

K-FILMS AMÉRIQUE PRESENTS  
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OPENING NIGHT FILM

# NO TRACE

MONIQUE GOSSELIN NATHALIE DOUMMAR

A FILM BY SIMON LAVOIE





*Log line*

In a troubled future, an aloof smuggler and a young stranger share the path to their destiny.

*Short synopsis*

In a troubled future, "N", a woman of indeterminate age, moves about the railroads on her handcar. A callous smuggler hardened by life, she leads a pious young woman and her child across the border to safety, unaware that both their destinies are inescapably linked to this inhospitable land where threat lingers...

*Synopsis*

In a near future, "N", a woman of indeterminate age, moves about the railroads on her handcar. A callous smuggler hardened by life, she leads a pious young woman and her child across the border to safety. A man – presumably the husband and the child's father – awaits and greets the woman and child. Later on, on a stormy evening, after having completed her mission, N helplessly sees her handcar being stolen by strangers. Wandering alone in the forest, she takes shelter in an abandoned cabin for the night. The following morning, she discovers a body lying along the nearby stream. It is the young woman encountered earlier. Although in bad shape, she is still alive. Accustomed not to meddle in other people's business, N withdraws and does not intervene. She continues to wander in the forest and comes across the remnants of a fire, a pagan pyre of some sort, where hangs a tiny human corpse. It is, without any doubt, the young woman's child. Remorseful, N decides to return to the body near the stream. Against all odds, N tends to the young woman, treats her wounds, feeds her and protects her. Little by little, the two women grow to understand each other. Once back on her feet, the young woman confronts N regarding her impiety and her true motives. As they fight the cold and hunger, both women become closer amidst the collapse of their respective worldviews and beliefs. This emotional encounter gives birth to an improbable fellowship in this inhospitable and threatening land.

## DIRECTOR'S NOTES BY SIMON LAVOIE

*No Trace* is a film that combines powerful formal desires and existential philosophical questions over which I have been pondering for years. I wanted to respond to these compelling urges (a strong will for simplicity and the desire to experiment and to question the very essence of the film medium visually and sound wise) by telling a story that represents a certain – hopefully moving and captivating – quest for meaning, based on an authentic personal need to comprehend the absurdity and the lack of meaning of our modern lives in today's world.

Through this film, I, therefore, act on the ideology of a particular type of cinematography. Years go by so fast; it's been twenty years since, after completing my studies, I committed my mind, body and soul to filmmaking. *La petite fille qui aimait trop les allumettes* (The Little Girl Who Was Too Fond of Matches), released in 2017, completed a cycle of five features made within nine years. This was followed by a quiet period that had allowed me to ponder with serenity over the aesthetic position as an artist that I embody today and over my future creations. A clear thought has quickly imposed itself: I still want to believe in auteur cinema, in the French language cinema of Quebec. My heart leans more and more towards film as an exploratory object, as a work of art. I believe that filmmaking is an art that is still very young and in constant need of further experimentation. I believe that we should fight against the ongoing standardization generated by the current norms of what has become irrepressibly an "industry". This film is thus, to some extent, a film of resistance.

### *Setting and plot*

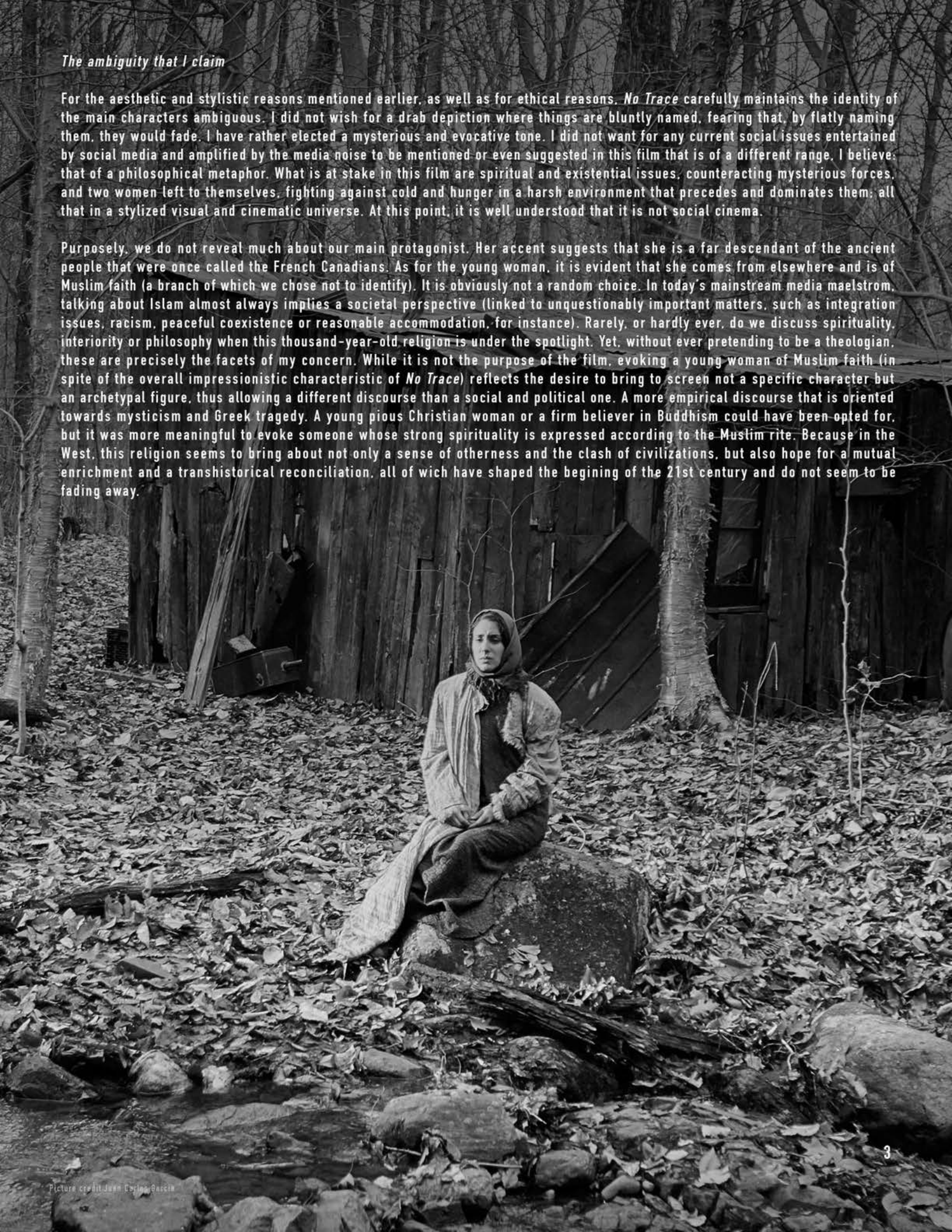
The film is set in a somewhat different realm: a universe that could be described as uchronic or even dystopian science fiction. Yet, I wanted to stay clear from minimizing labels that define genre film. I would rather qualify this film as "poetic cinema", as simple as that. *No Trace* may translate a troublesome vision of the future; nevertheless, I did not want this universe to be disembodied. Hence, I insisted on setting this story in a sort of "Quebecness" backdrop, through the identity and the language spoken by the main protagonist, N, and by subtly anchoring the story in a specific geographic area, the banks of the St. Lawrence River. Thereby, this touch of reality makes the issues in this story become more palpable (although, at some point, they are borderline abstract) and enhance the storyline.

This film is about our struggle to build relationships, to reach out to one another. By promoting a story about the debate between a borderline nihilistic atheism and a monotheistic faith that doesn't allow much room for reason, set in a society collapsed into violence and regressed to a primitive state (the reasons for which are not explicit) – a society in which citizens cannot have a meaningful dialogue anymore. I wanted to evoke, in an impressionistic fashion, the possible spark of a drift deriving from the tension in current political debates (and future ones surely) between unyielding beliefs from one end to the other of the political spectrum. Beliefs that are increasingly polarizing into positions diametrically opposed and violently antagonist to the verge of definite rift. A sense of worry about the future is running through this film...

### *The ambiguity that I claim*

For the aesthetic and stylistic reasons mentioned earlier, as well as for ethical reasons, *No Trace* carefully maintains the identity of the main characters ambiguous. I did not wish for a drab depiction where things are bluntly named, fearing that, by flatly naming them, they would fade. I have rather elected a mysterious and evocative tone. I did not want for any current social issues entertained by social media and amplified by the media noise to be mentioned or even suggested in this film that is of a different range. I believe that of a philosophical metaphor. What is at stake in this film are spiritual and existential issues, counteracting mysterious forces, and two women left to themselves, fighting against cold and hunger in a harsh environment that precedes and dominates them; all that in a stylized visual and cinematic universe. At this point, it is well understood that it is not social cinema.

Purposely, we do not reveal much about our main protagonist. Her accent suggests that she is a far descendant of the ancient people that were once called the French Canadians. As for the young woman, it is evident that she comes from elsewhere and is of Muslim faith (a branch of which we chose not to identify). It is obviously not a random choice. In today's mainstream media maelstrom, talking about Islam almost always implies a societal perspective (linked to unquestionably important matters, such as integration issues, racism, peaceful coexistence or reasonable accommodation, for instance). Rarely, or hardly ever, do we discuss spirituality, interiority or philosophy when this thousand-year-old religion is under the spotlight. Yet, without ever pretending to be a theologian, these are precisely the facets of my concern. While it is not the purpose of the film, evoking a young woman of Muslim faith (in spite of the overall impressionistic characteristic of *No Trace*) reflects the desire to bring to screen not a specific character but an archetypal figure, thus allowing a different discourse than a social and political one. A more empirical discourse that is oriented towards mysticism and Greek tragedy. A young pious Christian woman or a firm believer in Buddhism could have been opted for, but it was more meaningful to evoke someone whose strong spirituality is expressed according to the Muslim rite. Because in the West, this religion seems to bring about not only a sense of otherness and the clash of civilizations, but also hope for a mutual enrichment and a transhistorical reconciliation, all of which have shaped the beginning of the 21st century and do not seem to be fading away.



*A pact between the viewer and the film*

In this film, I ask the viewer to accept the fact that all will not be explained and, by extension, to accept that not everything will be understood. I hope that this agreement between the audience and the film, an agreement orchestrated implicitly through its narrative and formal devices (in a fashion that the viewer does not have all the information), will be acknowledged. That the audience will welcome the story in which countless enigmatic elements add up without any practical narrative solutions or a clear psychological justification at the end. This leap of faith is therefore essential. A shift of mindset is humbly requested as this is not a self-sufficient story. The formal aspect (the *mise-en-scène* in the broad sense) is an integral part of this project. And more than ever, while *No Trace* has its own subject matter, its formal aspect is also one of its subjects.

With a frank desire to explore how the audience perceives a narrative thread where the ambiguity of the motifs brings about infinite meanings and where, ultimately, the mystery prevails, I wanted this film to resemble the Swiss cheese with its numerous holes asking to be filled with the viewer's imagination. Although I aimed to maintain a climate of tension from start to end, using a location that seemed haunted by a mysterious aura, it was necessary that the conclusion of the film remains ambiguous. I thought it more powerful, more interesting. As questions start to form in the viewer's mind while watching the film, the end will cancel them.

In all and all, I was striving to reach a somewhat metaphysical tone. That is, incidentally, what the themes of the story suggest: there are indescribable forces, bigger than ourselves, that rule our world.

Clearly, the characters' search for transcendence is also the author's search...



## Visual language

Visually speaking, I felt an urge for a frank and radical artistic expression. Therefore, *No Trace* is defined by a unique image resulting from infrared black-and-white shooting technologies. To make the bold and vertiginous decision to shoot in an unusual, almost scientific format was exciting to me. With the young and talented director of photography Simran Dewan, we filmed with the Optical low pass filter (a filter that passes only infrared rays) set on the sensor of the Red Epic M Monochrome camera (that only captures light, not colours). The altered camera still captures the reality, but not as we see it with our eyes. It is rather a reality visible under the only light in the spectrum of infrared rays. Consequently, the actors' eyes (both pupil and iris) and the skies turned black, their skin translucent like porcelain, and leaves and greens as white as snow; from time to time, the light was created solely by the heat, as though the world was suddenly irradiated by a mysterious solar wind or radioactivity...

This shooting method thus allowed me to see the world with different eyes. A sort of first sight. With the modest resources we had at hand, the creation of the particular universe of this movie was a never-ending challenge. The shooting processes were aligned with my creative approach. They made sense and were in line with the shifted universe that I wished to depict in this film. Furthermore, on a formal level, the aesthetic characteristics were absolutely stimulating and didn't fail to attract crew members hungry for technical challenges.

## Filming

Simplicity is priority here, coupled with a form of rigidity of the mise-en-scène. Simran and I prescribed ourselves a set of rules that we tried to follow thoroughly. Thus, in this film, we alternately explore the possibilities of the wide screen (2.35 : 1 aspect ratio) , using 2x anamorphic lenses and of the almost square 4/3 screen (1.33 : 1 aspect ratio) using spherical lenses - slightly similar to the film *Those Who Make Revolution Halfway Only Dig Their Own Graves* in which different screen ratios would appear in turns. Unable to choose between the great strengths and the expressiveness of one or the other of the two image ratios, and, consequently, having to let go of one of them, I decided to use both screen formats. Once again, the tone of this film, its very essence, makes this type of formal characteristics appropriate.



## Soundtrack

*No Trace* is intended to be the perfect canvas for a highly expressive sophisticated sound track. The languor of the contemplative rhythm of the film permitted the gifted sound designer Patrice LeBlanc (a longtime partner, very essential to my filmmaking) to allow his talent free rein in a film where the sound environment was of great importance. The rustling of the impenetrable natural environment, the whisper of the wind, the cacophony of engines, the rhythmic sound of metal wheels against the rails were all elements that came together in a sonorous interlacing that aims to confer depth to the moving image.

When the screen turns black and the movie theatre plummets into darkness, the sound track becomes for a rare occasion sovereign, and this, thanks to the music of the young composer Jean L'appeau (alias Gabriel Dufour-Laperrière) who has composed for this film a daring atonal and bruitist electro acoustic musical score of great evocation.

## Shooting locations

I had the privilege to shoot a good part of this film in harsh and bare natural settings that run along a section of a seldom used railroad track between the Montmorency Falls and Clermont in Charlevoix. That was possible thanks to an agreement with *Chemins de fer Charlevoix* who own the rights to operate the railroad. I know well these old railway segments from my childhood in my home village of Petite-Rivière-St-François, they formed the settings of thousand strolls along the river on the same railway ties on which Gabrielle Roy has once walked – as she recounts her legendary promenades in *Cet été qui chantait* (Enchanted Summer).



## Performance

On the acting level, I allowed myself to experiment. I wished to transcend by all possible means the flat and boring realism offered by the huge majority of films. I wanted to create a more ethereal performance with my actors, a stylized acting from within.

After a long hesitation period over the right candidate for the role of N, we finally came to select an artist with an unconventional physique, a heartwarming down-to-earth woman, Monique Gosselin. As for the role of the young woman, we had to find an actress with a "je-ne-sais-quoi" foreign air, somewhat métis, with a sense of candor, purity and internal strength. We were blown away by Nathalie Doummar at her audition.

## Tone and references

The film *Stalker* by Andrei Tarkovsky is certainly an apparent inspiration; even though I tried by all means to distance myself from this monumental work of art, the idea of a smuggler, the hand car, and, above all, the idea of a minimalist science fiction film of meditative type rather than spectacular are indeed present in *No Trace*. But beyond the similar elements, I quenched my thirst on other objects of inspiration. To start with, I was influenced by a number of photographers, especially by the Irish Richard Mosse and his infrared photography project *The Enclave*. His work has opened my eyes to the power and eloquence of infrared photography.

As for cinematic inspiration, while the first third of *No Trace* almost starts as per the aesthetic canons of Western cinema (with its mysterious and taciturn main character), the storyline will progressively shift to a confrontation between two women, in the same vein as *Persona* by Ingrid Bergman. This film is indeed an inspiration for the cathartic confrontation between two protagonists of different values, a confrontation built on lies and the unsaid. Without pretending to compare myself to Bergman, the 1966 film was a clear model and a reference in terms of dramaturgy, albeit much more based on dialogue.





Another film that is quite close to what I wanted to create, aesthetically speaking and tone-wise, is *Mother and Son* by Alexandre Sokourov (another minimalist and contemplative duel). This 1997 film of an exceptional beauty was, for me, an important landmark in the discovery of a different cinema. I recall screening it on a weekday afternoon in the fall of 1998 at the one-time *Cinéma Parallèle* on St. Lawrence Street in Montreal. By the end of the film, I felt emotional and vowed that my cinema will also be different. Today, I want to go back to the initiatory influence of this important film in my life as a cinephile and a filmmaker.

A last influence would be a lesser known film that I cannot get out of my head : *L'annonce faite à Marie* (The Tidings Brought to Mary), an adaptation of an eponymous play by Paul Claudel, an exceptional film, that keeps haunting me. It is the sole and unique film by the French director Alain Cuny made in 1991 in coproduction with Québec. This strange film, mocked back in its time by many film critics, was later on admired by the great Chris Marker who helped to discover and re-discover it again. It is not a perfect film, but I think that it courageously refutes all filmmaking rules, making it fascinating and admirable.

#### *To conclude*

After *Those Who Make Revolution Halfway Only Dig Their Own Grave* and *The Little Girl That Was Too Fond of Matches*, I am still hungry for radicalism. I totally embrace the direction of my filmmaking practice. While some may say that it is a difficult path (evil tongues would say the contrary), as for me, to shoot any type of film is so exhausting and requires so much effort that compromises or arrangements become unthinkable. In our fragile filmmaking ecosystem, I am well aware that any new project might be the last (the actual pandemic exacerbates this fear), therefore I cannot but strive a little bit more for the absolute, at every occasion.

- Simon Lavoie  
translated from French by Salma Ayache



## BIOGRAPHY OF THE DIRECTOR SIMON LAVOIE

Hailing from the Charlevoix region in the Province of Quebec, Simon Lavoie studied film at UQAM University. From 2003 to 2007, he made several short films among which *Une chapelle blanche* (A White Chapel) was awarded the Jutra prize for Best short film in 2006. In 2008, Simon wrote and directed his first feature, the historical drama *Le déserteur* (The deserter), shortly followed by *Laurentie* (Laurentia, co-directed with Mathieu Denis), premiered at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in 2011. A year later, in 2012, he presented his third feature film, *Le torrent* (The torrent), a critically-acclaimed drama based on one of Anne Hébert's short stories. In 2015, Simon Lavoie and Mathieu Denis teamed up once again for the resounding *Ceux qui font les révolutions à moitié n'ont fait que se creuser un tombeau* (Those Who Make Revolution Halfway Only Dig Their Own Graves; awarded the Best Canadian Film at the Toronto International Film Festival 2016 and Special mention by the Generation Jury at the Berlinale). The following year, he presented his fifth feature at TIFF, *La petite fille qui aimait trop les allumettes* (The Little Girl Who Was Too Fond of Matches, an adaptation of Gaétan Soucy's novel of the same name) that was unanimously acclaimed by critics. In 2021, he presents the poetic drama *Nulle Trace* (No Trace), the opening night film of the Slamdance Film Festival.



## BIOGRAPHY OF THE PRODUCER MARCEL GIROUX

Marcel Giroux has been a film producer since the early nineties. He has over a hundred productions of diverse styles to his credit, including feature films *Nulle trace* (No Trace) and *La petite fille qui aimait trop les allumettes* (The Little Girl Who Was Too Fond of Matches) by Simon Lavoie (Honorable mention as Best Canadian Film TIFF 2017), *Montréal Dead End* by Rémi Fréchette and a collective of 14 aspiring film directors from Quebec (Best Canadian Film at Fantasia 2018), Jean-Marc Vallée's first feature film *Liste noire* (Black List) which still ranks among Quebec's best box office films of all times, and *Martyrs*, a cult film by Pascal Laugier.



## BIOGRAPHY OF MONIQUE GOSSELIN (N)

A versatile and accomplished actress, Monique Gosselin has played various roles in theater, film, and in television for over 30 years. On the silver screen, she rendered the roles of astounding characters in the films *Roche-papier-ciseaux* (Rock Paper Scissors) by Yan Lanouette Turgeon, *10 1/2 by Podz*, and *La donation* (The Legacy) by Bernard Émond. On television, we recently had the pleasure to appreciate her talent in the series *Lâcher Prise*, *Ruptures*, *Trop*, *Faits divers*, *Fatale station*. Monique Gosselin is cofounder and artistic co-director of Théâtre Le Clou, founded in 1989, and has been involved in numerous projects within the company. She depicted the eccentric mother in the theatrical production *Romances et karaoké* and received 3 Masques prizes in 2005. Currently, Monique is the artistic director of the writing project *Le Scriptarium*, and as such is also working as its stage director.



## BIOGRAPHY OF NATHALIE DOUMMAR (THE YOUNG WOMAN)

Born in Montréal to Egyptian parents, Nathalie Doummar is a multi-disciplinary artist. Since 2011, she has cumulated many roles on stage, in television, and in films. Her theatrical plays *Coco* and *Sissi* were both presented at Théâtre La Licorne with sold-out performances. As a playwright resident she presented the play *Le loup* (The wolf), directed by Chloé Robichaud, at Théâtre Duceppe. Her web series *Téodore pas de h* (Teodore with no h) won the Gémeaux prize for Best Script for Digital Media in the Comedy category. *Delphine*, the first short film that she wrote, won the Best Canadian Short Film prize at the TIFF and was selected at the Venice Film Festival in 2019.



NO TRACE

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Distributed in Canada by K-Films Amérique

DCP Black & White

Scope 2:35/1

101 minutes

French original version with English subtitles

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Cast :

Monique Gosselin

Nathalie Doummar

Victor Andrés Trelles Turgeon

Martin Desgagné

Zoe Jourdain-Doucet

Eva Joudain-Doucet

Main crew :

Producer – Marcel Giroux (GPA Films)

Writer/director – Simon Lavoie

Images – Simran Dewan

Set designer – Patrick Binette

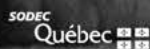
Costumes – Francesca Chamberland

Sound – Pablo Villegas, Patrice Leblanc, Clovis Gouaillier

Editing – Mathieu Bouchard-Malo

Music – Jean L'appeau

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