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Muriel d'Ansembourg: "I Had to Hold Onto My Voice"

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The Dutch director’s BAFTA-nominated short promised a quick follow-up. Instead, she spent 15 years fighting funders and financiers with producers Els Vandevorst and Isabella Depeweg to bring her explicit debut to the Berlinale, sparking a bidding war and a memorable Q&A on anatomical accuracy.

There's a particular kind of vindication that arrives fifteen years too late to feel entirely sweet, and Muriel d'Ansembourg knows it well. When her producers showed up unannounced at her front door with funding news for Truly Naked, the first word out of their mouths was "Congratulations!" For a second, d'Ansembourg thought they meant her birthday. "But it's not my birthday?" she replied, genuinely confused, before it clicked that they meant the funding.

"I really should mention the love I'm currently getting with this film, otherwise it sounds like such torture, " she says, laughing at how grim her own description of the process can sound. "It isn't. I'm getting a lot of love." The film traces a young man's reckoning with intimacy and shame, and it premiered at this year's Berlinale to a reception d'Ansembourg still calls one of the best audience experiences of her career.

It began as an idea in 2011. It didn't reach a screen until 2026. In between: a BAFTA nomination for her graduation short Good Night that convinced her she was, in her words, "on the right path"; a 2016 partnership with producers Els Vandevorst and Isabella Depeweg, a mother and daughter duo who would go on to fight the funding battles at her side; and years of rejection that nearly convinced her to give up entirely.

A Decade of "No"

D'Ansembourg is unusually candid about how close she came to walking away, not in one dramatic moment but in a slow accumulation of doubt that crested somewhere around the third rejection from the Dutch Film Fund. She remembers telling her producers flatly that the financiers simply didn't want this film. Vandevorst and Depeweg, who'd been through funding gauntlets before, told her to keep going. She chose to trust them. That stretch of limbo carried its own social cost. Friends would ask how the film was going, year after year, and d'Ansembourg found herself giving an answer that felt increasingly absurd to say out loud.

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"It becomes quite embarrassing when your friends say, 'How's it going?' and you're like, 'I'm still working on this movie, '" she says. The not knowing didn't just delay the film. It destabilized her sense of professional identity. If she wasn't making anything, was she still a filmmaker?
She credits the delay, paradoxically, with making Truly Naked the film it became. Developing the project largely without outside funding in its early years meant avoiding the chorus of notes and pressures that typically arrive with financing. By the time money, and opinions, entered the picture, she already knew exactly what she wanted to say.

"I do think it's very hard to hold on to your own voice... and thank God I had that time to really know what I'm saying and how I want to say it, " she says,
"because otherwise I think it would have been really difficult.

The Octopus Problem

No conversation about Truly Naked seems to end without arriving at the octopus, a scene that has apparently dominated nearly every interview d'Ansembourg has given. She tells the story with the weary affection of someone who has made peace with her own creative stubbornness.
The scene needed to register as extreme enough to justify a son's refusal to comply with his father, and d'Ansembourg wanted an image audiences hadn't already seen rendered on screen. Early readers flagged it, as early as the script stage, as something that might alienate audiences.

Funding bodies raised the same concern once they read it; the production team, separately, flagged the budget. A real octopus was ruled out on animal welfare grounds, which meant building a 65 kilo silicone octopus and layering in visual effects, which meant a three day shoot eating into time meant for other scenes, and which meant, by d'Ansembourg's own account, turning to her team mid-shoot and jokingly asking why no one had stopped her from writing the scene in the first place.

The reassuring moment came during the shoot itself, not after. Her assistant editor was assembling rushes as they filmed, including the octopus footage, to test whether it worked. A colleague wandered in mid-assembly and asked, with total sincerity, how they'd managed to film a real octopus. It calmed d'Ansembourg down, though not completely. In the edit, she and her editor kept working the same question together: how much octopus was enough to feel real, without tipping into so much that audiences would start to doubt it. She frames it as

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a shared decision rather than a disagreement they had to resolve.

One of the film's more graphic beats never made it that far. D'Ansembourg cut it herself during a writing draft, well before the cameras rolled, once she decided the film didn't need it. At the Berlinale, she says, the octopus scene landed exactly the way she'd hoped, drawing the kind of audible, full room gasp directors chase for years.

Explicit, But Not What You Think

D'Ansembourg pushed back hard against an assumption she encountered repeatedly during financing: that a script built around sexuality and the adult industry must be saturated with sex scenes. She recalls readers convinced the film was wall to wall explicit content, until she had them count the actual pages.
"It's a film about connection and intimacy and vulnerability, and that is the heart,
" she says.
Viewers will leave with a handful of indelible images, she allows, but she wants them leaving with warmth too.
The film's frankness about male nudity, visible in ways d'Ansembourg felt genuinely proud of, produced one of her favorite post screening exchanges.

There's no mother character in Truly
Naked; she's deceased before the story begins. The real comparison an audience member drew was between the father, seen nude repeatedly, and the adult actress, who also appears extensively on screen, just not in that particular anatomical way. A woman in her seventies stood up after a Q&A and asked her directly: "Why don't we get to see a clitoris while we see the father's penis several times?"
D'Ansembourg calls it a refreshingly bold question, and one she had an answer for. Showing that much, she believes, would most likely have been flagged by financiers as too explicit or unnecessary, the same calculation that shaped other choices throughout the film.

What Pawlikowski Taught Her

Asked about her mentors, d'Ansembourg answers simply: Pawel Pawlikowski, who taught her at the London Film School. One piece of guidance from him, offered while she worked on her graduation film, has stayed with her through every shoot since: never roll camera until the casting is right, no matter how much pressure builds to settle for "good enough.
" She

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applied it literally on Truly Naked, where casting stretched on for years longer than schedules wanted it to, across professional actors, first timers, and a performer who came from the adult entertainment industry.

The other lesson she absorbed from him is less about technique than temperament: every actor requires a different approach, and no amount of directing theory substitutes for adapting in the room.

What Comes Next

D'Ansembourg is already naming the thing Truly Naked didn't give her: genre. She's been telling interviewers, with some self aware reluctance about how often she's now committed to it publicly, that she wants to make a thriller, one that keeps the raw, psychologically grounded performance style she's known for but sets it inside a more conventionally suspenseful structure.
She's not abandoning her preoccupations, though. Intimacy, broadly defined, remains the territory she wants to keep exploring. What she wants to add is room for comfort alongside the depth, not a lighter film built purely for entertainment, but one willing to offer an audience moments of ease within work that still holds its weight.

Truly Naked has been called a
difficult watch by more than one viewer, and d'Ansembourg seems intrigued by a future film that lets an audience breathe a little, without asking her to abandon what she's built her name on.
For now, there's the small matter of a Berlinale bidding war, German distribution, and a dubbed language cut she's admitted she's too nervous to watch. Fifteen years in, Muriel d'Ansembourg has earned the right to look away from her own film, just this once.

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