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LOUISE  
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OFFICIAL SELECTION  
**UN CERTAIN REGARD**  
FESTIVAL DE CANNES

# I AM A SOLDIER

A FILM BY LAURENT LARIVIÈRE

WITH  
ANNE BENOIT AND LAURENT CAPELLUTO

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A film by **Laurent Larivière**

with  
Louise Bourgoïn, Jean-Hugues Anglade,  
Anne Benoit, Laurent Capelluto

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## **SYNOPSIS**

Sandrine, 30 years old, is forced to return home in Roubaix to live with her mother. She is unemployed and accepts to work with her uncle in a kennel, which turns out to be a hub for dog trafficking from Eastern Europe. She rapidly acquires authority and respect in this world dominated by men, and earns the money that could provide her with her freedom. But sometimes, even good soldiers stop taking orders.

# LAURENT LARIVIÈRE

## INTERVIEW

### **I AM A SOLDIER deals with a very contemporary subject.**

I wanted to talk about the sense of shame and failure that drives someone to return to the family fold after trying, unsuccessfully, to build a better future for themselves elsewhere. In the film, far from being the anticipated refuge, the family paradoxically becomes the setting for a confrontation and a loss.

**Sandrine's family is, itself, bearing the shame you allude to: Martine, the mother, a saleswoman in a supermarket, is the victim of harassment by her very young superior, who diminishes and bullies her. Audrey, her sister, is a modest town hall employee whose husband goes from one short-term contract to the next with little hope of ever finding a permanent position.**

They are all victims of the social determinism from which Sandrine tried to escape and her return upsets the balance they have established around the fantasy of her success. When she was absent, they missed her - like all those who leave, she was the *favourite child* - back in the fold, she stirs up frustrations.

**From the first scene, when Sandrine hands back the keys to the tiny studio flat she occupied while brushing off the real estate agent's humiliating comments, we feel the inner violence that drives the young woman; a violence aggravated by the welcome provided by her mother: she is happy to see her daughter, but has neither the time nor the space for her.**

Her mother is out at work all day and her sister and brother-in-law have moved into her childhood bedroom. She accepts this and resigns herself to sleeping on the sofa. But this suppressed tension and the extreme solitude in which the character finds herself is continually offset by the real love that runs throughout this family. None of its members are pieces apart.

**This ambivalence is almost the source of the heroine's growing unease...**

For much of the film, Sandrine is responding to the desires of others. There's no place for her? She accepts it. She's told that she has to find work? She looks for work. He uncle offers her a job in his kennels? She makes the best of it. And finds herself caught up in animal trafficking. She follows her uncle: by trying to satisfy her family and rebuild herself within its midst, she is gradually destroying herself.

**At no time does Sandrine question the treatment of the puppies brought in illegally over the Belgian border from Slovenia and Poland.**

Sandrine doesn't concern herself with ethics. For example, she never, or almost never, thinks about the violence used against the animals: as if it's just the way of things, a necessary evil. For her, as for many others, beggars can't be choosers.

**Few people know about the trafficking that's so beneficial to the pet trade.**

I came across it by chance. François Decodts, my co-writer, and I didn't want this to be the main subject of our film, but a framework that allowed us to follow the trajectory of our characters by echoing their own violence. However, it is a very cruel and a very prolific

reality. I read an article in *Liberation* newspaper saying that, according to the WWF, the trafficking of domestic or wild animals is the third largest illegal trade in the world after drugs and weapons and worth around 15 billion Euros. France is the European country with the largest number of domestic animals, including 8 million dogs... And only 150,000 of the 600,000 dogs sold annually in France come from registered French breeders. This leaves room for imports from Eastern countries in which numerous "puppy mills" exist. Beyond this fact, the trafficking became a kind of allegory of contemporary cruelty.

**By gradually establishing herself in the exclusively male and marginal world frequented by Henri, her uncle, Sandrine ends up becoming like these men and starts trafficking for herself on the side.**

Would she have done this if Henri had not been so violent after she bought the sick puppies that he then made her pay for? Probably not. By doing this, Sandrine thinks she'll be winning her freedom. But she makes the wrong choice. What she takes for salvation is only another step toward self-destruction. Sandrine is fighting on all fronts - against her roots, against her circumstances and against the reality of the world - but her weapons are insufficient. Only her instincts and inner strength will allow her to eventually overcome the confusion with which she is struggling at that precise moment.

**She could take the hand held out to her by Pierre, the vet. He loves her, and is the only one to really look at her and to pick up on her discontent.**

But she doesn't. She can neither accept his desire nor hear his words: her solitude is enclosing her in a relentless spiral. She can only turn the violence against herself. She accumulates it, in layers: the failure of Paris and her return, which was more onerous than expected, then the violence of the business in which she's become embroiled and the horror of the dead animals that her uncle asks her to burn. Added to this is the brutal intervention by the customs officials on the highway, and the fact that her uncle almost strangles her. She could stop everything, but she doesn't have the strength. It's only when she reaches a point of no return and has lost all hope that she can finally hope to find herself... and escape. Yes, it's like a rite of passage. Through her brush with death, she understands that the recognition of her existence can only be achieved through herself and not through her family: its ties are also shackles. This idea also shows that we sometimes have to die to ourselves to begin to exist and to say, "I".

**The film is built entirely around this paradox.**

All the characters in this family, including Henri, have a weight, density and complexity that meant a great deal to me. Despite their difficulties and despite their ambiguity, they are capable of love and solidarity. A simple game of cards between the mother and her daughters suddenly becomes a moment of joy that allows them to face the prospect of the next day. These people are not destitute: they fight, they are alive and they have desires.

**They may also be prone to violent fits of despair, as in the wonderful scene where Sandrine's brother-in-law begins to tear down the walls of the house he is unable to complete.**

"How do other people do it?" he yells. Sandrine manages to calm him by also setting about the building's foundations. She acts as a mirror for him, and vice versa, because it's a delicate question put to Sandrine, who finds a way out, from then on, through

trafficking. Which raises a second question: "How far are we willing to go to find a place in society?". Their situations reflect one another, each one bringing their own different answers.

**Martine, the mother, played by Anne Benoit, embodies the protagonists' contradictions very well: she is loving and honest, resigned to her fate whilst accommodating her brother's little deals and more or less consciously closing her eyes to what happens to her daughter...**

Martine swings perpetually from one movement to another. She is upset by the lack of trust shown by Sandrine, who has hidden her problems from her, and deeply upset by what she learns about her brother. But she can never bring herself to break completely with him. There's always an ambiguity about her. Anne Benoit imbues the character with sensitivity, fragility and an incredible porosity.

**Her presence brings a lot of gentleness and contrast to the film.**

Despite the film being tense, dark and somewhat harsh, I don't want it to be all one colour. We needed to introduce some breathing spaces and brief moments of respite. The violence that runs through the film doesn't preclude some moments of grace.

**Henri, who acts as a sort of "godfather" in this family, is a great film noir character.**

He is full of grey areas: although rude, self-centred and manipulative, he is also engaging and closely linked to his family; a pretty brutal link he "maintains" by slipping money to one and all. Henri is ultimately the only person to show Sandrine the concrete reality of her failure. "Why leave? You can see! You came back!" he replies when asked if he has ever thought of leaving everything behind. He has no empathy, no ability to perceive other people. He uses his niece as a soldier: she's the one who scrubs and cleans, who carries the bags, and is sent to the front to make his trafficking productive.

**He has an almost incestuous relationship with his sister and his niece.**

From the moment I wrote the script it was clear to me that Henri and Martine had a somewhat troubled relationship. But I didn't want to underline anything and I hardly mentioned it to the actors. It had to gradually emerge, to pass through the body. The relationship with Sandrine gradually developed during filming, as a further assault upon the young woman; a silent threat that would constitute an additional obstacle in her quest for freedom. After the night on the highway, and even though she calls Pierre for help, it's to Henri she flies when the two men leap at each other's throats. It comes out as something wilfully sensual in the scene where she treats his wounds: she runs her hand through his hair and he gently stroked hers... In the next scene, he lies her down on the desk and threatens to strangle her. We'd be entitled to see something suggestive in that!

**Henri leads a double life: on the one side the kennel and the family; on the other a mistress and the laundering of money earned in apartments and car parks. It's as if he is reluctant to leave his social milieu: he helps his family, and has built an empire elsewhere. The shame is continuing to work at full capacity.**

Yes, shame is everywhere. Each character has something to hide. But one can imagine that Henri, despite his calculating side, is in love. I believe he is.

**Can we say that Henri finds the path of redemption?**

Yes and no. There is something very honourable in the momentum that pushes him to walk through the door of the police station, but at the same time, we feel that he will negotiate to save his skin. Everything has a price with him.

**He becomes human after all...**

He becomes a lost boy, in tears in front of a family home that is now forbidden to him. His weakness at that moment interests me, because it authorises the cruelty that precedes it. I was impressed by Jean-Hugues Anglade's intimate understanding of this character.

**The nuances here are extremely subtle.**

Nothing interests me more than a statement being immediately offset by a different, discordant note. It is this complexity, the way we all have of twisting reality that I want to give to the cinema; neither all black nor all white.

**Sandrine frees herself from her failures by agreeing to appear naked in front of Pierre, as he did before her, to make her believe in him. She finally accepts her own vulnerability...**

This scene happens at the very end of the film, after her uncle's attack, where she washes herself for a long time, as if to scour away a metaphysical evil, and above all after the bite, the hospital and her convalescence. Sandrine takes the risk of showing herself as she is and, in a certain way, finally accepts the inner journey she has taken; she symbolically takes the hand extended to her by Pierre and acknowledges and faces her truth. She is no longer afraid. She won't have a relationship with Pierre. She will leave without him. But this meeting is crucial: this man has fixed her.

**It's a very bright moment of the film.**

Yes, I associate it with the clarity of Sandrine's victory and the strength of her commitment.

**You are very economical with dialogue.**

I only use it as a last resort. I work a lot on the structure of my films: for me, the meaning and emotion must create images and collisions between one scene and the next. When my characters speak, it is only to discuss concrete issues - not to reveal their moods.

**From the beginning to the end of the film, we feel as though we're physically linked to the character of Sandrine.**

Yes, we accompany her through to her liberation in the most intimate way. We share painful moments with her and others that are sweeter. We literally feel her inability to get out of the spiral within which she's caught. I work a lot on identification. It is a sensory approach that's very important to me and which takes place outside of any psychological narrative.

**While respecting a fairly classic style of dramatic composition, you free yourself of it quite quickly to lead the audience into far less comfortable areas.**

I try to inspire confidence by using familiar codes, all the better to lead the audience on to more slippery ground. It's about finding a point of balance between narrative and sensory cinema, and ultimately filming what is not seen. This, for me, is the whole challenge of the cinema.

**You oscillate constantly between a very realistic tone and scenes that flirt with the fantastic - the attack of the dog, for example, is almost dreamlike...**

It's always about conveying physical sensations to the audience, whether they are immediate, "tied to the stake of the moment", distorted or sublimated: they are a reflection of our relationship with the world.

**The sound and music also play a very important role.**

The sound is in keeping with what is going on inside the protagonists: their tension is portrayed in strident, muffled or distorted sounds that short-circuit the sounds of normal life. We wanted, with Martin Wheeler, who composed the music for the film, to find a melody that adhered closely to the path that Sandrine forges out of the chaos of her life: the bass clarinet, which is used in the film, brings the gravity, the breath and the momentum that characterise her.

**Why did you want to use *Quand revient la nuit*, the Johnny Hallyday song from the sixties that inspired the title of the film?**

It's the same idea of introducing a moment of levity into the harshness of the events. I wanted a musical break and I was seduced both by the melody and Johnny Hallyday's voice at that time. And then the text speaks for itself.

**Did you have any films in mind when you were preparing to direct the film?**

I thought of the Dardenne brothers, because of the extremely concrete relationship they have with reality. And the most spectacular side of James Gray's achievements – particularly for the scene on the highway.

**Louise Bourgoïn, who plays Sandrine, played a part in the film coming to be.**

She came to see one of my shows in the theatre and I found her to be very different from the idea that I had of her. We became friends. We come from the same social background and share the same concerns. I wrote the script thinking of Louise: I sensed that she had an anger to express that hadn't been seen at that time in the cinema.

**Was she aware of the project?**

I didn't want her to feel obliged in any way. One day, she asked if she could read a version and called me up, full of enthusiasm for it. It was only then that I told her that I'd written the part for her. "I didn't dare hope it was the case" she said. "I was thinking that the actress you gave the part to would be very lucky." I'm the lucky one. Louise's instincts as an actress are awesome.

**I AM A SOLDIER is your first feature, but you'd already made a name for yourself with short and medium-length films, the best-known, J'AI PRIS LA Foudre in 2006, and LES LARMES in 2010, having been highly acclaimed.**

Not having been to film school, short films have been where I've learned my trade. Each of them deals with some sort of liberation: the main character always has to resolve a personal enigma allowing him or her to reach a new level of consciousness. But in I AM A SOLDIER, the heroine faces the real world for the first time. I'm making progress.

# FILMOGRAPHY

Writer and director Laurent Larivière has directed six award-winning short films shown at several festivals (Belfort, Pantin, Villeurbanne, FID Marseille, Hors Pistes Beaubourg, Rotterdam...). He has also filmed for the theatre and dance shows. I AM A SOLDIER is his first feature film.

## FEATURE FILMS

2015 **I AM A SOLDIER**

## SHORT FILMS

2014 **TOUS LES ADULTES NE SONT PAS MÉCHANTS**

2011 **LES ÉLUS DE LA TERRE**

2010 **LES LARMES**

2009 **AU BOUT DES BRANCHES**

2006 **J'AI PRIS LA Foudre**

1999 **L'UN DANS L'AUTRE**

## DOCUMENTARY

2010 **LES LARMES : LA RÉCOLTE**

# FRANÇOIS DECODTS

## SCRIPTWRITER

After writing I AM A SOLDIER by Laurent Larivière, François Decodts wrote the script for the second feature film by Jean-Jacques Jauffret (director of HEAT WAVE, Directors' Fortnight 2011) and is currently working on Valérie Manns' first feature (LES ENFANTS PERDUS; SIMONE VEIL: UNE LOI AU NOM DES FEMMES).

# LOUISE BOURGOUIN

## SELECTIVE FILMOGRAPHY

- 2015 **I AM A SOLDIER** by Laurent LARIVIÈRE  
**LES CHEVALIERS BLANCS** by Joachim LAFOSSE
- 2014 **THE LOVE PUNCH** by Joël HOPKINS  
**GOING AWAY** by Nicole GARCIA
- 2013 **MISS AND THE DOCTORS** by Axelle ROPERT
- 2013 **THE NUN** by Guillaume NICLOUX
- 2012 **LOVE LASTS THREE YEARS** by Frédéric BEIGBEDER
- 2011 **A HAPPY EVENT** by Rémi BEZANÇON
- 2010 **BLACK HEAVEN** by Gilles MARCHAND  
**SWEET VALENTINE** by Emma LUCHINI  
**THE EXTRAORDINARY ADVENTURE OF ADELE BLANC-SEC**  
by Luc BESSON  
**WHITE AS SNOW** by Christophe BLANC
- 2009 **LITTLE NICHOLAS** by Laurent TIRARD
- 2008 **THE GIRL FROM MONACO** by Anne FONTAINE
- 2002 **WOMEN OR CHILDREN FIRST** by Manuel POIRIER

# JEAN-HUGUES ANGLADE

## SELECTIVE FILMOGRAPHY

- 2015 **I AM A SOLDIER** by Laurent LARIVIÈRE
- 2014 **SUBURRA** by Stefano SOLLIMA
- 2013 **BACK IN CRIME** by Germinal ALVAREZ
- 2009 **PERSÉCUTION** by Patrice CHÉREAU
- 2008 **VILLA AMALIA** by Benoît JACQUOT
- 2003 **IT'S EASIER FOR A CAMEL...** by Valéria BRUNI-TEDESCHI
- 1998 **ELECTIVE AFFINITIES** by the TAVIANI brotheri
- 1995 **NELLY AND Mr. ARNAUD** by Claude SAUTET
- 1994 **QUEEN MARGOT** by Patrice CHÉREAU
- 1990 **SUMMER NIGHT IN TOWN** by Michel DEVILLE  
**NIKITA** by Luc BESSON
- 1986 **BETTY BLUE** by Jean-Jacques BEINEIX
- 1985 **SUBWAY** by Luc BESSON
- 1983 **THE WOUNDED MAN** by Patrice CHÉREAU

# ANNE BENOIT

## SELECTIVE FILMOGRAPHY

- 2015 **I AM A SOLDIER** by Laurent LARIVIÈRE  
**TROIS SOUVENIRS DE MA JEUNESSE** by Arnaud DESPLECHIN
- 2014 **JE VOUS SOUHAITE D'ÊTRE FOLLEMENT AIMÉE** by Ounie LECOMTE
- 2013 **THE GREAT MAN** by Sarah LEONOR  
**THE ULTIMATE ACCESSORY** by Valérie LEMERCIER
- 2012 **LOUISE WIMMER** by Cyril MENNEGUN  
**FAREWELL, MY QUEEN** by Benoît JACQUOT
- 2010 **MY LITTLE PRINCESS** by Eva IONESCO  
**JE N'AI RIEN OUBLIÉ** by Bruno CHICHE  
**ON TOUR** by Mathieu AMALRIC
- 2009 **LILY SOMETIMES** by Fabienne BERTHAUD  
**THE ROUND UP** by Roselyne BOSCH
- 2008 **SÉRAPHINE** by Martin PROVOST  
**STELLA** by Sylvie VERHEYDE
- 2007 **DARLING** by Christine CARRIERE
- 2006 **LADY CHATTERLEY** by Pascale FERRAN

# LAURENT CAPELLUTO

## SELECTIVE FILMOGRAPHY

- 2015 **I AM A SOLDIER** by Laurent LARIVIÈRE  
**I'M ALL YOURS** by Baya KASMI
- 2014 **THE CLEARSTREAM AFFAIR** by Vincent GARENQ
- 2013 **ORIENT EXTREME** by Jacques DESCHAMPS  
**DOMESTIC LIFE** by Isabelle CZAJKA
- 2012 **JUST A SIGH** by Jérôme BONNELL  
**THREE WORLDS** by Catherine CORSINI  
**LOVE** by Michael HANEKE
- 2011 **OPERATION LIBERTAD** by Nicolas WADIMOFF  
**THE LONG FALLING** by Martin PROVOST
- 2010 **LIGHTS OUT** by Fabrice GOBERT
- 2009 **THE HIGH LIFE** by Emmanuel SALINGER  
**Mr. NOBODY** by Jaco VAN DORMAEL  
**OSS 117 RIO LOST IN RIO** by Michel HAZANAVICIUS
- 2007 **A CHRISTMAS TALE** by Arnaud DESPLECHIN

## CAST LIST

**Louise BOURGOIN** Sandrine  
**Jean-Hugues ANGLADE** Henri  
**Anne BENOIT** Martine  
**Laurent CAPELLUTO** Pierre  
**Nina MEURISSE** Audrey  
**Nathanaël MAÏNI** Tony  
**Angelo BISON** Roberto  
**Thomas SCIMECA** Fabien  
**Eva-Luuna MATHUES** Lola  
**Isabelle MALIN** The job interview woman  
**Vittoria SCOGNAMIGLIO** The hairless dog owner  
**Jocelyne DESVERCHÈRE** The pet shop woman  
**Fatima SOUHALIA-MANET** Henri's lover  
**Stéphanie BLANCHOU** The rejected customer  
**Eloïse VEREECKEN** Martine's young boss  
**Thibaud PALIGOT** The real estate agent  
**Patrick LAMBERT** The farm man  
**Philippe RESIMONT** Daniel, Henri's customer  
**Jean-Benoît UGEUX** The womanizer at Roberto's  
**Izabella KAROLCZUK** Lorna, the polish trafficker  
**Nicolas JANSSENS** Zadec, the polish trafficker

## CREW LIST

**Director** Laurent LARIVIÈRE  
**Screenplay** Laurent LARIVIÈRE and François DECODTS  
**Director of photography** David CHIZALLET  
**Sound** Antoine-Basile MERCIER  
**Editing** Marie-Pierre FRAPPIER  
**Music** Martin WHEELER  
**Sound editing** Benoît GARGONNE  
**Mixing** Nicolas D'HALLUIN  
**Calibration** Yov MOOR  
**Setting** Véronique MÉLERY  
**Costumes designer** Frédérique LEROY  
**Make-up Artist/Hairdresser** Florence THONET and Anne MORALIS  
**Stage manager** Arnaud AUBEY  
**First assistant** Alexandra DENNI  
**Script** Elodie VAN BEUREN  
**Production director** Michel MINTROT  
**Producers** Michel FELLER and Dominique BESNEHARD  
**Coproducers** Hubert TOINT,  
Adrian POLITOWSKI  
and Gilles WATERKEYN  
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