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# CUSTODY

(Jusqu'à La Garde)

A film by Xavier Legrand  
FRANCE | 2017 | 90MIN | COLOR | DCP 4K (D-CINEMA) | 5.1  
FRENCH W/ ENGLISH SUBTITLES

Venice Competition | TIFF (Platform) | San Sebastian Pearls

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## SYNOPSIS

Miriam and Antoine Besson have divorced, and Miriam is seeking sole custody of their son Julien to protect him from a father she claims is violent. Antoine pleads his case as a scorned dad and the appointed judge rules in favor of joint custody. A hostage to the escalating conflict between his parents, Julien is pushed to the edge to prevent the worst from happening.

## INTERVIEW WITH XAVIER LEGRAND

*Like in your short film “Just Before Losing Everything”, you are dealing with a social drama, domestic violence, in a way which generates great tension for the spectator.*

Custody is built on fear. The fear inspired by a man prepared to do anything to get back together with a woman who wants to leave him to escape his violent behavior. The character of Antoine, played by Denis Ménochet, is a permanent threat for those around him. He makes everyone around him tense; he can only feel his own pain, and he would manipulate anyone, including his children. Women who have suffered domestic violence, like the one played by Léa Drucker, are always on high alert. They know that danger can surface anywhere, any time, and no one is safe. In France, a woman dies every two-and-a-half days as a result of domestic violence, and although the media talks about it, the topic remains largely taboo. Victims are afraid to come forward, neighbors and family don't say anything, because they don't want to interfere with the couple's relationship. There is heavy secrecy. I didn't want to tackle it like a current affairs subject. As in “Just Before Losing Everything”, I wanted to raise public awareness about this crisis by using the power of cinema, which has always fascinated me; that of Hitchcock, Haneke, or Chabrol, the kind of cinema which involves the spectator by playing with their intelligence and nerves.

*You also cite Night of the Hunter by Charles Laughton and The Shining by Stanley Kubrick as your main sources of inspiration to approach this subject.*

Three films guided me in the writing: *Kramer Versus Kramer*, *Night of the Hunter*, and *The Shining*. I then forgot about them during the shoot, but they helped me reflect on the themes I wanted to tackle, and to find the moods and atmospheres which my characters move through. *Kramer Versus Kramer* is a film about parental rights which had a big effect on me. For the first time, you see a woman give up exclusive custody rights to her children, and it depicts the pain of separation with terrible acuity. *Night of the Hunter* illustrates how a person can be uncompromising with children to achieve their ends. *The Shining* inspired me for the last part of my film in terms of the madness, the isolation, the terror. Domestic violence can lead to pure horror and that's what I wanted to show.

*How did you use different genres or cinematic codes – realism, social drama, suspense, thriller – and work with them to enrich different layers of your film?*

First of all, I did a lot of research. I looked into the work of a family court judge, interviewed lawyers, police officers, social workers, and even attended group therapy sessions for violent men. Such a sensitive subject requires getting as close as possible to reality without simply making a documentary, or a social drama which would in the end just tell the story of a tragic

event. By inverting the story's viewpoint, I was able to highlight the suspense in the day-to-day. I adopted a dramatic approach in which we do follow a "hero", Antoine, but from the point of view of the various obstacles he has to overcome to achieve his ends: the judge, his son and his ex-wife. As such, the spectator experiences the judge's doubts, the pressure the child is subjected to and the terror of the hunted wife in real time. I wanted to provide a political and universal reading to the topic, while immersing the spectator in the history of genre cinema (that of a monster seeking its prey), in which the suspense and tension feed the narrative and vice-versa.

*For your first feature-length film, you have made some quite firm choices of very sparse directing, notably in terms of the sound.*

Yes, there's practically no music in the film. The tension comes from the use of everyday sounds and their resonance – the echo in an apartment, the indicator on a car, a clock, an alarm. I thought about this early on, the dramatic effects of sound were already in the script. I'm not trying to inject the narrative with a fantasy element, but rather capture the noises of an anxiety-inducing reality. The same goes for the directing, I'm not looking for spectacular effects, but rather the repetition of the same framing, in places that are visited several times, to create a feeling of familiarity, and also of being closed in, to give the impression that we are entering a terrible spiral.

*What led you to explore the same theme in both your first two films?*

I already had *Custody* in mind when I made "Just Before Losing Everything". It's a subject which affects me as a citizen and which is no doubt insufficiently dealt with. My short film took me everywhere in France, sometimes abroad, where it was shown in schools to open the debate and to educate young people on this subject. I wanted to continue probing the nature of this violence; the male domination in relationships; the insanity of possessiveness; and the crimes involving the family, which forms the backdrop of many cases, a which is a subject that fascinates me. I also wanted to learn more about the distinction between the marital couple and the parental couple. Does a violent, unsuitable partner necessarily make a bad parent? How can one decide? How can one judge? I investigated this subject. I met a family court judge and I followed her work.

*You begin the film in an almost documentary style, with a scene of gripping realism in which the couple go before the judge.*

You have to bear in mind such hearings are very short – around 20 minutes, during which every- thing about the children's future is decided. The justice system considers that if the violence is aimed at a parent and not the child, there's no need to break the connection. Yet this is a very complex question, even if the child has a legitimate need to have both parents; it can crystalize the conflict and become a means of pressure, an instrument for the partner who's been distanced and who can no longer reach the other partner. The judge handles around 20 cases a day, he or she only has a few minutes to assess the situation and see that the law is respected when faced with fragile people who are often playing a role, and with lawyers who are more or less competent. I tried to convey the tension and the emotional charge of that moment by filming it with the intensity of real time, and by putting the spectator in the place of the judge. The characters are positioned on an equal footing, represented by their respective lawyers. Who is the audience going to believe? What do they see unfolding before their eyes? What kind

of argument will they be sensitive to? The spectator is plunged into uncertainty and must make their mind up. The film then shows what happens next, what the judge will never see.

*Your actors capture this fragility and emotional charge brilliantly; how did you cast them and how did you direct them?*

I wrote the part with Léa Drucker in mind. To me, she is very similar to the character of Miriam, with her blend of strength and fragility – a very feet-on-the-ground woman who never slips into pathos. She's a woman who has been through the storm and who must rebuild her life as she moves on. Léa worked a lot on her role on her own ahead of the shoot. I didn't give much psychological guidance. I just insisted that she should not act as a the victim at any point. I'd seen her in a short film in which she was in a very loving relationship with Denis Ménochet. As I think he's an excellent actor too, I wanted to see them both in a different situation, another phase of love. I worked a lot with Denis on set. We talked about the smallest details. It's a hard role which means he has to tackle violence, manipulation, and darkness head on, without the audience losing touch with his character, rejecting him and refusing to understand him. He has to get inside the skin of an unhappy man, caught up in internal conflict, who's trying to be loved but who's living in denial. Denis Ménochet is terrific for this role. He conveys this combination of robust virility and childhood pain that one often finds in men who are violent towards their partners.

*Both Julien and his sister play important parts in the film, and their roles require them to express a great deal of emotion with few words. How do you see the child's perspective, and in particular Julien's, as contributing to the film?*

The children have very little dialog because that is the very essence of the subject: In domestic violence cases, children's voices are little heard. And when they do get to speak, they are often not listened to. The story begins with the judge reading out Julien's statement in front of his parents. This opening crystallizes the central issue in the film: The marital relationship and being a parent. Julien, as the youngest, is at the center of the conflict. There are usually two distinct developments for boys who grow up in a climate of domestic violence: Either they reproduce that violence, or they develop a syndrome of hypervigilance to permanently counter it. Julien falls into the second category. He is continually on the alert, using his modest means to protect his mother. For her part, Joséphine is waiting until she's an adult. She was also raised in a climate of violence and develops behavior characteristic of teenage girls: She sees the family unit to prematurely create her own, leaving with her boyfriend Samuel right after her birthday. As such, through the children, I show the different repercussions that domestic violence can cause in the same family in a "trans-generational" way. Joséphine reproduces a family pattern, becoming a young mother just like her own mother Miriam. One can even imagine that her grandmother had already constructed this phenomenon. Several generations who seem to flee parental authority by becoming mothers themselves as soon as possible.

## **Xavier Legrand**

Xavier Legrand was born in France in 1979. He studied drama at the National Conservatory of Paris. He performed for several directors in plays by Chekov, Shakespeare, Harold Pinter, Michel Vinaver and Peter Handke, and for Philippe Garrel, Laurent Jaoui, Benoit Cohen and Brigitte Sy for the screen. His first short as a director, "Just Before Losing Everything", was selected in more than 100 festivals. The film was Oscar-nominated in 2014 and won several awards including four prizes at Clermont-Ferrand in 2013 and the 2014 César for Best Short Film.

## **Denis Ménochet**

Denis Ménochet's initial roles were on TV in 2003 with *Aventure et Associés* and *Caméra Café*. His piercing gaze caught the attention of cinema directors and he began acting in the feature films *Moustache* by Emmanuel Carrère in 2004, *Hannibal Rising* in 2006 and *La Vie En Rose* by Olivier Dahan. In 2009 he landed a part in *Inglourious Basterds* by Quentin Tarantino, which marked the beginning of a successful career on the big screen. In 2010, he played in *La Raffle* and *Joseph et la fille*. After that, he worked with directors Julie Delpy (*Skylab*, 2011), Mélanie Laurent (*The Adopted*, 2011), François Ozon (*Dans la maison*), and David Perrault (*Nos héros sont morts ce soir*, 2014). His role in *Custody* by Xavier Legrand sees him reprise the role of Antoine from the Oscar nominated short "Just Before Losing Everything" from the same director.

## **Léa Drucker**

Léa Drucker began her career performing on stage, in diverse plays such as *Le Misanthrope* and *Plaidoyer Pour un Boxeur*. But it is for the French adaptation of *Danny And The Deep Blue Sea* by John Patrick Shanley and *84 Charing Cross Road* by Helen Hanff that she became renowned. In 1991, she was introduced on screen with a role in *La Thune* (Philippe Galland), *Rai* (Thomas Gilou), *Assassins* (Mathieu Kassovitz) and *Chaos* (Coline Serreau) followed. In 2001, she got the main lead in the film *Papillons de Nuit* from John R. Pepper, after which she starred in a succession of comedies and dramas that included *Bienvenue au gîte* (Claude Duty), *Narcos* (Gilles Lellouche), *Akoibon* (Edouard Baer), *The Man of My Life* (Zabou Breitman), *La Vérité Si Je Mens 3* (Thomas Gilou), *Cyprien* (David Charhon), *The Wedding Cake* (Denys Granier-Deferre), *Pauline and François* (Renaud Fely) and *La Chambre Bleue* (Mathieu Amalric). She also played in the French serie *Le Bureau des Légendes* (Éric Rochant). In 2012, Léa Drucker played the role of Miriam in Xavier Legrand's Oscar nominated short film "Avant Que De Tout Perdre", and again in 2017 in Xavier Legrand's first feature *Custody* in which she reprises Miriam's part.

## **Thomas Gioria**

Thomas discovered theatre at a very young age in his small hometown where he attended a lot of plays. He then began acting lessons and participated in his very first casting auditions. He met Xavier Legrand who immediately thought Thomas was the perfect fit for the role of Julien in *Custody*, his first role in a feature film.

## **Mathilde Auneveux**

Mathilde Auneveux has a musical background, having joined the semi-professional "Sotto Voce" choir as a child and regularly performing on stage in Paris. As a teenager, she studied classical singing and at the age of 16, recorded standard soul and jazz songs that she published online, under stage name "Lili & Jee". Her acting career began at a very early age. She joined the youth workshops at "Cours Florent" acting school and continued acting courses at "Enfants Terribles"

in Paris after high school before studying at the London School of Dramatic Art. She continued her other studies, obtaining a B.A. in Modern Literature at The Sorbonne, whilst pursuing a career as an actress. At 16, she met Xavier Legrand, who offered her the role of Josephine in his first short-length film, "Just Before Losing Everything." She went on to land several roles in movies and TV series afterwards, until Xavier Legrand asked her to reprise the role of Josephine in his first feature *Custody*.

## **CREW**

Xavier Legrand - Director  
Alexandre Gavras - Producer  
Xavier Legrand - Screenwriter  
Nathalie Durand - Cinematographer  
Yorgos Lamprinos - Editor  
Jérémie Sfez - Production Designer  
Julien Sicart, Vincent Verdoux, Julien Roig - Sound  
Laurence Forgue-Lockhart - Costume Designer  
Youna De Peretii, a.r.d.a. - Casting Director  
Christine Moarbes - Production Manager  
Marie Doller - First assistant director

## **CAST**

Denis Ménochet - Antoine  
Léa Drucker - Miriam  
Thomas Gioria - Julien  
Mathilde Auneveux - Joséphine  
Mathieu Saïkaly - Samuel  
Florence Janas - Sylvia  
Saadia Bentaïeb - Judge  
Sophie Pincemaille - Miriam's Lawyer  
Émilie Incerti-Formentini - Antoine's Lawyer