

MY FRIEND VICTORIA

A film by Jean Paul Civeyrac

An 8-year-old black child named Victoria (Keylia Achie Beguie), is taken in for a night by the wealthy, white, well-intentioned family of one of her schoolmates. The experience haunts her for years to come, shaping her desires and offering a mirage of privilege that she dreams of but finds impossible to attain. As an adult (beautifully played by newcomer Guslagie Malanda), she drifts from job to job, but then unexpectedly reconnects with the family's youngest son (Pierre Andrau) in an encounter that will reshape her life yet again. Adapting Nobel laureate Doris Lessing's story "Victoria and the Staveney's," Civeyrac relocates the story from London to Paris to craft a probing and intimate look at the politics of race and class identity. Veteran actors Catherine Mouchet (*Thérèse, Late August, Early September*) and Pascal Greggory (*Pauline at the Beach, Queen Margot, Gabrielle* and others) round out the cast.

Jean-Paul Civeyrac (born 1964) made his first feature, *Neither Eve Nor Adam* in 1996; it was presented at the Venice Film Festival. His subsequent films have been screened in major festivals around the world, including Cannes, Berlin, Locarno, Toronto, Buenos Aires, London, Mar del Plata, Rotterdam and New York. Among his most acclaimed work are *All the Fine Promises* (2003, winner of the Prix Jean Vigo), *Through the Forest* (2005, presented at the Toronto and New York Film Festivals) and *Young Girls in Black* (2010, presented in the Directors Fortnight at Cannes). For many years he also taught at France's leading film school, Fémis. MY FRIEND VICTORIA is his eighth feature.

A conversation between Jean Paul Civeyrac and Jean Douchet about *My Friend Victoria*

How did you get the idea for this film?

Philippe Martin, the producer, suggested that I read *Victoria and the Staveney*s by Doris Lessing. I found the subject very powerful and the story astounding in its discreetly virtuoso manner of conjuring up a great many ideas, actions and contradictions within simple situations. I also liked the possibility of a totally different approach to my previous film, entirely focused on two girls plunged into a violent and funereal atmosphere. *My Friend Victoria* could be gentler and more delicate, with a novel-like charm, and its subject allowed me to present a broader view of society, to create characters from different social classes, etc.

The interesting thing about the novelistic aspect of the film is that Victoria does not seem involved in the world's conflicts. Because she knows that she is going to lose from the outset and is not sensitive to everything going on around her, it's as if, willingly or not, she does not let the outside world in.

Yes. Moreover, she is so sure that she will lose that her only struggle will be to give her daughter Marie the opportunity for a better life than hers - hoping that society will give her a warmer welcome and that she will also be better equipped to cope. A painful undertaking as Victoria knows that a successful outcome could drive a wedge between her and her daughter.

In this story, everything is melodramatic and, at the same time, the film rejects that. The melodramatic aspect lies in the conflict between the individual and society. Yet Victoria's way of existing in the world distances her from this conflict. Similarly, it is not the sentimental aspect of melodrama that is worked on here but solely the *internalized sensitivity* of a character.

Throughout the film, Victoria lives so much within the folds of her "internalized sensitivity", cut off from the world and herself, that she hardly seems anchored to

the ground and almost floats through life. It seems to me that the film's political dimension is also expressed in this way, in this absence from the world and oneself that appears like an unformulated rejection. Hence, for example, the scenes of sleepwalking, or what Victoria's friend Fanny says about her in the voice-over: *"She herself probably did not really understand what drove her to act in such a way, etc."*

You shoot a great deal in close-up. Very few characters appear in full figure shots. And, when they do, they are above all in the sequence with the white family where, indeed, people are down to earth and at home.

Yes, this family fits in better with the world than Victoria does. But what I'm mostly trying to achieve is to avoid making the close-ups too overwhelming and excessive, to avoid them becoming a form of emotional blackmail. Otherwise, I have the impression that we see less of the characters and the people filmed than the director's desire to hunt down and trap something in a facial expression, rather than let it occur freely. These close-ups attempt to bring out something of the mystery of an inner life, while allowing the audience's gaze to move freely, while allowing its sensitivity to interact with that of the characters - and also with mine.

A white audience is confronted with the duplicity of a supposedly tolerant society: from the outset, Victoria cannot become integrated.

The fact that she is from a Christian background shows that the problem is not religious - as some people try to make us believe every day - but rather the colour of her skin, the fact that Victoria is black. However, I have not tried to make a "militant" film that violently forces the audience to confront a dramatic situation, but rather to invite them, through a story that I hope is moving, to have an intimate understanding of what is at stake between the characters. The film is of course not neutral, it has a point of view, but it does not impose any obligations on its audience. It is meant to describe a situation in which all the characters play their parts with more or less self-awareness, distance and freedom.

We perceive a great deal of sensitivity in Victoria, yet at the same time she remains inaccessible. This makes the voice-over necessary to approach her and enter into the film...

As soon as I decided to adapt the book, I felt it needed a voice-over. Both for the reasons you state and to lose nothing of Doris Lessing's subtlety, and also for the film's "musicality". I in fact tried to compose a kind of very gentle ballad, with many variations, and I believe that the voice-over mixed with the score, the ambient sound and the actors' voices contributes greatly to this. I know that, generally, a voice-over is seen as a way of distancing the story and the characters. In a way, this is true and the film accepts that: I would like the audience to feel free to experience *My Friend Victoria* as they wish, without feeling that their sensitivity and intelligence have been taken hostage. But I also believe that a voice-over can contribute to the film's "charm": it is the voice of the storyteller who captivates his audience. Curiously, these two contradictory functions do not seem incompatible to me. In any case, I hope that they aren't here: that is one of the film's aesthetic wagers.

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Victoria GUSLAGIE MALANDA
Fanny NADIA MOUSSA
Elena CATHERINE MOUCHET
Lionel PASCAL GREGGORY
Edouard ALEXIS LORET
Thomas PIERRE ANDRAU
Diouma ELISE AKABA
Sam TONY HARRISSON
Victoria as a child KEYLIA ACHIE BEGUIE
Fanny as a child KEEMYAH OMOLONGO
Marie MAYLINA DIAGNE

Screenplay & Directed by JEAN PAUL CIVEYRAC
Produced by PHILIPPE MARTIN
Coproduced by JACQUES-HENRI & OLIVIER BRONCKART
D.O.P DAVID CHAMBILLE
Sound FRANÇOIS MEREU, STÉPHANE THIÉBAUT
Script clerk MATHILDE PROFIT
Set design BRIGITTE BRASSART
Costumes CLAIRE DUBIEN
Make up/Hairdresser PASCALE GUEGAN
Editing LOUISE NARBONI
First assistant director MARIE DOLLER
Production manager HÉLÈNE BASTIDE

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With the participation of CANAL+, CINÉ +
& CENTRE NATIONAL DU CINÉMA ET DE L'IMAGE ANIMÉE
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FÉDÉRAL BELGE & INVER INVEST
In coproduction with BELGACOM

France - 2014 - 95 mins – Color – 2.35 :1
In French with English subtitles

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