. They hoped to innovate with an imaginative and contemplative literature that had already been practised by the likes of A. D'Halmar and Federico Gana.

In Del Solar's works, daily life coexists with the dream world, with tenderness and cruelty, the literary evocations and the omnipresence of the universe of childhood. His fiction always imposes a double reading. It demands, at once, that one believe and cease to believe. All this to say, that his fiction springs from complete freedom of inspiration. This is a challenge for cinema, but a stimulating one.

An example: In "Wooden Leg", the main character tells of his meeting with a character he calls "the Captain". We believe that this Captain is a "flesh and bones" creature, a resident in an unremarkable hotel. However, at the same time, he evokes the character from Stevenson's Treasure Island, the one who introduces himself by saying: "Call me Captain!", and who, when he throws a purse of gold coins on the desk of the hotel where he's staying, cries, "You can tell me when I've worked through that!"

In my liberal adaptation – perhaps the term "adoption" would be better – of the tales Night Across the Street and Wooden Leg, I have also made use of another indirect fiction. A few years ago, I was lucky enough to meet the daughter of the writer Jean Giono (another secretive and mysterious writer, in a sense, the Provencal equivalent of Del Solar). She told me that the ultra-provincial Giono, for whom a trip to Paris seemed like a leap into the unknown, loved to dream of extraordinary journeys to the other side of the world. One day, he announced to his family that he was preparing himself for a voyage-of-no-return to a town named Antofagasta, a port in the north of Chile. The only reason he could give for his decision was that he liked the sound of the word "Antofagasta".

Of course, the film takes place in an "imaginist" world, in which the real world (in the film, Giono also lives in France and writes novels) and the imaginary world (in which the voyage takes place) coincide, converge and diverge.

In employing a narrative technique that is little used in cinema, that of alternative history (characterised by questions like: What if the Nazis had won the war? Or, what if Napoleon had won at Waterloo) I imagine the friendship between the character from Night Across the Street, a man on the cusp of retirement and Giono, and their walks through Antofagasta. It is a weaving narrative, only half explicit, and a dark story of crime and treason.

The story takes place in Antofagasta, in our time. We recognise modern buildings and shopping malls – startling modernity. And yet a modernity which the characters seem to ignore. These buildings do not exist...although they may well exist in the future.

Little by little, this simple melancholy will be disturbed by the events taking place. The horror of an impending crime grows in importance. And the ghosts, the ruins of incomplete lives, the spectres, a mix of “memory and desire”, of broken promises and of “lost illusions”, all come to occupy the stage.

All this to say that the film traverses a “possible” world in which Giono arrives in Antofagasta, settles there, and almost dies there, and a world that the camera shows us, in which the characters seem to ignore and refuse the problems of daily life. A sad coexistence between the images and the impression of unreality which emerges.

In a way it's a development of the painting by Matisse in which we see a pipe above the text “*ceci n'est pas une pipe*” (this is not a pipe).

Santiago de Chile, March 2011

Don Raul

by François Margolin

He was an eternal child. A child of seventy years old, for whom cinema was a game, and who barely outlived his mother Olga, who died at more than ninety years old, just two years earlier. He succumbed to liver cancer almost at once, but miraculously recovered, thanks to a transplant that very few people survive, only to fall victim to another cancer, which he didn't even have time to be treated for, when a virus infected the lungs of his weakened body, and carried him off in just a few days, without giving him the time to realise that this was the end.

It was as if he could only be a child. Perpetually. Perhaps that was why he never had children of his own. He would have been a perfect father, who played with words, who joked, who transmitted his knowledge in a distant and elegant way, and who acted through this knowledge. He was, however, a sort of substitute father for some – me among them, to my great fortune – although I think particularly of Melvil Poupaud, the hero of his “City of Pirates”, whose career he launched at the age of nine.

He had “Three Lives and Only One Death”, to borrow the title of one of his best films, with Marcello Mastroianni. A life in Chile, from where he was exiled in 1973 after Augusto Pinochet's coup d'état; a life in France, for almost thirty six years, and a third life, having lived through the liver transplant that should have killed him. Raoul Ruiz didn't believe in death, any more than sleep. One day he explained to me that we appreciate a film more while asleep and that he wasn't against the idea of spectators sleeping during his films. For was not one of these entitled “The Insomniac on the Bridge”? It tells the story of two insomniacs who manipulate people while they sleep. A possible metaphor for his role as filmmaker.

His work was Chile. A bric-a-brac of a country, lost at the edge of the world, on the other side of the Andes, beyond which there is nothing except the immense emptiness of the Pacific Ocean. Chile is an absurd country: a tongue of land, five thousand kilometres in length, where all Europe meets. Spain, of course, but also England, Germany, Italy, Serbia and even France, not to mention, of course, the Mapuche Indians, still very present and from whom Raoul Ruiz claimed to be descended – an invention, perhaps. Was not the liberator of the country called Bernardo O'Higgins, clearly of Irish descent? This mosaic, this jigsaw puzzle, where all sorts of people of all sorts of origins coexist, and where, he explained to me, the rates of alcoholism and suicide are the highest in the world (he exaggerated a little!), this land where the best grapes in the world grow, including the Carménère... this is the oeuvre of Raoul Ruiz. The man with two first names: Raul there, Raoul here. An oeuvre that I believe to be profoundly fictional, but which also documents Chile, its imagination and its deep soul.

All of his oeuvre came from his childhood bedroom. From the family apartment in Providencia, a neighbourhood in the centre of Santiago, where, despite his age and his long years of exile, his bedroom is still preserved. With its paintings of boats riding out tempests, for the most part triple-masts, from which his pirates sprung. With the photographic portrait of his father, a commander in the merchant marines. A father who was adored and admired, and who we can imagine telling him all manner of stories on his return from his trips. A bedroom where, on the departure of his father, little Raul would also invent all kinds of stories, even more adventurous, even more picaresque than those his father told. His heroes were often children, as in “City of Pirates”, “Genealogy of a Crime”, “Mysteries of Lisbon” and “Night Across the Street”, his two last films. Very special children, with extraordinary skills and the minds of adults. A little like him, or rather his opposite, for he would remain eternally childlike.

In Chile he's known as “Don Raul” or “Don Raulito”, a more affectionate version. There he was greeted in the street, or in the entrances of restaurants that he always frequented. A sign of respect for someone who was considered a “national monument” – a sort of local Eiffel Tower, he used to say with a laugh – and who would become, despite his long exile, a national glory. This form of recognition amused, but didn't displease, him, in a country he had to flee thanks to Pinochet's coup, to start again from zero, first in Germany, then in France, with his wife, his accomplice, his editor Valeria. Just as he was not at all displeased by being made Citizen of Honour in Puerto Montt, the Patagonian port where he was born and where he started to dream, of all kinds of fish and of the ghosts of Chiloé Island, where he lived as a child. He thumbed his nose at the generals who saluted him. A small revenge. A small pleasure. A small victory. And finally, it was important too. As much for Olga, his mother, who was not particularly left-wing, and who proudly displayed the diplomas and medals of her only child in the family apartment.

Raoul Ruiz always told me he was waging a battle. Was it too early, or simply hopeless? A battle which replaced, anyway, all the political battles of the past and of which he was a little tired: the battle against the “three acts”. These “three acts”, which form the norm of classic cinematography, inherited from Feydeau and Labiche, and theorised by Hollywood – those cookie-cutters for apprentice screenwriters – but also the trend in French cinema which created a genuine cult of the script. For Raoul, was it a clever and artistic way of fighting, in the tradition of South American politics, against American “gringo” imperialism?

Maybe. However, and more profoundly, it was also about building a new kind of narrative which didn't treat the spectator as an object, but as a subject. A subject capable of thinking for herself, without being manipulated and handled like a lapdog for the length a two-hour projection. A project shared by other great filmmakers: From Godard to Losseliani and David Lynch, and inherited from the great masters such as Georges Méliès and Jean Vigo. A project which consists in making cinema a genuine art form, equal – at least – to the literature of Proust or Borgès. It wasn't by chance that Raoul Ruiz dealt, in film, with these great literary innovators, through “Time Regained”, for the

former, and through the whole of his work for the latter. Overcoming these “three acts”, was, for Raoul, to reclaim freedom, his own freedom, the freedom to make films, to invent new and different shots, to mix times, to collide epochs and styles. What the exegetes describe by bandying about adjectives such as “baroque” or “surrealist”.

It was also – and this is the proof of his “cunning” mind – a way to make films more cheaply, with very little means, without being weighed upon by those always ready to claim that “it can’t be done this way or that way”. What are these “intangible rules”? A little like the supposed “grand principals” of the liberal economy which, today, governs the world, leading only to its economic downfall.

Raoul Ruiz wanted to make many more films. His imagination hadn’t dried up. On the contrary! His illness pushed him back towards the essential. He wanted, in particular, again, to tell a pirate story. We spoke about it, and I brought him a book about a journey to Cartagena, Colombia. But he wanted his pirates to be Jewish. Why? I thought, at first, it was a homage to the cinema, “invented” by Jews, from Central Europe and then Hollywood. “Not at all,” he explained. “Sir Francis Drake” whose name he pronounced with a Chilean accent, “was half Jewish and his son completely Jewish. For the son of the famous pirate of Tortuga founded a City of Pirates in the north of Chile, near Antofagasta, a base he could retreat to if things went badly.” Raoul wanted to tell this story because it had fascinated him since childhood. As it no doubt fascinated the Jews.

At one of our last lunches together, I explained that one of my friends, a Pole, who smuggled Russian caviar into France – and who regularly sold to Raoul – was dying of cancer. I told him too that he had decided to be cremated and that he had asked his wife to put his ashes in a caviar tin and to scatter them in the Baltic sea. Raoul said: “The Jews keep their sense of humour right up to the end!” Raoul did too: he played, on us all, the very bad joke of dying.

Paris, August 2011