

**KINO**  
INTERNATIONAL

PRESENTS



# NÉNETTE

A film by Nicolas Philibert

2010, France, 67 minutes, 1.85:1  
In French with English subtitles

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A Kino International Release  
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## SYNOPSIS

Born in the jungles of Borneo, Nénette is a 40-year-old orangutan — and the oldest (and most popular) inhabitant at the Ménagerie at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris. Sitting in her gallery, she stays relaxed and indifferent as she looks down at the parade of visitors who file past her daily, commenting on her appearance and behavior.

In the unadorned, *cinéma vérité* style of his previous films, documentarian Nicolas Philibert remains intent on simply observing and listening to Nénette, as well as the bustling soundtrack of inquisitive children and zookeepers on either side of her viewing window. Ultimately, you may start to wonder: who is really observing who?

## CREDITS

Directed by Nicolas Philibert  
Cinematography by Katell Dijan & Nicolas Philibert  
Editing by Nicolas Philibert, with the assistance of Léa Masson  
Original Music by Philippe Hersant, performed by Pascal Gallois

A Les Films d'Ici/Forum des Images production, with the participation of the Menagerie du Jardin des Plantes/Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle and CinéCinéma, Long Ride Inc. and Centre National de la Cinématographie

French distribution and world sales by Les Films du Losange

## FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS

*Official Selection*  
Berlin International Film Festival  
Edinburgh International Film Festival  
Montreal International Festival of New Cinema  
Sydney Film Festival  
Vienna International Film Festival  
Hot Docs Canadian International Documentary Festival



### **ABOUT THE DIRECTOR**

One of the great European documentarians, Nicolas Philibert began his education by studying philosophy and later worked as an assistant director with such filmmakers as Rene Allio and Alain Tanner. His films include *Back to Normandy* (2007), *To Be and To Have* (2002), *Every Little Thing* (1997), *Animals and More Animals* (1996), *In the Land of the Deaf* (1992) and *Louvre City* (1990).



### **ABOUT THE STAR**

Born in the jungles of Borneo, Nénette arrived at the Ménagerie at the Jardin des Plantes in 1972, at an estimated age of 3 or 4 — making her just over 40 now. (In the wild, an orangutan rarely lives more than 35 years.) She has had three mates and given birth to four offspring: the first two were sent abroad as part of a European program for the preservation of endangered species; the third, Tübo, lives with her; and the fourth, Dayou, died of a heart attack in 2007, at the age of 8. Nénette and Tübo live with Théodora and her daughter Tamü, both of whom arrived in late 2007 from the Twycross Zoo in Britain.

This is her feature film debut.

## DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

This project came about at the end of 2008. One day, I went to visit the Ménagerie at the Jardin des Plantes. I hadn't set foot there for years. On entering the "ape house," I stopped dead in front of the orangutans' cage. A few visitors were laughing at them, commenting on their every act and gesture. On her ledge, Nénette seemed to be miles away — but when I took a closer look at her, I realized that she wasn't missing one bit of the show we were unwittingly providing. The idea for the film came to me at that point. In my mind, it would be a short film running fifteen or twenty minutes at the most — but as soon as I started shooting, I could tell that the face-to-face setup was going to allow me to go beyond the initially planned running time. This was confirmed during editing. From that moment on, the film followed its own development without my needing to force things.

I wanted to film Nénette face-on, through the glass of her cage, the way visitors see her — to seize those troubling moments that seem suspended in time when she looks back at us. Of course, I also filmed the other three [orangutans that] share the same cage, but I haven't given them the same place in the film. The priority goes to Nénette. And yet, at first [glance], she is the most discreet, the one you notice the least. She is often in the background, half-buried under the straw of her nest where she takes very long naps. She is probably saving her strength, given her age! She is also the only one [of the orangutans] not born in captivity, but in her natural environment. I don't know if that is what makes her [act] more distant, but she rarely approaches -- unlike the other three, who do not hesitate to come and press against the glass. Perhaps that's what I liked — this distant presence, tinged with indifference, that gives her a sort of aura, or sovereignty. A way of charming without trying to charm; of looking at the visitor without ever asking for anything in return, and of flinging his so-called superiority and voyeurism back in his face.

600,000 people file past her cage each year, take her photo, film her, comment on [her]. They laugh, exclaim, sympathize, pity, admire her skill, her agility, the sheen of her fur; they philosophize, compare themselves to her, explain to their children; by reading the signs, they discover the extent of the threat facing the species, the massive deforestation, poaching... There are visitors who come every week, as if coming to see an old cousin; those who are there for the first time and who remain rooted to the spot; those who jeer, grunt, gesticulate, imitate her, ape her or pose endless questions about the pouch that orangutans have under their chin. Seven days a week, winter and summer. For 37 years.

The film is based on the divergence between image and sound, meaning that we see the animals without ever hearing them and hear the humans without ever seeing them. There is no reverse angle. No cutaway shot. The soundtrack blends several kinds of words: families, couples, foreign tourists, a gang of adolescents, single visitors, students from an art school and their teacher, etc. But I have also recorded the keepers, especially the older ones — they saw Nénette grow and know her story. Finally, I asked a few friends from different backgrounds to come along, and I recorded their reactions: Erik Slabiac and Franck Anastasio from the group Les Yeux Noirs came to sing a gypsy tune; Valéry Gaillard, who was my assistant for some years, came to read some pages by Buffon; Linda De Zitter, a psychoanalyst, chose Flemish, her mother tongue, to make a few remarks; and the comedian Pierre Meunier came up with the long, totally improvised monologue at the end of the film.

Behind the glass, Nénette is a mirror. A screen for our projections. We attribute all kinds of feelings, intentions and even thoughts to her. In talking about her, we talk about ourselves. In looking at her, we include ourselves in the picture. Just as Flaubert declared, "I am Madame Bovary!", so I could say, "I am Nénette." She is you. She is us. And yet we shall never know what she thinks, or even if she thinks. The mystery remains. Deep down, Nénette is the perfect confidante: she keeps all secrets.

This is a film on the gaze, on representation. A metaphor for the cinema, in particular for the documentary, as capturing and as capture; after all, filming others is always a way of imprisoning them, of enclosing them in a frame, of freezing them in space and time.