

# La Mif

a film by Fred Baillif

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## Director's note

In recent years, several women who had been sexually abused opened up to me. Carried by the desire to make films that are socially engaged, I collected their testimonies and used them as a basis for this project. One topic was recurring: the denial of the victim's relatives, which turned them into accomplices.

In need of characters and a setting for the story, I had the intuition that a children's home would be a breeding ground for situations of abuse. Faithful to my 'cinéma vérité' style, I decided to start a process of immersion. This is how I contacted Claudia, more than 20 years after having worked with her as an intern when studying social work. She was to retire soon and agreed to help, before sharing with me her strong frustration towards the youth protection system. This immediately inspired my story.

With my first two narrative projects, 'Tapis Rouge' (2015) and 'Edelweis Revolution' (2019), I developed a style inspired by direct cinema, based on real people and improvisation. What drives me with this method is the search of a natural performance and the fun of uncovering unsuspected talent in people who have had no previous acting experience.

With *La Mif* the actresses became the film's 'co-writers', as the access they gave me to their reality allowed me to build the story. This process offered fascinating outcomes. It started with individual interviews with each of the residents and the employees of the children's home, which led to

improvisation themes. We then carried workshops over two years, which progressively allowed characters to emerge. I gathered all the elements that had come out of these improvisations and wrote a script. It didn't have predetermined dialogues, but a general plot, an outline and some punchlines.

Most of the scenes take place within a real children's home, a location full of lies, family and work drama. A place that allowed us to work in a flexible way with natural actors in an environment that was familiar to them. With this choice, the boundaries with documentary were blurred and made the setting an essential aspect of the story.

After two years of preparation, we couldn't produce the film because the lack of written dialogues prevented us from getting classic funding options. But the girls were growing up so we decided to shoot the film anyway. In just over 2 weeks, the film was shot. All the dialogues were improvised and our flexibility allowed us to adapt the story to the actors' performances. In the editing phase, like in a documentary, the story evolved again based on what was captured. A first edit made the local fundraising possible, reaching RTS, Cinéforum and BAK.

To match the realistic style of acting, the cinematography had to be minimalist. My friend and dedicated DOP Joseph Areddy and I opted for a lot of natural light and a 360° "mise en scène" to give a better access to improvisation. Everything was shot handheld, in a very reactive way using mainly a 50mm lens to be as close to the characters as possible and to reinforce the feeling of claustrophobia felt by the protagonists.

Even though the children's home director Lora, interpreted by Claudia Grob, was to be the lead character, my desire to show various point of views pushed me in the direction of a hyperlink film. The young girls all had equal opportunities to occupy the story, depending on their desires and their inspiration 'in the moment' while shooting. Alongside, all the home's social workers also agreed to be part of the film and to interpret characters that would be close to their reality. Three professional actors were added to the group, Frédéric Landenberg (Seb), Nadim Ahmed (Malik) and Blaise Granget (François), the latter two having also trained as social workers.

They were key in facilitating the improvisations and helped with the non-professional actors' confidence. These multiple protagonists all helped to bring other themes to the story, which is the goal of this method. I wanted to be surprised by elements and dialogues that could arise at any moment. For example, I wanted to shed light on the complexity of social work, where

questions around sexuality are the source of strong disagreements. The secondary characters in the film have, for this reason, taken a more important place than I initially planned. Their values and views have all influenced the plot. This didn't distract me from the central theme of abuse accomplices, which remains key in the story. Therefore, the plot is built around Lora's character and is woven with the other narrative arcs developed in parallel. Through her journey in the film, Lora understands that her denial is a defense mechanism just like the young residents lie to themselves to survive.

This is what I tried to achieve artistically. Moreover, this film is a social work project. I don't want to insist on the gender aspect which is not an issue for me. I'd rather emphasize the social aspect of such an experience. These girls with intense backgrounds had to be heard, whether they had suffered abuse or not. Therefore, I trusted them through the process of being part of the film from the beginning.

Filmmaking is a tool that I used to help them gain self-confidence, delivering a strong and simple message to the audience: we can accomplish things. Sounds corny? Yes, I agree but I can already hear the audience ask them if this experience has changed their lives. While they are trying to find the best answer, I can already hear myself think; this is not about changing them, it is all about planting seeds.

*When I was a basketball player, I was a point guard. My role was to make my teammates play a better game. This is exactly what I am trying to do today as a film director. My teammates are non-professional actors and my mission is to help them express what they have been hiding to themselves sometimes for a long time.*