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Nina

and the hedgehog's secret

A film by Alain Gagnol and Jean-Loup Felicioli

WITH THE VOICES OF AUDREY TAUTOU, GUILLAUME CANET, GUILLAUME BATS, PATRICK RIDREMONT, LOAN LONGCHAMP, KEANU PEYRAN

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with the voices of
Audrey
TAUTOU

Guillaume
CANET

Guillaume
BATS



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The story

10-year-old Nina has always filled her imagination with her dad's hedgehog diverting stories. But when he loses his job, Nina starts to worry about the future of her family. After hearing rumors of a treasure hidden by the old factory's boss, Nina and her best friend Mehdi decide to organize a risky hold-up, to share the swag between her father and his fellow co-workers. A crazy adventure begins...







The interview

Once again you've written a detective story for children. What are this script's original ingredients?

Alain Gagnol: In this film, a story about love and friendship is combined with the detective story. It's also about the end of childhood, and how children's lives can be upended by adult problems. A look at today's world and its conflicts serves as the setting for this story of a heist carried out by ten-year-olds.

I often come back to the crime genre because it puts the audience at the center of the action, especially with its suspenseful scenes. It has a playful side to it that allows us to talk about serious subjects while keeping a certain distance from them. Detective stories feature characters in extreme situations, the kind you'd never expect to see in real life.

The characters' motivations are oftentimes murky and ambiguous. They bring out the worst and the best in human beings. I think it would be a shame not to give young audiences a chance to read these kinds of stories.

It's a genre that comes up often in your films; why is that?

Alain Gagnol: My taste for detective stories comes

from American cinema, particularly the film noir movies from Billy Wilder, Raoul Walsh, and later Martin Scorsese, William Friedkin, Michael Mann, among many others. It also comes from literature (American as well): Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, Donald Westlake, Dennis Lehane and others.

My first novel was published in the Série Noire¹ collection – you might say I lean towards that!

Jean-Loup Felicioli: We're both big crime novel readers, so we naturally get excited about throwing ourselves into this genre.

Talk to us about Nina and Mehdi: the film shows us a truly authentic friendship between the two. How did you develop the psychology of this in the film?

Alain Gagnol: The more screenplays I write, the more attention I bring to making the characters come alive, with their qualities, their flaws, the way they see the world, what makes them tick.

For Nina and Mehdi, I wanted to bring to life two children with very different characters that complement each other. From Nina's point of view, having Mehdi as a best friend can sometimes be a little irritating,



especially when you're dealing with such an energetic character as hers.

Mehdi is quiet, even a little soft; he always thinks long and hard before acting, sometimes to the point of doing nothing at all. But, there's nothing sturdier than his friendship. Nina can completely depend on him. When she lacks courage, Mehdi is always there to support her.

What drives you to write films for children?

Alain Gagnol: I also write novels for adults and teenagers, much darker stories. Initially, I hadn't planned to write for children. Animation led me there, mostly for economic reasons. It's even harder to finance a cartoon for adults than for children, which is saying a lot...

But with the first feature film I made with Jean-Loup, "A cat in Paris", I discovered that, whatever the audience, it's all about making movies. By speaking to young viewers, you're not making lesser movies. On the contrary, it's as if you've been given even more responsibility. Today's young viewers will be tomorrow's adult viewers. If we decide to just force-feed them loud images and colorful, soulless films designed to capture their attention, we shouldn't be surprised if, later on, they consume movies on their cell phones.

The hedgehog character has a special place in the film. Could you tell us how you came up with this character?

Alain Gagnol: I've always liked to create graphic surprises within my films. From the outset, the hedgehog character was conceived in black and white, existing in a world reminiscent of early 20th-century cartoons.

These pioneering movies are very poetic, despite (or perhaps because of!) their clumsiness and technical foibles. They're the total opposite of the technological prowess of today's computers, which have annihilated the difference between the real and the virtual. I love the idea of giving this kind of image to children. For many of them, it will be their first time.

As for the character herself, she was there from the start. I imagined Nina spending time with an imaginary friend, someone who she shares her most secret thoughts to. This also shows the strength of her imagination. To cope with the real world, being able to imagine and escape are essential. It's like taking a deep breath before diving underwater.

Jean-Loup Felicioli: Old American cartoons filled me with wonder as a child, especially animation from the 20s and 30s. I was inspired by the Mickey Mouse





character, created by Ub Iwerks, for the hedgehog character.

It was an opportunity to help children discover or re-discover what I liked so much about the style of that period. I like how it contrasts with our more realistic world. It's there, but it doesn't quite fit in. I think this captures the idea that he's a product of the little girl's mind, and therefore imaginary.

This is your first digital film: what impact has digital technology had on your creative style and methods?

Alain Gagnol: Digital technology is a tool in the same way as a pencil. It's not a magical instrument that does everything for us. In our case, we use the drawing tablet like a sheet of paper. In other words, each drawing is done by hand, using a stylus. The computer isn't involved in creating or animating the graphics. Some things are done by computer, such as rain and lighting

effects, but most of the film is still done by hand.

Contrary to what a lot of people think, computer technology doesn't make things go any faster. Computers are more practical than the sheet of paper, saving time and energy when it comes to correcting, adjusting a trajectory or modifying a drawing. There's no need to sharpen pencils, wear out erasers or to film sheet after sheet to check your work. But the basis of animation remains the quality of the drawing and, if you want to achieve sensitive, subtle movement, you still need the same time amount of time and skills.

Jean-Loup Felicioli: I gave up working on paper for two reasons. Firstly, I had the feeling, after more than thirty years of rubbing chalk on my sheets, that I'd reached the end of a technique and could no longer keep evolving. It became important for me to explore something else. What's more, going through the scanning process, which is needed to transform the drawing into digital file, takes an enormous amount of time and leads to

a loss of quality in terms of color and texture. So, quite naturally, and to keep up with the times, I turned to all-digital techniques.

I tried to find in it what I had first liked about working with pastels, with the various tools provided by drawing software. We made two short films on computers, just to be on the safe side, before launching ourselves into a full-length feature.

Secondly, working on a tablet is faster and cheaper. It's getting harder and harder to find the funds to make a feature-length animated film, and they're also getting smaller and smaller, which is why we have to rethink the way we make them. On paper, I had to make color models for the set designers, which took up a lot of my time and prevented me from making sets myself. I'd do about thirty at most per film. With digital technology, I made around 300 key sets – out of a total of 1,000 – which served as color models for the decor team.

What cinematographic and artistic references did you draw on for this project?

Alain Gagnol: I don't have any specific references for this film. As time goes by, I realize that my references are always more or less the same. It goes without saying that

I do discover other films, other books, but what's most deeply rooted in me is always what comes out in the end. I've never recovered from the dazzling experience of seeing Charles Laughton's "The Night of the Hunter" for the first time as a teenager. This film is often with me in a more or less visible way in what I write. In it, we see animals in the forest, children threatened by an adult for money. But it's not something that I've thought about beforehand when I write. It's only after that I realize that it's cropped up once again.

Jean-Loup Felicioli: I've been creating and supervising the graphics for the films we make for a long time now, and I think I've become my own reference point over time, absorbing the various influences of comics and painting that initially gave me the desire to create.

The social context in which the film is set plays a major role in the script. Was it your intention to make a more realistic film?

Alain Gagnol: I wouldn't put it quite like that, but maybe it's because I have a rather negative image of that sort of thing. I'm not very interested in realism in cinema. There are exceptions, of course, but in my case, the cinema that excites me the most is practically the opposite of that. The films that have impressed me the most have a scope that transcends what you might call realism: Fellini, Coppola, Leone...

On the other hand, I think it's very important to talk to children about real things. It would be wrong to think that children are unaffected by current events or unaware of the difficulties their parents are going through. I feel that seeing these elements in a story aimed at them will help them to understand them better, and not suffer from them as much. The film is realistic from that point of view, But it still has characters who do extraordinary things, and with an imaginary hedgehog who accompanies the heroine.



And yet fantasy, the power of imagination and innocence are still the driving forces behind the plot...

Alain Gagnol: Imagination plays a huge role in my life. After all, I spend most of my time inventing and telling stories. That's probably why I attach so much importance to the imaginary in my films.

As an only child, at a time when cell phones and computers weren't a part of our daily lives, I used my imagination to pass the time.

I'd be bored by characters who didn't have a rich inner life. Nina and Mehdi are active dreamers. They always act with good intentions, even if it means taking risks. Living in a difficult world, in an unforgiving setting, especially to the most fragile, these two children find in their ability to dream the strength to face it.

What do Audrey Tautou and Guillaume Canet bring to the parents' characters?

Alain Gagnol: What actors bring is considerable and always surprising: they transform a text into emotions. Comedy is a fragile art that fascinates me. Their work, combined with the animators', creates a special alchemy that, on screen, makes viewers forget that what they're watching are cartoons.

In the case of Audrey Tautou and Guillaume Canet, they make Nina's parents really come alive in the story. They bring a personal, intimate universe to the table, which comes through in the inflections of their voices. Voice recording is a special moment in the making of a cartoon because, compared with other stages, it's very quick. In just a few days, we have all the film's dialogue, whereas the images take several years to produce.

How do you write dialogue for children's characters, and how did you direct these young actors?

Alain Gagnol: The only thing that counts when writing dialogue is trying to find the truth in the character. I don't write thinking it's about a child, an adult or a hedgehog. My aim is to be sincere with the character, to understand him or her and to make him or her experience what he or she feels. There are things we

say without thinking, things we'd like to say, things we shouldn't say, and so on. From this point of view, children are no different from adults.

We were fortunate enough to work with Marie Bureau for casting and directing. She was able to guide the young actors and find the naturalness in their dialogues. Her way of working is remarkably accurate and effective. Nina and Mehdi's characters have become much richer and more believable thanks to Marie.

Jean-Loup Felicioli: Recording the children's voices was a real pleasure. We worked with a casting director who has a real talent for finding the right voices and bringing out the best in actors. It's a great comfort for the directors to have access to an outsider's perspective, which leads them to realize very quickly what works and what doesn't.

The music is composed by Serge Besset, who has worked with you for many years. What role does music play in your films, and in this one in particular?

Alain Gagnol: It's a truism, but always worth remembering: in cinema, what you hear is as important as what you see. I pay a great deal of attention to the rhythm of the soundtrack, the interplay between dialogue and sound effects, the mood of a sequence. Music has a special place here. I'm always impressed by the emotional power it conveys at a given moment. Serge Besset is a specialist in animated film music. He knows perfectly how to follow the contours of a scene to place his musical elements in the right places. He has a tremendous ability to put himself at the service of a story, and his music has a romantic quality that breathes life into the film.

Jean-Loup Felicioli: Serge Besset has worked on all our films, without exception. So, he knows us well and knows what kind of music we like. He's very talented and listens carefully to the intentions we have for each sequence. The music reveals or underlines the emotions felt by the characters. Images, however beautiful, don't convey emotion as directly; it's more intellectual. Only music has that immediacy that makes us vibrate instinctively.



Your previous films take place in very large cities. Here, you explore an abundant natural world. Is this a new aspect of your cinema?

Alain Gagnol: Yes, it was a great novelty for us! With these new sets, Jean-Loup brings nature to life in a truly impressive way. His work on color and light, which has always been his great strength, becomes even more special, more spectacular, in this context. I came up with the story with three main locations in mind: the house, the forest and the factory. The children are constantly going between these three worlds. The forest is all the more important as it lies between two poles: nature is a place of transition between childhood and adolescence, between dream and reality.

Jean-Loup Felicioli: This forest setting was a first for me; it was a challenge, because I'm much more at ease with depictions of cities or interiors. Frankly, I

wouldn't have done it if I'd stayed on paper. Chalk, even sharpened, is still less precise. In the best-case scenario, I'd have ended up with something approaching impressionism, and that wasn't what I wanted. With the computer, I was able to maintain how precise the lines were, despite the abundant vegetation. What's more, I've created an image bank of drawings of trees, plants, grasses and flowers, which could be layered over each other. I use them a bit like a photo montage: the work then lies in harmoniously bringing all the elements together.



The authors' biographies

Alain Gagnol studied animation, illustration and comics at the Émile Cohl school in Lyon, then worked as an animator in Valence. He also writes detective novels published by Gallimard, Cherche Midi and Le Passeur.

Jean-Loup Felicioli studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Annecy, Strasbourg, Perpignan and Valence, before joining Alain Gagnol in Valence. He also writes children's books.

Together, they made several short films before releasing their Oscar-nominated debut feature, "A cat in Paris", in 2010, then Phantom Boy in 2015.

The directors' filmography

The Egotist, short film, 1995

Les Tragédies minuscules, animated serie, 1998

Le Nez à la fenêtre, short film, 2001

The Corridor, short film, 2005

Mauvais temps, short film, 2006

A Cat in Paris, feature, 2010

One Hell of a Plan, short film, 2015

Phantom Boy, feature, 2015

Nina and the hedgehog's secret, feature, 2023



with the voices of

Audrey Tautou	Camille
Guillaume Canet	Vincent
Loan Longchamp	Nina
Keanu Peyran	Mehdi
Guillaume Bats	The hedgehog
Patrick Ridremont	Lupin
Saabo Balde	Sami
Hugues Boucher	Gustavo
Julie Carli	Madame Kovacs
Eve Lorrain	Nina, kid
Noé Chabbat	Mehdi, kid
Nada El Beskani	Nadia
Saeed Mirzaei Fard	Yassine



Artistic and technical team

Screenwriter	Alain Gagnol
Graphic designer	Jean-Loup Felicioli
Artistic voice manager	Marie Bureau
Storyboard	Alain Gagnol and Jean-Loup Felicioli
Editor	Sylvie Perrin
Sound editor	Bruno Seznec
Mixing	Michel Schillings
Production manager	François Bernard, Anna Leterq
Artistic image manager	Alain Gagnol and Jean-Loup Felicioli
Technical manager	Benoît Razy
Music	Serge Besset
Produced by	Jérôme Duc-Maugé, Pierre Urbain, David Mouraire





60 years of cinema

In 2023, Les Films du Losange celebrates its 60th anniversary. Throughout the years, from the French New Wave until today, with three Palme d'Or awards in Cannes, one Academy Award, and over sixty international awards, the Paris-based company has been a key player in the history of cinema. It will continue to promote a director-oriented collection of over 300 films around the world. Founded by Barbet Schroeder and Eric Rohmer in the 1960s, Les Films du Losange is the oldest French independent company still in operation and remains connected to the best of cinema today. Since Charles Gillibert and Alexis Dantec took over the company, the journey continues with the same loyalty and commitment to filmmakers.