



Locarno Film Festival
Piazza Grande

TABO TABO FILMS AND BANDE À PART FILMS
PRESENT



THE PATH OF EXCELLENCE

A FILM BY FRÉDÉRIC MERMOUD



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THE PATH OF EXCELLENCE

(La voie royale)

A FILM BY **FRÉDÉRIC MERMOUND**

INTERNATIONAL SALES
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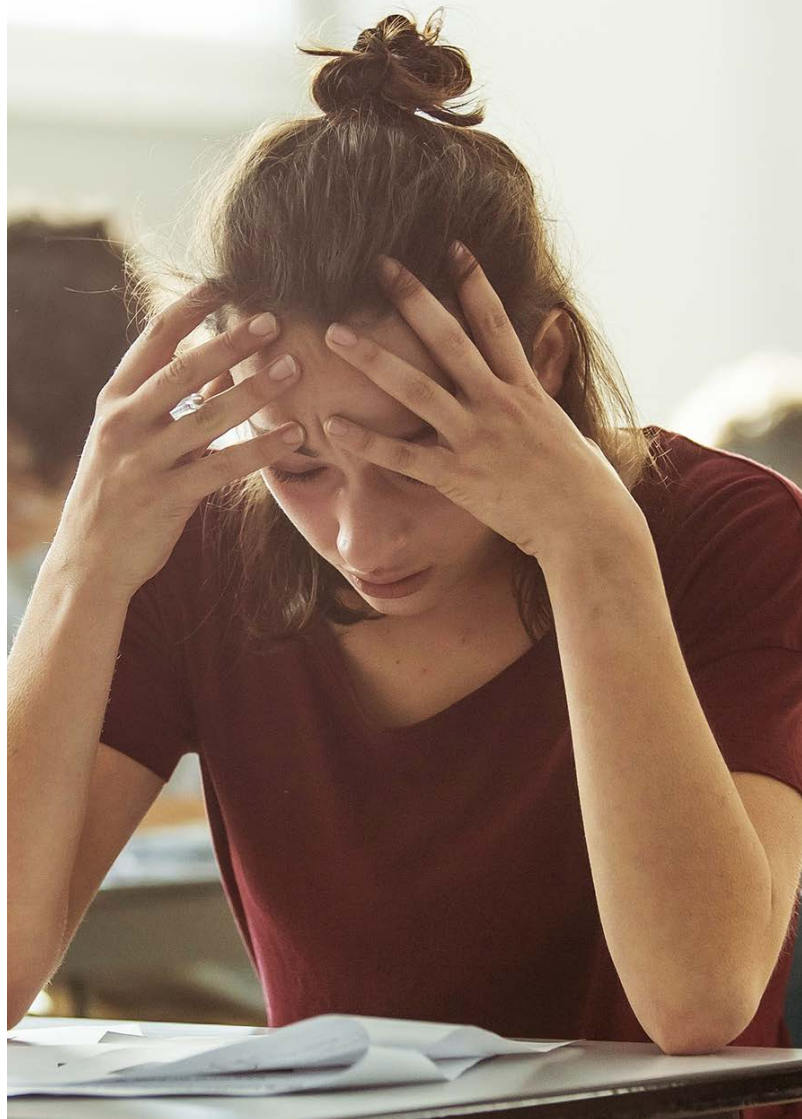
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SYNOPSIS

Sophie is a brilliant student. Encouraged by her math teacher, she leaves the family farm to try her chance at the entrance exam for top rated schools by enrolling in a preparatory science class. Going through new encounters, challenges, failures and fierce competition, Sophie realizes that entering the prestigious engineering school of Polytechnique, is not just a question of competition, but a challenge of climbing the social ladder.



INTERVIEW WITH FRÉDÉRIC MERMOUD

How did the idea for *La Voie Royale* come about?

In my first short films, I had already tackled the coming-of-age story. For instance, *L'Escalier* (*The Staircase*), with Nina Meurisse, is about a young girl who experiences the first stirrings of love. I had also trodden this path with *Complices* (*Partners*), my first feature film, a thriller in which two narrative threads intersperse, with one about a high-school girl who falls in love with a male sex worker. And a few years ago, I told my then-producer Tonie Marshall that I wanted to make a film on this crucial moment when you become the actor of your life and you have to make choices. Choices that have an impact on your love life, your studies, your political commitment. This is the moment when, all at once, you decide who you want to become without being exactly sure that you are on the right track. It so happened that Tonie had just read a script by Anton Likiernik focusing on science *classes préparas**. I was all the more interested as this kind of universe had scarcely been filmed. We therefore started to work on the script together.

[*The *classes préparatoires aux grandes écoles*, or *classes préparas*, mentioned in the film are intensive preparatory courses designed to prepare students for entry into one of the prestigious *grandes écoles*, which are the most selective higher education institutions in France.]

How did the rewriting go?

Anton's script hinged on a toxic friendship between two female friends inside a competitive schooling environment. I chose to give the film a more sociological and contemporary dimension.

I wanted to tell the story of a character of modest origins, someone who isn't predestined for this type of curriculum. What are the hurdles that Sophie faces? The film therefore addresses the issue of upward mobility and meritocracy. That being said, I didn't want Sophie to be a class defector, experiencing a real cultural and social clash upon discovering a new world. I wanted to have someone who is from a rather open-minded, well-meaning family, but who evolves at the periphery, and who faces challenges that stem from her own feeling of illegitimacy or her imposter syndrome. I wanted to look into the things she prevents herself from doing, her self-censorship, so to speak, or her bashful self-consciousness. For at the beginning, Sophie curbs her own dreams. The writing process continued with Salvatore Lisa, who is familiar with the preparatory classes specialised in literature and the humanities (or *prépas littéraires*).

When she gets in her new class, Sophie immediately meets up with students who have a much clearer picture of their future...

Her high-school teacher, in her final year, had told her that the preparatory classes would open up a large avenue of possibilities. On her freshman day, she discovers that most students already have specific plans. For instance, Diane wants to get into prestigious Normale Sup to become a researcher, and Jules wants to get into Polytechnique, an elite institution of higher learning specialised in science and engineering, to create start-ups. Everyone has a career plan

or a professional narrative in the writing. But Sophie is a blank page, really. Subtly, the film unfolds the story of a girl finding her calling, as well as the story of an unexpected political awakening.

In some way, this is evocative of the disruptive speech, which was largely echoed by the media, of some students at the AgroParisTech school (a prestigious institution specialized in life sciences and agronomy) who radically contested the very system their curriculum represents during their graduation ceremony in 2022...

Absolutely. And yet the film was written before COVID, which slowed down the whole production process. As far as I know, there had never been a contestation of that kind before. Since then, however, some Agro and well as Polytechnique students have made speeches that are very political, carrying profound meaning. They successfully challenged the presence of supermajor oil company TotalEnergies on campus in 2021, and then the very same thing happened with the luxury conglomerate LVMH. There was something in the air, and my character had already felt it! Or, let's rather say that the intuition sustaining the film has since been validated.

Sophie is never made into a victim...

Such was our intention when we wrote the script. I wanted both a fictional and a realistic approach. I like it when characters find the



resources to fight, to fulfil their dreams and to achieve a kind of transformation. Owing to her background and personal itinerary, Sophie is less aware of some social issues than Diane or Hadrien, both of whom apprehend the social chessboard with greater acuity and understand the codes that inform the whole system. Actually, Sophie's main obstacle is herself. But she will strive to unsettle that which seems predestined at first. The one person that gives her the hardest time is probably her physics teacher, but Maud Wyler's subtle performance hints at a more complex relationship - the teacher seems to find in Sophie an echo of her own trajectory, and she tries to give her a boost and help her pass an exam she herself may not have been able to pass...

In the oral exams that Sophie sits, notably the exam to enter Polytechnique, some of the exercises resonate with her own experience. Somehow, she is that gas bubble that is submitted to various pressures before gradually morphing...

Anton had devised most of the exercises, and then as the writing process unfolded, I underlined how important it was that they resonated with very concrete things, beyond their cryptic formulation. Physics does make this possible. Academics talk of telescopes, of races under the rain, or of the movement of a sparkling water bubble. And indeed, it is true that some exercises echo what the character is going through. I really like the idea of working on "hard sciences," which have little inspired filmmakers, and of catching Sophie in the act of getting ready, as though she were an athlete, or a musician. She must do her routines, tirelessly, she studies day and night, and her teacher asks her to solve her problems "with grace."

What kind of research did you carry out to get

a better understanding of this milieu?

It was important for me to immerse myself in this world prior to shooting. I met with numerous students and teachers. I visited several preparatory schools. I attended the oral exams at Polytechnique and made contacts with students who were experiencing the same turning point as Sophie. Suzanne Jouannet who plays Sophie, spent time with a young woman who was preparing for the Polytechnique entry exam, and it turns out that during shooting, my youngest son was accepted in a science *prépa*: somehow he became my insider! I also worked with Jérémie Klinger, who defends his PhD in physics this summer, and who acted as a scientific adviser. He double-checked all the exercises, the equations written on the board, and above all he helped the actors and actresses appropriate a lexicon that was totally unknown to them. Jérémie gave scientific credibility to the whole project.

On top of this, I also read a great deal of *M Campus*, a section on *Le Monde* website, which gives very detailed news about how the various curricula evolve, documents life on the prestigious *prépas*, discusses the issue of meritocracy, gender parity, etc. These milieus are way more complex than they may appear at first glance. I had never thought that students there already start networking, hence the headmaster's speech in the film, which is both humanist and neoliberal, somewhat evocative of Macron. I asked journalist Thomas Snegaroff, whom I know and whose work I admire, to play the part.

The film relies a great deal on its main actress; how did you find Suzanne Jouannet, whose powerful performance is truly impressive?

Basically, the idea was to find our own Rosetta, although I had no intention to film her like the Dardenne brothers! I was looking for some kind of stubborn bull, with peerless energy.

With casting director Okinawa Guerard, we auditioned many young actresses and Suzanne was the obvious choice. It may sound cliché, but from the very first screen tests, I felt that she fit the role perfectly, that she was exactly what I was looking for. Suzanne is radiant, she is naturally joyful and spontaneous, but she is also endowed with a more profound, more intense quality, almost borderline sometimes. She is one of a kind, with an acting generosity and a truth I have rarely seen before. I hadn't seen her act in *Les Choses humaines* at that point. To me, she was an actress without a past, and I liked that.

Doesn't this intensity also stem from her singular, deep voice?

Probably so. I love her voice. I am very sensitive to voices, it is how I connect with actors. For instance, Antoine Chappey, who plays the father, has a voice that is at once sweet and firm, with unique inflections. I tend to focus on the actors' voices to know if a take is right.

How did you direct Suzanne Jouannet?

There are two major steps for me: a first reading where we talk about all the scenes, and then the choice of costumes. A character is also built in that moment, because he or she finds its "second skin". Suzanne prepared a lot for the film: she spent some time at the pig farm where we shot to get familiar with the farmers' gestures and to immerse herself in their environment; and she also had a coach for the scientific aspect of the part. When I watch the scene of the oral exam for Polytechnique, which was shot at the end, I realise just how far she's come. Just like her character. More concretely, on set, I know that I need to find the movements of the characters first, and that once these movements have been found, the frame is set and ready for the actor to deliver a performance freely and propose things. I try to bring out the actor's performance so that it may transcend the spirit of the scene.



And what about the other actors?

I had seen Marie Colomb, who plays Diane, in various films, including *Laetitia* and *Magnetic Beats (Les Magnétiques)*. She is an extraordinary actress. When we made screen tests with Suzanne, a wonderful partnership clicked into place. Marie embodies a more assertive, more provocative femininity, but there is also a kind of sisterhood between them. Something pulls them together, and right from the moment they meet, we can feel that their friendship will only grow stronger. We defined their bond during the readings – it is a troubling romantic friendship, where anything can happen, but the context, and especially their workload, keeps it on a thin ridge, and prevents it from turning into a romantic passion. I think Sophie knows that if she is to reach her goal, she needs to protect herself, and to avoid what philosopher Blaise Pascal would consider a form of escapist “entertainment”. Sophie is susceptible to desire, she may be attracted to a girl or a boy, but she prefers to keep her eyes on the prize.

As for choosing the rest of the cast, I also carried out many screen tests. We met many talented actors, but we needed to create the right constellation. I really like the almost British restraint of Lorenzo Lefebvre, who plays Hadrien. For Laurent, Sophie's brother, I wanted a brash, blunt, physical actor, and Cyril Metzger was just perfect. And finally, Alexandre Desrousseaux brings so much humour, freshness, and energy to the part of Jules that we don't really judge his character's ambition.

Who is the actor who plays the Polytechnique examiner? It is such a great scene, especially because of the kindly atmosphere...

Matthieu Rozé is also a filmmaker, he just directed *Azuro*. I knew he was a good actor, but what is it that makes an actor suddenly embody his character so strongly that he goes beyond

the archetype? It is really mysterious. And it is true that Matthieu brings something to the scene - the way he is subtly won by Sophie's arguments, even though he reins her in by saying that reality is a little more complex than that. It was the last day of shooting, and we were very lucky.

You chose to shoot in widescreen, but you still focus on faces a lot...

With my cinematographer, Tristan Tortuyaux, we went for a dense, strong image with deep colours, but not too fictional either. Since I wanted Suzanne to look like a small wild horse, we opted for a more open format, almost western-like. We worked in Scope, while staying close to the characters, so we often used close shots, or close-ups.

What prompted Sophie to give the school another try, even though she had given up during the mock exam?

It happened in stages. Maybe the most determining element was the conversation she had with her father in his truck, when he told her that he had wanted to be a builder, that he had been proud to take part in the building of a road structure, a majestic bridge, where the workers' efforts had almost been more highlighted than that of the engineers who had conceived it. Her father suddenly gave her the energy she lacked. There is also the meeting with her brother in Lyon, when she realizes that people with a modest background have had their right to speak taken from them, and that it is her responsibility to do something about it. When she gets back home, she realizes how much she has evolved, and she finds the lifeblood that allows her to go back. Because the film also portrays, in small strokes, a family of farmers who feel like outsiders, both demoted and left out. It echoes a situation we are all familiar with, in which the “invisible”

demand to be heard as well.

Does the Lycée Descartes really exist?

No, we made it up. The high school in Lyon that is quite renowned, with a really good entry rate to the *grandes écoles*, is the Lycée du Parc. But the place was being renovated, and it was complicated for us to do some location scouting and to shoot there. Our initial idea was really to show a girl who goes to an elite high school in the provinces, so that the whole idea of her “making it” by going to Paris wouldn't interfere with her journey. We ended up shooting in two different high schools in Lyon: La Martinière and Saint-Just.

How did you work on the film's music?

It was created by composer and singer Audrey Ismaël. I had loved the propositions she had made, mostly based on percussion. The rhythmic suggestions suggested a workout, or even some military training. I was really interested in this musical line, with sounds of breathing. So we kept that percussive approach and added classical instruments, a cello and a piano, while retaining their physicality to give the music an organic feel.

Have you given any thought to what happens to Sophie in Polytechnique and afterwards?

I love to think about it, and this is one of the off-camera realities brought about by the film. Sophie says that she wants to change things from the inside, so what will happen five or ten years later? How do you manage to preserve the values that have shaped who you are in the face of reality? This could be the subject of another film. Definitely...



FRÉDÉRIC MERMOUD

After a Master's degree in philosophy from the University of Geneva and a filmmaking diploma, Frédéric Mermoud directed several acclaimed short films, including *L'ESCALIER* and the César-nominated *RACHEL*. In 2009, his first feature film, *PARTNERS (COMPLICES)*, was presented in competition at Locarno Film Festival, and won the Best Screenplay Award for a Swiss film. In 2012, he directed episodes 5 to 8 of season 1 of the cult Canal + series *THE RETURNED (LES REVENANTS)*, which won an International Emmy Award. He returned to cinema in 2016 with *MOKA*, starring Emmanuelle Devos and Nathalie Baye, which was a critical and public success. He then came back to crime thrillers, shooting season 6 of *ENGRENAGES* for Canal+. Also for television (Arte and RTS), he films the last days of a sect in *SIRIUS*, inspired by the massacre of the Order of the Solar Temple. Finally, in 2019, he will direct and co-produce *CRIMINAL FRANCE* for Netflix, a series in the form of a procedural huisclos with Sara Giraudeau, Nathalie Baye and Jérémie Renier. *THE PATH OF EXCELLENCE (LA VOIE ROYALE)* is his third feature film.



CAST

Sophie Vasseur **Suzanne JOUANNET**
Diane Le Goff **Marie COLOMB**
Claire Fresnel **Maud WYLER**
Caroline Vasseur **Marilyne CANTO**
Hadrien Loiseau **Lorenzo LEFEBVRE**
Laurent Vasseur **Cyril METZGER**
Jules **Alexandre DESROUSSEAUX**
G rard Vasseur **Antoine CHAPPEY**

CREW

Director **Frédéric MERMOUD**
Scriptwriting **Anton LIKIERNIK, Frédéric MERMOUD** and **Salvatore LISTA**

Image **Tristan TORTUYAUX**
Editing **Sarah ANDERSON**
Original Music **Audrey ISMAËL**
Sound **Balthasar JUCKER, Étienne CURCHOD**
1st Assistant Director **Sophie DAVIN**
Casting **Okinawa GUERARD, Valérie TRAJANOVSKI**
Unit production manager **Damien GRÉGOIRE**
Production designer **Pascaline PITIOT**
Costume designer **Alice CAMBOURNAC**
Film Development Manager **Jessica ROSSELET**

A film produced by **Véronique ZERDOUN, Jean-Stéphane BRON** and **Lionel BAIER**

A French-Swiss coproduction **TABO TABO FILMS, BANDE À PART FILMS**
and **AUVERGNE-RHÔNE-ALPES CINÉMA**

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With the support of **CANAL+**
With the participation of **CINÉ+**

With the participation of **TV5MONDE**

With the participation of **LA RÉGION AUVERGNE-RHÔNE-ALPES** in partnership with **CNC**

In association with **COFIMAGE 34, CINEVENTURE 8, INDÉFILMS 11**

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