

Isabelle Huppert

Hafsia Herzi

# VISITING HOURS









# In conversation with Patricia Mazuy

I'd like to start with the simplest and most enigmatic thing of all. Your new film is called Visiting hours, even though the story is about two women, neither of whom is locked up. Their husbands are held in the city's prison, but they are not. Why this choice?

Who is the prisoner of Bordeaux? That is the question! At one point, the film was called *The Prisoners*. But we had the impression that we'd seen it all before. On the other hand, in the singular form, the title has something romantic and melodramatic about it, an overture to fables and fairy tales. Mina and Alma are free, of course, but their whole lives are in prison.

Was that the original idea, two women who, while on the outside, live as if they were on the inside-Alma going so far as to refer to Mina as her cellmate?

Yes, and Mina also refers to Alma as her cellmate! The idea came from Pierre Courrège in 2012. The film was originally meant to be his own. His intention was to make

a social film about women in reception centres and visiting rooms: those who, as wives, sisters, mothers, or daughters of inmates, spend part of their lives in prison, and therefore also spend a lot of their time on the side, on a train, nowhere... These were strong starting points. Pierre Courrège and François Bégaudeau-with whom Pierre had written *The Statesman* (2016)-wrote a script and spent several years trying to get the film made, but to no avail. The project was proposed to me at the beginning of 2019 by Ivan Taïeb, a friend of producer Xavier Plèche.

In their script, the two female characters, the rich and the poor, the white and the Arab, already existed. They already had strong and even funny dialogues, irrigated by class relations. I reworked it in collaboration with Bégaudeau. Very early on, I wanted to find a metaphor for the liberation of two women, each trapped in a particular life. Alma and Mina become porous to each other. Mina's arrival in Alma's big house and solitary life



catalyses Alma's awareness of her miserable life amid the gilding and flowers. A reversed metaphor for love, with the ladies outside and the husbands in prison.

#### Were you familiar with the prison environment?

Not at all. I discovered the reception centres, the areas next to the prisons. The premises, the waiting, the women amongst themselves... And while I had to wait to get permission to shoot and even to make location scouting visits, I learned a lot watching Stéphane Mercurio's films. They really helped me. Then, with Marlène Popovic in charge of open auditions, we found a group of women who had lived or were living the life of a prison wife. Then, with Any Mendieta, an actress friend of ours, we worked on getting to grips with what filming is all about. A small group, real encounters.

What's more, I didn't really know either the upper-middle classes in the provinces or the suburbs 'in the flesh'-

which was tricky for a film that shouldn't be afraid of naturalism. What I know are farmers and shopkeepers. So, even though it's always a good thing to face the unknown, filming Alma and Mina, this city, Bordeaux... was as foreign to me as filming at the North Pole. When Alice Girard took over the film to produce it, I spoke to her about it, she understood, and I was able to spend some time in Bordeaux, working with the women from the associations, and thinking things over. Émilie Deleuze helped me a great deal to refocus on the final stretch of the script when I had to familiarize myself with the practicalities of production constraints and stay on course at the same time. From my point of view, what's important is the paradox of the project. Its ability, through fiction, to speak to us about human relationships, to draw us into a film that I didn't want to be a film about victims. but about heroines.

### When did the filming take place?

Between 16 October and 2 December 2023. Thirty-two days. That's not much time, not to mention the fact that it rained non-stop. We'd set the shots in between showers. It was a complicated shoot. Among other difficulties, I couldn't film at the Bordeaux prison, which was too decrepit and overcrowded. I couldn't go there for security reasons because I wanted a modern prison on the edge of town, a prison in no-man's-land, as modern detention centres often are. The reception centre we can see on the outside is in Mont-de-Marsan. The inside has been rebuilt as a fake studio in a community centre. For the visiting rooms, we could only shoot on Mondays,





when there are no visitors... It was all quite acrobatic in terms of logistics.

# Mina is played by Hafsia Herzi and Alma by Isabelle Huppert. How did you choose them?

I've known Isabelle Huppert since *The King's Daughters* (1999). She is a tremendous actress. Her character, Alma, is a heroine full of flaws and hesitations, and at the same time absolutely generous and courageous, even though she is perched above the emptiness of her life, locked up in her solitude... Not unlike Isabelle in real life. I was very moved and delighted that she wanted to take on

this role. Of course, I knew Hafsia Herzi from *The Secret* of the Grain and from her subsequent films, but it was with her first film as a director, *You Deserve a Lover*, that I was keen to offer her a role.

The contrast between them seemed important to me. I wanted Hafsia to appear as the opposite of Isabelle. I asked Hafsia to gain weight to strengthen the opposition. A few more pounds gave her good cheeks, and something sublime in the oval of her face. I had a problem with her long hair, which was sumptuous, but I couldn't see it in the duo to come... After many indescribable attempts, we finally found the hairstyle that would make her look

taller, this chignon of plaits stuck over her head. It opened her eyes and put her in a mix of fairy tale and presentday reality. The film had found its princess.

### Did Hafsia Herzi and Isabelle Huppert know each other before working with you?

Yes, at least for having appeared together in André Téchiné's new film *My New Friends*.

I had never made a film so tenuous, so psychological, so feminine. One house, two women talking, a social background, almost no exteriors, no great horizons... Although I was afraid of that, it's always a good thing to venture where you've never been before. The balance of the characters and the strength of the moments of friendship between them is an essential element; it was the crux of the film. With Mathilde Muyard (the editor on my films since Basse Normandie!), we made sure that there was a constant balancing act between their characters, and that even in the scenes where they weren't together, we never lost sight of either of them. It's all about the duo. It really is a film about actresses!

# What do you think is at stake between the two characters? Friendship, a bond, an occasional alliance?

When you go to the cinema, you want to see a strong story. And these two women are about to share a very strong story together, one that will leave its mark on them, even after the end. They are obviously very different. And among their differences, one in particular caught my eye. Time. Mina doesn't have any, she has to

react to situations all the time, whereas Alma has all the time in the world. A deep, enormous, almost incongruous friendship develops between them. It's almost like a love story. The viewer has to be able to believe it; the film deals with reality as scenes happen. For instance, at their first dinner together, something happens immediately, embodying this unlikely encounter. When Alma gestures wildly about people not daring to ask her why her husband is in prison, Mina suddenly finds her very funny. As though in real time, we can see the birth, the possibility of recognition and strong friendship. Isabelle is incredible in this scene, bringing this moment of comedy to life. And Mina, who is quite a dark character, becomes brighter.

### Visiting hours is a melodrama as well as a comedy.

I thought a lot about Italian comedy. We know that Isabelle is also great at comedy. Before the shoot, I told her about an extraordinary film by Marco Ferreri, *Break Up (The Man with the Balloons)* (1965). It's about a toy company CEO, played by Marcello Mastroianni, who receives a balloon salesman in his office and then goes mad trying to calculate the time it takes for the balloons to deflate. A deeply depressed character, by the way! I thought a lot about him for Alma. This film helped me! The precision, the candour, the class allegiance, the obsession but also the absence, the madness... Another Ferreri film that influenced me was *The Story of Piera* (1983), in which Hannah Schygulla plays a character on the verge of madness who is totally out of sorts but gentle and relaxed. In this film Isabelle, who plays





the daughter of Hannah Schygulla and Mastroianni, is also absolutely fantastic, a bit like Mina who reacts to concrete situations. It's a thrilling reversal of situation. The balloons in the scene with the children are a tribute to Ferreri.

For Mina too, I sometimes thought of Italian comedy. Its liveliness and vitality. Sometimes I've said to Hafsia:

'Think of Mastro, go for it.' But at other times, even more than a character from an Italian film, I see Mina as a burlesque character out of a Boris Barnet film. That's why it's so important for her to be shapely, physical, sometimes a beautiful princess and sometimes—when she's working in the laundry, for example—much more imposing.

# The class relation between Mina and Alma is obvious, yet there is no real conflict between them.

This relation is blindingly obvious, so there's no need to put it into words. When we see Alma in her huge house, we immediately understand that she's at home there; Mina is not. Even the children appear to be surplus to requirements. They're not from 'this house', they're not from 'this world,' they're 'settled,' in transit. The world around Alma is pleasant and depressing. And self-centred, with no awareness of what exists outside. This is evident when Alma entertains friends-these representatives of the provincial bourgeoisie portrayed in a singular way, like in some late Buñuel films or the French plantation in Apocalypse Now-during an outlandish sequence over a cheesecake that shows us even more how much Alma is sinking. But I especially wanted to tell a story of mutual liberation. Alma is catalysed by Mina, so to speak, and Mina, in return, gains in stature. Mina, who believes in love, thinks that Alma is living in delusion and that she must accept to live in the real world. She thinks that Alma's life may become impossible when her husband is released from prison, even if she pretends to be happy about it. She's going



to save Alma and save herself. The fact remains that it's easier to free yourself when you're rich than when you're poor. In the end, Mina returns to the visiting room. She wears no new clothes, her life remains the same, while Alma has taken to the road with her paintings...

One of the most astonishing moments in the film is when

### Alma, after Mina has cleaned her, strokes her gas cooker.

This woman is probably looking at her gas cooker for the first time in her life! And she's doing it thanks to Mina. It's an erotic moment I thought of in preparation. I wanted the scene to be more than just technical-the housework, the children going to bed... I like the fact

that we start with the class struggle and end up with this contact, at least mental, between the two women.

# This warmth is in fact present right from the opening, in the florist's shop, particularly with the inverted image of the flowers in the ceiling.

I fell in love with this ceiling of strange mirrors. All summer long in Bordeaux, I would make sure that the florist's was open and not doing any renovation work! This floating prologue allows us to get to know Alma while distancing ourselves from the Isabelle Huppert we know.

### And you immediately put the emphasis on colour.

Absolutely. Colour is crucial. Particularly in Alma's home, which combines a carnal side, a warm texture, and contradictory impressions of opulence and solitude. Her house is all the sadder for being full of flowers. With cinematographer Simon Beaufils and production designer Dorian Maloine, we spent a lot of time working on the colours, to create a sensual, gourmand velvet. With sound editor Jean Mallet, we treated the set like a pharaoh's vault. Almost nothing at first, then a sound that gradually comes to life. Not much, but then cars, birds... The pleasure of colour in *Visiting hours* is really important, musical. Lots of blue, but also yellow and red in the visiting rooms, and a Minnelli feel at Alma's, with this big red wall that plays a certain role.

# It was also at the florist's that the musical motif first appeared.

Amine Bouhafa composed the music. I knew him from



his work on *Timbuktu* and on an Egyptian series that I had seen on Netflix-back when I was a subscriber!Secret of the Nile, the story of a chic hotel on the Aswan Dam, in which actors don't play the French way and get straight to the point. I loved it!

When I met Amine, I asked him to write a song, a bit like John Williams did for *The Long Goodbye*, one of

my favourite films. In any case, the idea was to have a theme that, although we can only hear it from time to time, would permeate the film. At the florist's, we hear a whistle. A bit of the Western perhaps, the great horizons... We played this music while we were shooting the scene, and it helped Isabelle a lot, better than my misleading indications about floating! Alma moves around, dances

a little, sways, bends down... Then we hear a bit of the song that Alma switches off as she gets out of her car. We'll hear this nostalgic melancholy song again in its entirety during the end credits.

# And then there are the supporting characters. They are all very surprising, starting with Yacine, Mina's husband's accomplice, who is always pestering and tormenting her.

Yacine is played by William Edimo. I don't think he'd ever acted in a film before. I really like him. Tatiana Vialle, the casting director, knew him from the theatre. He's in Jean-Christophe Folly's next play. Yacine is a very complex character. I didn't want a gangster-looking guy who would frighten Mina by acting tough.

What's frightening about Yacine is his fragility. I treated him like a character in a William Faulkner novel. Yacine is shattered by the death of his brother. He is broken, ravaged by weakness. And that's what makes him both disturbing and potentially dangerous.

#### What about the husbands, Christopher and Nasser?

Christopher is played by Magne-Håvard Brekke, another theatre actor. Tatiana introduced me to him. I immediately thought that he and Isabelle would be a great match. Magne lives in Paris but works a lot in Germany. He's a star of German theatre. In the 1980s, he was part of Frank Castorf's first shows, and today he plays a lot for Christoph Marthaler. Nasser, Mina's husband, is also played by a great theatre actor, Lionel Dray. He played a supporting role in my film *Of Women and Horses*. At the



time, I didn't know him from the theatre, and ever since I saw him on stage with Sylvain Creuzevault, Jeanne Candel, or Samuel Achache, I've always looked for the opportunity to work with him again.

# Mina's two children are treated in a highly original way, hardly as characters at all.

I had Hafsia come to Bordeaux to meet them, after working with six children for two months, to really decide on the siblings. I didn't treat them as characters but rather, in my mind at least, like the pieces of treasure in Robert Aldrich's western *Vera Cruz*: you have to be very careful with them and above all not lose them.

### Time management is special here. Why is that?

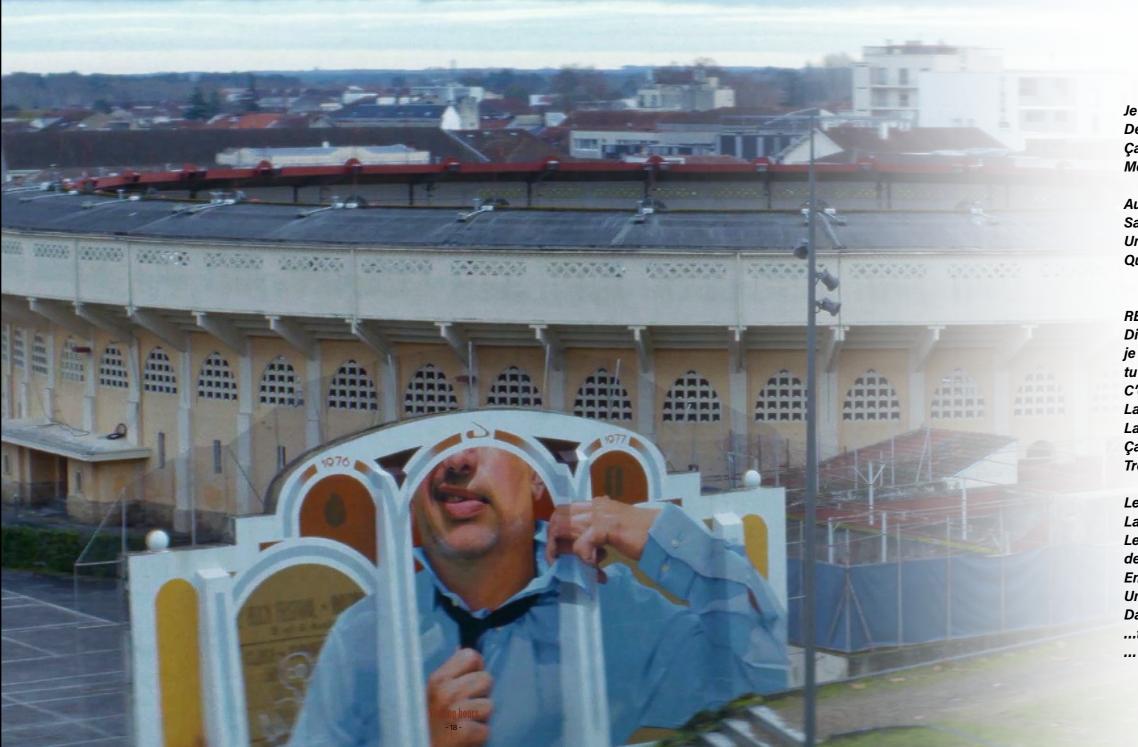
The film is both naturalistic and melodramatic. We have the interwoven portraits of these two very different women who share an unlikely but very powerful moment of friendship. At the heart of the film, the two juxtaposed sequences in the visiting room are like the eye of the storm, rhythmically, before the wave in the second part. And in this second part, I was looking for the vertigo, the feeling of time collapsing, that Alma's character experiences. It was this collapse of time that I wanted to work on.

### At the end, the two women part, and Alma leaves Mina a farewell message. But Mina, having thrown away her phone, cannot hear it. Why?

I wanted this message to be both strong and absolutely poetic, just as Alma feels when she sets sail. I asked the young poet Pierre Butic to write the words of the message.

To answer your question, it's powerful in terms of emotion that this message remains lingering. The story between these two women is over. But it's taking their story seriously to leave it tense. To be in a vacuum. What has just taken place is like a romantic break-up in a melodrama. I think that sums it up. It's the first time that in one of my films, without lapsing into sentimentality, I've tried to work with emotion as a material. To explore gentleness. I'd never done that before, and it's thanks to Isabelle and Hafsia that we've been able to follow that lead.

Interview by Emmanuel Burdeau,
April 2024



Je pleure de te voir Des larm' de joie Ça remplit une rivière Mes larm' de joie

Authentique romantique Sans l'amour, t'es rien Une chanson magnétique Quel beau va et vient

REFRAIN:
Dis moi tu mens
je sens tu mens!
tu veux serment heureux
C'est la peur qui t'agite!
La peur qui file
La fausse colère
Ça me ravit
Trop belle erreur!

Le cul par terre
La haine au sol
Les bras tendus poussent le plafond
des tunnels où tu danses!
En silence un beau salut
Un saut très haut,
Dans mes bras...
...tu danseras
... sans voir le jour... et tu rieras...

J'ai largué les amarres Très tard, jubilatoire! Authentique romantique Jamais colérique

Chante et Sauve ta peau Je te crie 'plonge dans l'eau' Chaque jour chaque nuit Tu me vois et tu ris

Elle a menti elle a trahi
Et moi je dis : c'est mon amie
Elle a menti et moi je ris
Je ris pour toute la vie
Ma vie si noire, les soirs
Je l'ai laissée tomber
Ton regard nénuphar
Je l'ai enfin retrouvé...

REFRAIN

Paradis ou l'enfer Ça va te plaire Tu t'enfuis et tu ris Moi je te suis... Un match de boxe avec toi C'est ma vie dans tes bras N'éteins pas ton amour Sinon, tu nous tueras

# Crew

Script Pierre Courrège, François Begaudeau and Patricia Mazuy with the collaboration of Emilie Deleuze- Produced by Alice Girard and Xavier Plèche - DOP Simon Beaufils - Editing Mathilde Muyard - Lma - Original music Amine Bouhafa - Sound François Boudet, Jean Mallet, Nathalie Vidal - Set design Dorian Maloine - Costume Caroline Spieth - Stage direction Nicolas Guilleminot - Cast Tatiana Vialle - Script Anaïs Sergeant - Make-up Odile Fourquin, Thi Loan Nguyen - Hair styling Christine Paquier, Fréderic Souquet - Lights Sophie Lelou - Camera Agathe Dercourt - Machinery Léo Stritt - Production manager Rémy Jantin - Color grading Magalie Leonard for Chromashaper - Music supervisor Thibault Deboaisne for Sound Division - Production management Sacha Guillaume-Bourbault - ADP - Post-production management Mélanie Karlin - A Rectangle Productions, Picseyes, Arte France Cinéma, Les Films du Camélia coproduction - With the support of Canal+ - With the participation of Ciné + - With the participation of Arte France - In association with Les Films De Pierre, Les Films Velvet, Les Films Du Worso, Srab Films - With the participation of Les Films du Losange - With the support of Département de la Gironde and Département des Landes - In partnership with CNC - Developed with the support of Cofinova Développement 19 - French distribution and International Sales Les Films Du Losange

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## Cast

Isabelle HUPPERT: Alma - Hafsia HERZI: Mina - Noor ELSARI: Noor - Jean GUERRE SOUYE: Julien William EDIMO: Yacine - Jana BITTNEROVA: Cristina - Magne HAVARD BREKKE: Christopher - Lionel DRAY: Nasser - Robert PLAGNOL: Pierre Larrigade - Julia VIVONI: Nelly - Lola JEHL: Anne-Lise - Sava LOLOV: Dragger n°1 - Frédéric NOAILLE: Dragger n°2 - Florentina IENACHESCU: Dry cleaning manager Céline CHLEBOWSKY: Céline - Laetitia PERSICK: Laetitia - Lamya BOUTADIZ: Neighbor Imène - Farida EL BERMILE: Female sister - Soraya GHALEM: Woman in line - Imen HADJERSI: Imen - Sandro DOS RUIS: Young visitor 1st time - Any MENDIETA: Any - Marianne AUZIMOUR: Sophie - Erysia HESOL: Reception supervisor n°1 - François NUYTTENS: Linen keeper n°1 - Agathe LOUVEL: Supervisor n°2 - Elaid ELSARI: Visiting room supervisor - Isabelle SOLAS: Supervisor computer failure - Nathalie N'SONGAN: School Director - Bénedicte BATIFOLIER: Teacher - Frédéric SOUQUET: Hairdresser - Daniel GERINO: Hervé - Béatrice MAZE-CENSIER: Eugénie - Emmanuelle GERINO: Emmanuelle - Olivier CAUBET: Jean-Paul - Delphine GLEIZE: Delphine - Achille REGGIANI: Florist

Visiting hours

Visiting hours

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# Isabelle Huppert

(Selective filmography)

Visiting hours, Patricia Mazuy • The Sitting Duck, Jean-Paul Salomé • The Crime is Mine, François Ozon · Sidonie in Japan, Élise Girard · Eo, Jerzy Skolimowski · Mrs Harris Goes To Paris. Harris, Anthony Fabian · About Joan, Laurent Larivière · Mama Weed, Jean-Paul Salomé · Eva, Benoit Jacquot • Right Here Right Now, Pascal Bonitzer • Things to Come, Mia Hansen- Løve • Elle, Paul Verhoeven (Cesar Award for Best Actress, Golden Globe Award for Best Actress in Motion Picture -Drama, Nominated for Best Actress at the Academy Awards, Spirit Award for Best Actress, Gotham Award for Best Actress) - Louder Than Bombs, Joachim Trier - Valley of love, Guillaume Nicloux -Amour, Michael Haneke • In Another country, Hong Sang-Soo • White Material, Claire Denis - Gabrielle, Patrice Chéreau (Special Golden Lion of Venice Film Festival's Jury for the film and her entire career) • Time of the Wolf, Michael Haneke • 8 Women, François Ozon (Collective Silver Bear for the eight actresses at Berlinale, Collective European Award for the eight actresses) • The Piano Teacher, Michael Haneke (European Award for Best Actress, Best Actress at Cannes Film Festival 2001) • The King's Daughter, Patricia Mazuy • The School of Flesh, Benoit Jacquot • A Judgement in Stone, Claude Chabrol (Cesar Award for Best Actress, Best Actress at Venice Film Festival) • The Separation, Christian Vincent • Madame Bovary, Claude Chabrol (Best Actress at Moscow Festival) • Story of Women, Claude Chabrol (Best Actress at Moscow Festival) • Clean State, Bertrand Tavernier • Loulou, Maurice Pialat • Heaven's Gate, Michael Cimino • Violette, Claude Chabrol (Best Actress at Cannes Film Festival) • The Lacemaker, Claude Goretta (BAFTA for Best Actress)

# Hafsia Herzi

Visiting Hours, Patricia Mazuy • My New Friends, André Téchiné • Borgo, Stéphane Demoustier • The Gravity, Cédric Ido • The Rapture, Iris Kaltenbäck • Three Nights a Week, Florent Gouëlou • Madame Claude, Sylvie Verheyde • Good Mother, Hafsia Herzi • Singing Jailbirds, Etienne Comar • Sisters, Yamina Benguigui • You Deserve a Lover, Hafsia Herzi • Pygmalionnes, Quentin Delcourt • Mektoub My Love : Intermezzo, Abdellatif Kechiche • Féminin plurielles, Sébastien Bailly • Persona Non Grata, Roschdy Zem • Of Skin and Men, Mehdi Ben Attia • Black Tide, Erick Zonca • Mektoub My Love : Canto Uno, Abdellatif Kechiche • Superlovers, Guilhem Amesland • Certified Halal, Mahmoud Zemmouri Sex Doll, Sylvie Verheyde • War Story, Mark Jackson • By accident, Camille Fontaine • Exit Marrakech, Caroline Link • The Marchers de Nabil Ben Yadir • On My Way de Emmanuelle Bercot • The Bag of Flour, Kadija Leclere • Ma compagne de nuit de Isabelle Brocard • The Source, Radu Mihaileanu • Jimmy Rivière, Teddy Lussi-Modeste • For Djamila, Caroline Huppert • Inheritance, Hiam Abbass • House of Tolerance, Bertrand Bonello • Joseph and the Girl, Xavier de Choudens • The King of Escape, Alain Guiraudie • Buried Secrets, Raja Amari • A Man and His Dog, Francis Huster • Française, Souad El-Bouhati • The Secret of the Grain, Abdellatif Kechiche • Dawn of the World, Abbas Fahdel

# Patricia Mazuy

### Biography

Born in Dijon in 1960, Patricia Mazuy was a good student who wanted to go to the Louis Lumière Film School, but entered HEC Business School to satisfy the wishes of her father, a baker. There she confirmed her love of westerns and thrillers, discovered The Doors, who were already dead, and left school for Los Angeles. There she shot a short film on her salary as a babysitter and met Agnès Varda and her editor Sabine Mamou. Three years later, Mamou hired her as a trainee on *A Room in Town*, and finally, she learned about cinema. After editing *Vagabond*, she turned her attention to her first film, *Thick Skinned*. She had started writing in 1983 for Jean-François Stévenin, whose film *Passe montagne* she admired. ■

### Filmography

2024 Visiting hours2022 Saturn Bowling

018 Paul Sanchez is Back!

2011 Of Women and Horses

2004 Riding Dostoevsky

2000 The King's Daughters

1996 **La Finale** (*TV*)

1993 Travolta and Me (TV)

1991 Des taureaux et des vaches (Doc.)

1988 Thick Skinned







Photos can be downloaded at www.filmsdulosange.com