

Angel (2007)

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François Ozon (director)

Short Synopsis

Set in Edwardian England, and based on a novel by British writer Elizabeth Taylor, *Angel* follows the story of a girl from humble beginnings who climbs the social ladder by becoming a romance novelist. When her dreams come true Angel finds her life changing in unexpected ways. The first English feature by celebrated French director François Ozon, *Angel* is a moving melodrama and was nominated for the Golden Bear at the 2007 Berlin International Film Festival.

Long Synopsis

François Ozon's first English-language film is a lavish melodrama set in Edwardian England. Based on the novel 'The Real Life of Angel Deverell' by Elizabeth Taylor, it follows the life of the spirited and determined Angel (Romola Garai). In her final year of high school, the conceited and domineering teenager dreams of becoming the greatest romance novelist of all time. Against all odds, she produces a series of incredibly popular works under the patient administration of her literary agent (Sam Neill) and the skeptical eye of his wife (Ozon favourite Charlotte Rampling). Despite having no experience of life or love, Angel becomes an enormously successful, and her dreams of fame and fortune come true.

Passionate, driven and not entirely likeable, Angel inspires devotion in some, like her dutiful secretary Nora (Lucy Russell), and antipathy in others, like Nora's brother Esmé (Michael Fassbender). In Esmé, a talented but unsuccessful painter, Angel feels she has found a kindred spirit, and pursues him. They marry, but as the First World War breaks out, Angel realises she cannot hold her fortune in her hands forever.

Ozon infuses *Angel* with the intelligent camp humour of his previous films, and creates a complex and lavish melodrama. Nominated for the Golden Bear at the 2007 Berlin International Film Festival.

Genre: Drama

Country of origin: France / UK / Belgium

Original Language: English

Duration:

Technical Details: Colour

Sound Mix:

CBFC Ratings:

Director: François Ozon

Director's biography

Born in 1967, François Ozon is a French film director and screenwriter whose films are characterised by sharp satirical wit and a freewheeling view on human sexuality. Sometimes referred to as the *enfant terrible* of French cinema, he has a reputation as an original and provocative filmmaker. After studying direction at the French film school La Femis, Ozon made several acclaimed short films including *Une Robe D'Été* (1996) which won the Léopard de Demain Award at the 1996 Locarno Film Festival, and *Scènes de Lit* (1998). His feature film debut *Sitcom* (1998) was well received by critics and audiences, and was selected as part of the International Film Critics' Week at the 1998 Festival de Cannes.

8 Women (2002), a murder mystery and quirky musical in one, starred true icons on French cinema, Catherine Deneuve and Fanny Ardant among them, and became a huge commercial success. His 2003 film *Swimming Pool* starred Charlotte Rampling and was released to great critical acclaim. Ozon considered it a very personal film that allowed an insight into the difficult process of writing. *Angel* (2007), Ozon's first English-language production, screened at the 2007 Berlin International Film Festival.

Ozon's films continuously challenge the rules of conventional cinema by tackling taboo issues, including same-sex relationships. *Water Drops On Burning Rocks* (2000) received the Teddy Award, given to the best portrayal of gay and lesbian themes, at the 2000 Berlin International Film Festival. Today François Ozon is one of the most important young French film directors in the new "New Wave" of French cinema.

Filmography

Ricky (2009)

Angel (2007)

A Curtain Raiser (Un Lever de Rideau) (2006) (Short)

Time To Leave (Le Temps qui Reste) (2005)

5x2 (2004)

Swimming Pool (2003)

8 Women (8 Femmes) (2002)

Under The Sand (Sous le Sable) (2000)

Water Drops On Burning Rocks (Gouttes D'Eau Sur Pierres Brûlantes) (2000)

Criminal Lovers (Les Amants Criminels) (1999)

X 2000 (1998) (short)

Scènes de Lit (1998) (short)

Sitcom (1998)

See The Sea (Regarde la Mer) (1997) (short)

L'Homme Ideal (1996)

A Summer Dress (Une Robe D'Été) (1996) (short)

Jospin S'Éclaire (1995)

Little Death (La Petite Mort) (1995) (short)

Truth Or Dare (Action Vérité) (1994) (short)

Une Rose Entre Nous (1994) (short)

Victor (1993) (short)

Thomas Reconstitué (1992) (short)

Deux Plus Un (1991) (short)

Peau Contre Peau (1991) (short)

Le Trou Madame (1991) (short)

Une Goutte De Sang (1991) (short)

Mes Parents Un Jour D'Été (1990) (short)

Les Doigts dans Le Ventre (1988) (short)

Photo de Famille (1988) (short)

Screenplay: François Ozon
Martin Crimp

Director of Photography: Denis Lenoir

Editor: Muriel Breton

Producers: Olivier Delbosc and Marc Missonnier

Executive Producer: Tanya Seghatchian

Cast

Angel Romola Garai

Théo Sam Neill

Hermione Charlotte Rampling

Nora Lucy Russell

Esmé Michael Fassbender

Biography of Romola Garai

Romola Garai began her acting career when she was spotted in a school production by a casting director looking for girls to play Judi Dench in the TV drama *The Last Of The Blonde Bombshells* (2000). She quickly moved into films, and starred in *I Capture The Castle* (2003), *Nicholas Nickleby* (2002), *Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights* (2004) and *Vanity Fair* (2004). She was nominated for the Outstanding Newcomer Award by the 2004 Evening Standard Theatre Awards for her critically acclaimed role in the West End adaptation of George Eliot's novel, *Calico* (2004). While filming *Angel* (2007), she developed a strong relationship with director François Ozon, who refers to her as his 'muse.'

Selected filmography of Romola Garai

King Lear (2008)

Atonement (2007)

Running For River (2007)

Angel (2007)

Amazing Grace (2006)

As You Like It (2006)

Vanity Fair (2004)

Dirty Dancing: Havana Nights (2004)

I Capture The Castle (2003)

Nicholas Nickleby (2002)

Biography of Sam Neill

Born in Northern Ireland to army parents, Sam Neill attended university at Canterbury and Victoria. Following his graduation, he worked as a film director, editor and scriptwriter for the New Zealand National Film Unit for 6 years. His first role in a feature film was *Sleeping Dogs*

(1977). Neill then moved to Australia and his performance in *My Brilliant Career* (1979) was noticed in London and won him the lead role in *The Final Conflict* (1981). Throughout his career, Neill has worked steadily in the US, the UK and Australia. He achieved commercial and critical success with roles in *Jurassic Park* (1993) and *The Piano* (1993).

Selected filmography of Sam Neill

Angel (2007)

Wimbledon (2004)

Jurassic Park III (2001)

Bicentennial Man (1999)

The Horse Whisperer (1998)

Restoration (1995)

The Jungle Book (1994)

Jurassic Park (1993)

The Piano (1993)

The Hunt For Red October (1990)

Possession (1981)

The Final Conflict (1981)

Biography of Charlotte Rampling

Critically acclaimed actress Charlotte Rampling was born in England in 1946 and modeled before entering films in Richard Lester's *The Knack ...And How To Get It* (1965), followed by roles in *Georgy Girl* (1966) and Luchino Visconti's *La Caduta Degli Dei* (1969). She is best known for her role as a concentration camp survivor who is reunited with the Nazi guard who tortured her in Liliana Cavani's *Il Portiere di Notte* (1974). She has co-starred with legendary actors

including Sean Connery in *Zardoz* (1974), Robert Mitchum in *Farewell, My Lovely* (1975), Woody Allen in his *Stardust Memories* (1980), and Paul Newman in Sidney Lumet's *The Verdict* (1982).

Always willing to take on bold and challenging roles, Rampling shocked audiences in Nagisa Oshima's comedy *Max Mon Amour* (1986) when she played a woman in love with a chimpanzee. A favourite of director François Ozon, she has worked with him in *Under The Sand* (2000) and *Swimming Pool* (2003) and has enjoyed the distinction of having roles specially written for her. Rampling won an Honorary César Award in 2001 for her extraordinarily haunted performance in Ozon's *Under The Sand*, and she won Best European Actress Award at the 2003 European Film Academy Awards for her performance in *Swimming Pool*.

Selected filmography of Charlotte Rampling

Angel (2007)

Basic Instinct 2 (2006)

The Keys To The House (Le Chiavi di Casa) (2004)

Swimming Pool (2003)

Under the Sand (Sous le Sable) (2000)

The Cherry Orchard (La Cerisaie) (1999)

The Wings Of The Dove (1997)

Max Mon Amour (1986)

Sadness And Beauty (Tristesse et Beauté) (1985)

The Night Porter (Il Portiere di Notte) (1974)

Georgy Girl (1966)

The Knack ...And How To Get It (1965)

Awards

2007 Berlin International Film Festival, Nominated Golden Bear

Screenings

2008

Dublin Film Festival
Glasgow Film Festival
London Lesbian and Gay Film Festival
Belfast Film Festival

2007

Berlin International Film Festival
London Film Festival
Karlovy Vary Film Festival
Cinemanila International Film Festival
Toronto International Film Festival
Tokyo International Film Festival
London Film Festival

Specials

An interview with the director: Claire Vassé speaks with François Ozon about *Angel*:

***Angel* is adapted from a novel by Elizabeth Taylor. Why this particular book?**

I read it in one sitting 5 or 6 years ago and thought it would be a perfect opportunity to try an epic film in the tradition of the 1930s and 40s melodramas, recounting the rise and fall of a flamboyant character. And I fell in love with *Angel*, she amused and fascinated me, and ultimately touched me very deeply. So I asked my producers to buy the rights. It seemed clear that the story wouldn't work if it were transposed to France. It's a very English story, in the tradition of English women writers. The character of *Angel* was inspired by Marie Corelli, a contemporary of Oscar Wilde and Queen Victoria's favorite writer. Corelli was one of the first writers to become a star, writing bestsellers for an adoring public. Today she has been totally forgotten, even in England. She had no equivalent in France in her day.

In the meantime, you tackled another portrait of a woman writer in *Swimming Pool*.

That was a chance to get my feet wet, no pun intended! At the time, I didn't feel ready to adapt *Angel*, but *Swimming Pool* allowed me to explore some of the same themes: the relationship between a writer and her publisher, the frontier between reality and fiction, the origins of creative inspiration and certain aspects of British culture. A few years later I finally felt ready to take on the English language and Elizabeth Taylor's novel.

How did you go about adapting the book?

My main challenge was to make Angel likeable. In Elizabeth Taylor's book, the character is often grotesque. The author takes a rather sardonic view of Angel, her books and her behavior. Taylor acknowledges her ability to write and her drive to become famous, but ridicules her constantly, describing her as bizarre and unattractive. I didn't think we'd want to spend two hours with such an utterly negative character on screen, whereas in the book the cruelty works. I felt it was important that Angel be charming and endearing despite her more obnoxious, even nasty, characteristics. Scarlett O'Hara immediately came to mind. She is truly a character you love and hate at the same time. I wanted Angel to be aware of her powers of seduction and use them, particularly with her publisher and Nora. My Angel is more manipulative than Elizabeth Taylor's. But in a playful, amusing way, not perverse. In the beginning, everyone criticizes her: her teacher, her mother, her aunt, the publisher's wife. We can deduce that Angel and her work are misunderstood. This inspires sympathy for her and piques our curiosity, especially when she's writing. I wanted to draw the audience in before revealing, later in the film, that what's she writing might not actually be great literature.

I'd take it further and say we are drawn in by her determination to write, and aren't concerned about how good the writing is.

We realize that Angel's writing is not brilliant about twenty minutes into the film, when she's watching a play that has been adapted from one of her novels. That scene was invented to visually illustrate the essence of her writing. But I tried to temper the ridicule and the clear absence of literary merit with Angel's emotional reaction to her success. I wanted to show the creative force of someone who is capable of inventing an imaginary world, and who takes great pleasure in doing it. How good the mystery or romance writer is doesn't interest me, it's their energy and inspiration. Where does it come from? How does it permeate their very being, blurring the line between reality and imagination? Does art breathe life into us, or suck it out? How committed must one be to one's art? Angel and Esmé are completely different, but they are both committed to their art. And they both lead failed lives. Esmé because he is weak, and lacks faith in his work. But in the end, perhaps Esmé, the avant-garde artist with integrity, will be the one who is remembered, while Angel, who had the strength to believe in her art and was indeed buoyed by her lack of self-doubt, will be forgotten. Nevertheless, it cannot be

denied that she touched people in her time, provided escape. So, which is more important if you're an artist? Having fame, fortune and acclaim during your lifetime before sliding into oblivion? Or struggling in the shadows and gaining recognition only after you're dead, like Van Gogh?

Do you feel closer to Angel or Esmé?

What matters to me is being able to create in the here and now. Will my work survive the test of time? I don't ask myself that question, it would paralyze me. Art can cross centuries, but it's also made for immediate consumption. I can relate to Angel's sense of urgency, her drive to create. Her pragmatism gets her out of her social condition. Her art is in service to her life. It allows her to buy her mansion, surround herself in luxury, get the man she loves and support him financially.

Despite his lies, Angel sincerely loves Esmé.

In the book, the love story was clearly a sham: Angel was in love with the idea of this romantic, brooding painter, their honeymoon was a catastrophe, Esmé was only in it for the money. Here again, I felt that in order for us to like Angel on screen, we had to believe in the sincerity of her love. Angel is mainly in love with her own personal idea of what love is, but at the same time she fervently believes in it, and she truly wants to help Esmé.

What about Nora's desire for Angel?

In the book the homosexual subtext was present, but Nora was really ugly, she even had a mustache. I softened her up a bit, tempered her frustration and bitterness, brought her out of the shadows. I wanted her to have some appeal, not just be a slavish doormat devoted body and soul to her idol. In the book, Nora keeps her brother's mistress a secret from Angel in order to keep Angel for herself. In the film, Nora eventually tells Angel the truth about her brother's mistress. But shouldn't she have told Angel earlier, right after catching Esmé in the act? Suddenly Nora has a tragic dimension. She becomes an accomplice to Angel's suffering, torn between her desire for Angel and her bond with her brother.

You say you couldn't have brought a thoroughly despicable character to the screen. Does this suggest a more direct approach to emotion in your work, as we've seen in *Under The Sand or Time To Leave*?

If I'd followed the book, the whole movie would have been like the scene where Angel dines with her publisher, where she behaves like a hysterical, manipulative monster. I could have continued playing with this rather farcical caricature, but I also wanted to explore Angel's complexities, discover her fragility behind the protective shield of her image as a strong woman

who has rapidly climbed the social ladder. Her rise is all the more spectacular because she's a woman. She's her own boss, she chooses her husband, buys her own house and controls her career. Essentially she has broken free of her Edwardian shackles. She's sort of an early feminist. Women today can relate to her. But I wanted to show all sides of that coin, and reveal her multiple facets. Angel has built her life on lies and suppressed emotions. She is often in situations where she's playing a role, acting. But I also included scenes where she has no other choice than to be herself, like when she's humiliated at school, or when her mother dies. That scene was a mere line in the book, but I felt it could be a key moment of truth for Angel. She's devastated and feels abandoned. However that doesn't stop her from playing a "woe is me" scene for a journalist soon afterwards. I really wanted to capture this ambiguity in Angel, to alternate between distancing and Identification.

We find the same layering of emotions at Esmé's funeral. The text Angel reads at church reveals that she has rewritten their love story, and we could assume her tears are exaggerated. But I think Angel is sincerely moved. She tells the story of two star-crossed lovers and their attempted suicide, which is absurd and bears no resemblance to the reality of Esmé's death, but she believes it. Deep down, Angel is a little girl who dreams of money, success and her Prince Charming. Like many teenagers today.

***Time To Leave* ends with a shot gradually emptying out. With this film, you've moved away from such minimalism.**

Yes, *Angel* brought me into a much more baroque, ornate world, while my last few films were getting increasingly spare in detail. *Angel* is choc-a-bloc with vivid colors, a myriad of characters weaving tangled webs, single scenes covering the gamut of emotions and contradictions... But the film also ends on a rather simple note, accompanying Angel into poverty and emotional solitude. What I found most fascinating, beyond tackling the melodrama, was working with the passage of time: using ellipses, finding striking visual ways to illustrate turning points in a character's life, and experimenting with cross fades for the first time.

And the music? As with the editing, was it a question of finding an emotional balance?

I had in mind the music Frank Skinner composed for the Douglas Sirk melodramas at Universal. I even used some of it when we started editing the film and found it worked brilliantly. But I came to realize that it sounds dated to today's audience. So I asked my composer Philippe Rombi to take inspiration from Skinner's melodramatic music and not be afraid to wax lyrical, while at the same time coming up with a theme melody that reflects Angel's secret aspirations and thus facilitates audience identification with her.

Is it just a coincidence that you took on such complex, classical material in England, with English actors?

Right from the start, the English actors brought depth and complexity to the scenes, along with a level of acting that I have rarely seen. They prepared their roles in advance, using my indications and our conversations to really get inside their characters and bring them to life. Whereas French actors tend to work on a day-by-day basis, English actors are more like distance runners. Romola said she would work on her scenes a week in advance. It was a very pleasant surprise to see such hardworking, dedicated actors. Every day Romola would have a big scene to play and need to tap into a wide emotional spectrum. She never grew tired, she stayed the frenetic course with no complaints. The scenes were not shot in chronological order, but she was always prepared to play different ages and modify her accent to fit the scene we were doing.

What is it like directing actors in a language which is not your own?

I was apprehensive about it, but I soon managed to make myself understood. I knew my dialogues in French and I had worked closely with Martin Crimp on the English adaptation. We talked a lot, and he would explain the nuances of the language and his reasons for not always translating the French literally. In English, it's often possible to shorten the text and get straight to the point, without sacrificing ambiguity or irony. I wanted dialogue in the spirit of Oscar Wilde, lines that would give the actors something to work with but didn't sound too written. This seems easier to do in English than in French.

How did you go about casting the film?

Stories of this caliber are usually referred to as "star vehicles" in Hollywood. As a matter of fact, an American studio was interested in the film, but only on the condition that I work with an American screenwriter for a year and come up with a happy ending. If I did that, they promised they'd get me an American star! I preferred doing the film my way, with lesser-known actors and a smaller budget. I worked with a wonderful English casting director who introduced me to the current crop of young British actors. I did careful screen tests and chose actors who were enthusiastic and available, and who hadn't yet gotten their big break in England.

What persuaded you to choose Romola Garai?

Romola understood the role. She wasn't afraid of the more grotesque aspects of Angel's character, and she brought charm and naivety to the part, with her big, dreamy, childlike eyes. Plus, she really liked Angel. Not all the actresses did. Many of them found her monstrous and mean, an anti-heroine, a liar, a failure - she frightened them! Whereas Romola played it straight, she approached Angel and Angel's life with no disdain whatsoever.

Michael Fassbender, who plays Esmé, is a revelation in the film.

In order for a modern audience to believe in Angel and Esmé as a couple, there had to be strong chemistry between them. And the young painter needed to be real, carnal, charismatic, insolent. Michael Fassbender has those qualities, he's a mix of irony and brute force. He's Irish, he has a different accent and a different manner than the English, he's more quirky and raw. As for Sam Neill, he read the script right away and loved it. He found it both touching and amusing. His enthusiasm was a great comfort to me throughout the shoot.

And working with Charlotte Rampling again?

I'd worked with Charlotte twice before, and it meant a lot to me to have her with me on my first English-language film. It was really out of friendship that she accepted the small role of Hermione, who mirrors the audience's dubious attitude toward Angel. Her character is somewhat removed from the action. At the beginning, she finds Angel uncouth and annoying and thus judges her harshly, but her opinion gradually changes over the course of the film and by the end she defends Angel, saying that while she doesn't care for the writer, she understands the woman and feels some admiration for what she has accomplished.

And Lucy Russell?

I saw a lot of actresses for the role of Nora. During the screen tests, I realized that many of them actually wanted to be Angel. As soon as they'd finish reading, they'd say to me "I could play Angel too, I am Angel!" They had no desire to play a supporting role, whereas Lucy Russell didn't mind. She showed up for her screen test dressed like an old maid, with thick glasses and her hair in a strict bun. She was actually there to play Nora! Of course the role is far less glamorous than that of Angel, but Lucy was smart enough to know that it is often the person in the shadows who gets noticed, even if she's not the one wearing the beautiful dresses. And like Charlotte, Lucy speaks fluent French, so she was my second crutch on the set!

Who actually painted Esmé's paintings?

My production designer Katia Wyzkop, who also worked on Pialat's *Van Gogh*, contacted Gilbert Pignol, the artist who did the paintings for that film. It was quite difficult to imagine Esmé's style, so we started with what Angel would like - ostentatious paintings which are all style and no substance - and conjured up the opposite. Esmé's work is at the other end of the spectrum, he's a dark, tortured Expressionist. He likes to paint cemeteries and working-class housing allotments, not your typical subject matter. Angel hates his paintings. She thinks art should be colorful, pretty and fun - it should enhance reality. For the portrait of Angel, we took

our inspiration from the work of Lucian Freud, which is completely anachronous but helped us emphasize the public's general incomprehension of Esmé's work in the film. From a distance we can make out Angel's face, a bit dull, but as we move closer it looks decomposed, calling to mind Dorian Gray. The portrait is busy, the paint thick and chunky and crudely applied. It took us a long time to get that painting right. It had to be at once hideous and recognizable as Angel.

***Angel* is your first period film with costumes. How did you approach the task of recreating the era?**

I needed realism in the beginning, to bring to life the world Angel is trying to escape: the town of Norley with its red brick streets, the grocery store, her mother... But when Angel moves to Paradise House, the historical references and the realism disappear. Suddenly we could do whatever we wanted with the decor and the costumes. We were free to enter Angel's imaginary world, indulging in and sharing her childlike bad taste, which brings to mind Louis II's castles in Bavaria! When we were looking for funding in England, nobody could figure out why a French filmmaker would want to make an English period film: there are already so many on television! Period films are considered dated and academic. I wanted to break that stereotype, loosen things up a bit. I took quite a few liberties with the suggestions I was given by my English advisors. For example, Esmé has an open-casket funeral, which is a Mediterranean tradition, unthinkable in Protestant, Edwardian England. But I did it anyway, because this is Angel's world, and she doesn't care about social conventions. Angel is beyond codes, she's constantly reinventing her own reality, which is, alas, her only survival mechanism.

(Source: WSA official press kit)