

LA BELLE BINOCHÉ

She has become an international film star by taking risky, challenging roles; in her latest film, *Elles*, Juliette Binoche ups the ante, playing a journalist whose investigations begin to make her examine her staid, traditional life

BY MATT MUELLER

Arriving to meet Juliette Binoche on the mezzanine terrace of the Toronto International Film Festival's swanky new headquarters is a slightly daunting experience. It's a baking September afternoon, and entering the presence of an actress who suits the term "legend" more than most in a haze of perspiration isn't the best first impression. Binoche's reputation for being prickly precedes her: she allegedly referred to journalists as "pollution" early on in her career.

Perhaps she's mellowing with age, because Binoche confounds all expectations. She's charming company. She assures me that she's finding it oppressively muggy too and, blessedly, never once does she refer to me as "pollution".

"I said some peculiar things when I was younger," she laughs, "but who doesn't?"

Since bursting onto the international scene in the 1980s, La Binoche, as she's affectionately known in her native France, has become the most celebrated French actress of her era. She has an Oscar and a BAFTA to her name (both for *The English Patient*); secured the César for her role as a grieving young widow in *Three Colours: Blue*; was bestowed with the Cannes

Film Festival's Best Actress Award in 2010 for *Certified Copy*; and has a trio of European Film Awards, for *The Lovers on the Bridge*, *The English Patient* (again) and *Chocolat*.

If there's one theme that unites Binoche's wide-ranging work, it's her wish to confound audience preconceptions about the mostly challenging women she portrays – just as she's managed in person today. This is the case in her latest film, *Elles*, in which she plays Anne, an investigative journalist and mother juggling domestic routines while struggling to finish an exposé on student prostitutes in France. As two of Anne's interviewees share their erotic, often violent tales, she ends up feeling far more humiliated on their behalf than they do, disrupting her own comfortable existence. But the film finds a rich vein of humour in Anne's shambolic efforts to run her household, deal with her surly teenage son, visit her sick father in hospital, and organise a dinner party for her unappreciative husband and his boss.

"In life, I'm pretty much like that," Binoche says. "I'm a mother, and it makes you laugh when you have to deal with all this stuff. You're doing three things at once and everything gets a little crazy."

In collaboration with *Elles'* Polish writer-director, Malgorzata Szumowska, Binoche incorporated autobiographical elements ►



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into the project and the character. The actress is currently single, but she has previously lived with many of her long-term partners, and has raised two children, 18-year-old Raphaël and 12-year-old Hannah. "My son is not like my son in the film, playing video games all the time," she says. "But I wanted to show that the smallest things in life can make you angry."

Binoche confesses that she brought her own preconceptions about prostitutes, feeling, as Anne does, judgmental about why a young woman would choose to enter the profession. "She feels superior in the beginning, and then bit by bit she's like, Oh, my life is messed up too, what am I judging? You need to show the complexity of it because it's not that simple. Those girls, they're innocent and yet they're... *monstreux* at the same time." I'm sure she can't mean monstrous, but she translates the word into "profiteers", surmising that perhaps this new breed of sex worker is emblematic of life in our consumerist, have-it-now world.

"I was shocked by some of the things I discovered," she continues. "There are girls who can live like that and feel okay about it. Some even enjoy it. Some get addicted to

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Binoche in 2000's *Chocolat*, for which she was nominated for a Best Actress Oscar; with William Shimell in 2010's *Certified Copy*, for which she won Best Actress at Cannes; with Denis Lavant in 1991's *The Lovers on the Bridge*; and in 1996's *The English Patient*, for which she won Best Supporting Actress at both the Oscars and the BAFTAs

the ease of it, the money. So now I don't feel I can judge it. But as a mother I want to tell young girls going into it, 'Be careful. Protect yourself. Think of yourself as a woman later in life and how you might feel.' My character is so naive."

Now 47 (she turns 48 in March), Binoche has always pursued creative outlets beyond acting. She's exhibited her artwork and has published a book of her ink portraits. In 2008, she devised the dance-drama *in-i* with choreographer Akram Khan, premiering it at the National Theatre in London before taking it on a world tour. She's also an avid social and political activist, fighting for immigrant rights in France and continuing to lobby on behalf of Jafar Panahi, the Iranian filmmaker who has been detained and banned from making films in his country.

Binoche is drawn to sober intellectual work rather than the flashy or commercial (she famously turned down Steven Spielberg when he wooed her for *Jurassic Park*). In recent years she has worked with directors from Argentina, Iran, Austria, Israel, China, Poland, France and Hollywood, as if gripped by experiential wanderlust. She chalks up her nomadic work ethic to a belief that the French film industry doesn't always know what to do with her, perhaps epitomised by Gérard Depardieu's ungallant comment a few years ago that he couldn't understand why Binoche was held in such esteem. In response, the actress told *Empire* magazine, "I understand you don't have to like everyone and you can dislike someone's work. But I don't understand the violence [of what he said]... It is his problem."

In her personal life, Binoche has always had a strong affinity for filmmakers and fellow actors, with most of her romantic relationships springing from film projects. Past lovers include directors Leos Carax and Santiago Amigorena, and co-stars Olivier Martinez and Benoît Magimel, father to her daughter (Raphaël's is professional scuba diver André Halle).

What has never changed for Binoche are the motivations that make her say yes to the acclaimed filmmakers who want to work with her. "What's important to me is that the director has personality and is interested in the human heart, the human soul and human lives," she says. "And that we're going to go through this journey together. It's important to have a good sense of sharing. It's not about me obeying anybody and it's not about the director following what I want either."

Here, Binoche is no doubt referring to that aforementioned reputation for being a strong-willed collaborator. "I think I'm very patient and always willing to try things," she says with a smile. "But I have some resistance as well because I have my own vision, as I think all actors should before they start a movie."

Next up could be the role of her lifetime, portraying Camille Claudel in *La Créatrice*, a biopic about the years the tormented sculptress and lover of Auguste Rodin spent in an asylum. "It's going to be a big challenge," Binoche says with some understatement, "but I am very excited by it." And should it fail to capture the critical and public imagination? *C'est la vie*, as far as she's concerned. "I'm always expecting films not to work, so when they do I'm very surprised. There's a great producer who worked with Godard who once said when he was collecting a prize, 'I was only trying not to lose too much money.' It's never about trying to win; it's about trying not to lose too much money." ■

***Elles* opens on 20th April in the UK**

Matt Mueller contributes to Total Film, Screen International, Wonderland, Entertainment Weekly and The Guardian