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# CONANN

2023 | FRANCE/BELGIUM/LUXEMBURG | HEROIC FANTASY/HORROR | FRENCH/ENGLISH/GERMAN | COLOUR/N&B | 105 MIN.  
24 I/S / SCOPE (2.39) / 2K (2048X858) / 5.1 (L,R,C,LFE,LS,RS)

**A FILM BY BERTRAND MANDICO**

WITH ELINA LÖWENSOHN, CHRISTA THERET, JULIA RIEDLER, CLAIRE DUBURCQ, SANDRA PARFAIT, AGATA BUZEK,  
NATHALIE RICHARD, FRANÇOISE BRION, AUDREY BONNET, CHRISTOPHE BIER

## Logline

After blowing every festival's crowds minds with his electrifying feature debuts - respectively adventure-tale *The Wild Boys* (Cahier du Cinéma's Favorite Film of 2018) and sci-fi odyssey *After Blue* (Locarno 2021, TIFF Midnight Madness & Fantastic Fest-best film winner) - Bertrand Mandico makes a triumphant return with *Conann*, his own blazing, violent yet erotic take on the mythological classic repulped in the 80s. Prepare to watch Mandico's unique vision gets the bigger & louder treatment as he gathers a versatile crowd of actresses to capture the never-told before tale of heroic fantasy's blood-thirsty queen, and 2023's most unforgettable trip!

## Synopsis

Traveling through the abyss, underworld dog Rainer recounts the six lives of Conann, perpetually put to death by her own future, across eras, myths and ages. From her childhood, a slave of Sanja and her barbarian horde, to her accession to the summits of cruelty at the doors of our world.

## SCREENINGS IN CANNES:

<b>Official Festival Screening</b>	<b>Friday May 19   9:45 pm   Théâtre Croisette</b>
<b>Festival Press Screening</b>	<b>Saturday May 20   3:00 pm   Théâtre Croisette</b>
<b>Festival Screening</b>	<b>Saturday May 20   7:00 pm   Cinéma Alexandre III</b>
<b>Festival Screening</b>	<b>Sunday May 21   2:00 pm   Cinéma La Licorne</b>
<b>Festival Screening</b>	<b>Sunday May 21   10:45 pm   Arcades 1</b>

## BERTRAND MANDICO

Bertrand Mandico has developed a unique writing and dreamlike style, a formal and non-naturalistic narrative combination. Multi-awarded and selected in many festivals with his short films, he directed his first feature film in 2017 (*Les (The Wild Boys/Les Garçons Sauvages)*), which was both a critic and an audience success (he won the prestigious Prix Louis Delluc for the first film). His second feature film (*After Blue/Dirty Paradise*) received the FIPRESCI Prize at its premiere in Locarno in 2021, then was selected in many festivals (Sitges, Toronto, and Austin Fantastic Fest where it won the Grand Prize award).

## AN INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR BERTRAND MANDICO

Conducted by Philippe Azoury in Paris, April 25, 2023

### *Where exactly does the Conann project come from? Is it first a film, a play, a piece of work with a hybrid status?*

I went through the soil of the theater to make it grow. I had been circling the subject for a while. When I say the subject, it's mostly the succubi, the demonic pacts, I had amassed a lot of notes about them, I was trying to give them shape. At the same time, Philippe Quesne, who was directing the Théâtre des Amandiers at the time, suggested that I put on a show that would be linked to the cinema, and it came about like that, by spontaneously answering him: "If I do a project for the theater, it will be *Conann She Barbarian!* He was amused, and invited me to come and work at the theater to begin to elaborate the project, to build the story. In my idea, this show was to be the genesis of *Conann*. It included screenings, a double director, trying to edit the film: it was a "preparatory show". The *Conann* antechamber.

### *But the show didn't happen?*

No, it was to be set up in 2020 in the midst of COVID restrictions... After which, Philippe Quesne left the theater. I still went through with the show, as we had imagined it, and I "filmed" it at the Amandiers, a film that already has its title, *The Deviant Comedy*, which I will show later. There are also two other short films, excrescences of *Conann* (*We The Barbarians* - a virtual reality film about the damnation of actresses, and *Rainer, a vicious dog in skull valley*).

### *So Conann is not the film from this captation at Les Amandiers?*

No, indeed, it is a film thought for the cinema. Nourished by the reflection of the show preparation. I wrote the script in parallel with the experience of Les Amandiers, and shot it in Luxembourg in an old steel factory that was being dismantled. A inspiring place, where metal was made (which is coherent with *Conann*), a huge territory (crossing it takes more than an hour to get through, maybe more), with a capacity to accommodate incredible scenery. Each plot presented an imaginary of the film, I could make all the sets I needed to contain: here my vision of New York in 1998, there the temple, elsewhere the battlefields with a surreal checkerboard or the small lake of another world... the sunken bunker was also present: the field of possibilities was infinite. At the Amandiers, we had built fake mountains, I had them brought to Luxembourg to complete the picture.

### *Nevertheless, do you think that Conann, the film, still keeps, at least in its very first part, a trace of this theater experience?*

The Hell part, indeed, has kept a theatricality, with the chrome lodge, a representation of the underworld inherited from the opera and the studio. And the character played by Françoise Brion, a dead woman who arrives in this other world, condemned to recover her memory and relive the atrocities she committed, that is her damnation: to remember the barbarian she was. The cruelest show there is, that of the mirror of the soul. The dead woman is confronted with her doppelgänger, the barbarian queen, on her throne. And if the introduction can evoke the theater, it refers especially to a whole forgotten part of the French cinema, where the Faustian pact, the devilishness were represented in an omnipresent way, that it is with Rene Clair's *The Beauty of the Devil*, Marcel Carné's *Les Visiteurs du Soir* or of course Jean Cocteau's *Orpheus*... I wanted to revisit a genre left with the abandonment, however bewitching.

### *The film has something operatic about it...*

At the very beginning, I wrote songs for the piece, something along the lines of a rock or pop opera in the tradition of what I had done with *Ultra Pulpe*.

For the film, I asked Pierre Desprats, the composer of the music of all my films, to forget everything we had done previously. This time, I was looking for percussion-based sounds, a drier general tone, with a sharp bias to differentiate the eras. The references I gave him ranged from the introductory music of Bergman's *Persona*, to Bernard Hermann's scores for Hitchcock, Nino Rota's ethnic collages for *Satyricon*, Wu Tang Clan type rap for the Bronx, Plastikman for the warlike coldness, or more classically Purcell revisited by Michael Nyman in his minimalist period, up to the Paul Anka style song that Barbara Carlotti interprets. For Pierre, it was a rather destabilizing work. But this bias gives a singular and intense result.

***We understand that you don't exactly start from John Milius' film?***

No, not at all (laughs). Conan, in his Milius version, is an emblem of virility, of testosterone. I went to the antipodes of that. I summoned a small part of the stories of Robert E. Howard, a writer close to Lovecraft, who created Conan in 1932 before his premature death. In his work, Conan was a slender character, who climbed and slithered, which is far from the image associated with the character in the film. But I didn't adapt the books, I re-read them, kept the original trauma of the killed mother and the idea of revenge of the barbarian slave. As I did my research, I was able to go back to the original *Conann*, the one from Celtic mythology, which is spelled with two NN, the spelling I kept for the film. He is a conqueror character who lived with fantastic creatures called Fomoirs, described as demons, or rather cynocephalic demigods, with dog or hyena heads. Now I already had in my notes a demon with a dog's head, the correspondence disturbed me a lot. This reinforced my adventurous choice of a total reappropriation, of a multiple, polymorphic Conann crossing the times.

The re-inscription of the two NN to this iconic name, is also part of the idea of femininity and multiples.

***What was your desire at the time to go back through this figure in a completely unexpected way?***

The desire to take stock of barbarism, culminating in what I believe to be the height of barbarism: old age killing its own youth.

***Is the film shot on film?***

Yes, it's 35 millimeter, we use half the frame, a thrifty scope, the one used in Italian westerns... And there are no special effects after development : everything is created during the shooting, on the spot, with the lights, the constructions and some transparencies. This is my shortest shoot: five weeks. So I had to think of the cut in an even more concise way than I usually do. I chose to shoot almost everything with a crane. I put a dolly track in one place and that conditioned everything we were going to shoot during the night. Because everything was done entirely at night, it was impossible to shoot in the dark in this immense place, which in places was open to the wind and rain. It was very tiring, with all the physical ordeals that this poses for the actresses and technicians, a total investment, without a net. I understand now that I could never have made *Conann* like that, if it had been my first feature film.

***Because of the insecurity of the directing/producing device and the virtuosity that it required?***

In the sense that the only solutions to solve the problems were radical, and that I had to assume them with all the risks that this entails for each sequence: synthesize the staging as accurately as possible and make editing choices during the shooting. By betting on the tempo of the actresses' performance.

For example, when the 35-year-old Conann, played by Sandra Parfait, walks through the streets of the Bronx with Rainer (Elina Löwensohn). This scene took up four pages of dialogue on the script. I decided to do it in one shot: a walk back and forth through

the wet streets. I knew that the actresses knew their lines, we had worked for a long time on the characters in the stage, we knew each other well, we could take the most extensive sequences in hand, while doing very few takes.

*Was this your first time using the crane? What did you discover with this process that made you want to come back to it again? It's not just a system of elegance, you're creating a floating effect?*

I used it at the end of the shooting of *After Blue*, in the studio for the World of the Dead, with a decentering lens that breaks the balance between blur and sharpness. Here I extended this principle over the length of the film with the same type of optics, sometimes I took the camera on the shoulder or on a Dolly, but 80% of the film was shot sitting on the crane.

As I like to impose constraints on myself that define the style, it became a game, that of making the shooting time cohabit with the narrative ambition of the film.

With this setup, we think of the movements in space by making the most of the heavy daily installation. I was perched on the crane and almost in telepathy with the grip and the crew. The most difficult thing was my vertigo, I never took my eye off the viewfinder, I clung to the camera to see only the film and forget the void. Perhaps the crane gives the vision that the dead have on the world. A fluid, floating vision, without ever being able to touch the ground.

This formal approach makes sense for *Conann*, in the way it accompanies the characters, always in perpetual mutation, moving from one world to another. We cross six stages, six ages, six periods, the film summons the history of cinema but also the great History.

I had to make each chapter stand out while keeping a global coherence. This style, the staging, the use of black and white created unity in the rupture.

*How, by what means, do you arrive - that's the whole project - from a mythological figure, widely popularized by Heroic Fantasy literature and by the cinema, to an entirely feminized version of this figure?*

The 25-year-old Conann, played by Christa Th  ret, is non-gendered, completely they. I thought it was important to shake up the genres, to offer actresses the possibility of playing a character originally anchored in virility.

My desire was to take root in the original myth to better transcend it.

The crossing of eras accompanies the very idea of aging and the inner journey of this multiple character. To talk about this viral barbarism, I only saw a "monstrous" film, sharp, "ambitious" and yet always focused on intimate moments. I wanted to explore new areas of cinema and storytelling, culminating in old age killing youth.

*Conann is then played by actresses of different ages, with very distinct personalities and characters. They embody the stages of a life in a brilliant way.*

I don't see constancy in the human being, but distinct periods, changes as one ages, the tragedy of which is self-betrayal.

This is the driving force of the film: how one can betray one's convictions, one's ideals, one's desires, how one hardens as one ages.

*The other driving force of the film is more romantic: it is impossible love.*

Conann's first betrayal will be to transform her desire for revenge into love for her natural enemy. She betrays her desire for revenge... Revenge, this old rusty cinema mechanism, to which we must twist the neck. It is a narrative asset, never contested. Whereas it is a form of barbarism.

Besides, I believe that this questioning of revenge is found in all my films, as much in *The Wild Boys* as in *After Blue...*

*Conann*, therefore, takes an unexpected route in the genre: she doesn't take revenge, she betrays herself, after which she becomes a monster by diverting her convictions, by transforming herself into a frighteningly manipulative being, who becomes darker over time, even going viral...

*Conann is "she barbarian", but what barbarism(s) is the film about?*

Cruelty, killing one's ideals. Opportunism. Cynical capitalism and corruption... The last Connan in "a refinement" of barbarism perverts artists.

*They will ingest her...*

She becomes a parasite. We think we are devouring her, but it is she who devours us.

*The segment on "old Europe" is very impressive. The dialectic between horror and fascination in spite of everything is captured in one dialogue: "Europe is beautiful, it has style..." "Don't talk nonsense, will you..."*

There is a symbolic imagery and a very frontal speech in this place, I represent Europe by a French Cancan dancer on a battlefield.

There is also the presence of the "masked capitalists", taking a blood bath and the 45-year old Conann, who while serving them the soup, will end up shooting them. Their blood will feed the pool, because a new generation is coming and must soak its power. This is the first time I'm confronted with such a directly political form, condensed in a scene that synthesizes a vision without detours.

*It is a film that travels through metamorphoses and worlds but in which there is no off-screen...*

Yes, in the same way that we never see the sky. We are stuck with Conann and his memory in drawers. The camera hugs the characters like a dragon, most often in a bird's-eye view, a very oppressive way of dealing with space with the night as an escape route.

*Who is Rainer, the dog-faced character played by Elina Löwensohn who is the main character in each episode?*

To understand it, I have to mention an important reference in the film: Max Ophuls's *Lola Montes*. It tells her story in a circus that has become her hell, reliving her whole life from her trapeze, before the big jump. This is the structure I used to build my story. Rainer is the equivalent of Peter Ustinov's Mr. Loy in Ophuls' film.

His character is at the same time the most touching, the spurned lover, but also the one who pulls the strings of the decline, the most cruel. My Rainer has some differences, he is a demon who photographs death and bodies, half Helmut Newton, half Gerda Taro. But the first reference, engraved in his leather, is Fassbinder and his black romanticism. Rainer sniffs around corners to corrupt the characters, speaks like a Shakespearean hero, his sentences sound like ironic oracles. He is a piece of the evil one, the arm of death, but he is especially the one who humanizes himself as Conann dehumanizes himself. This crossing and this impossible love constitute a counterpoint to barbarism.

*For Rainer, L'Atelier 69 made a prosthesis of a peeled dog head. And why the dog's head anyway?*

Because in all mythologies, the dog is the one who makes you pass into the other world.

The prosthesis had to be able to render all the expressiveness of Elina who wore it like a second skin.

We had to renew it every two days (the prostheses get damaged quickly and we can't glue them anymore after 48 hours). Elina was eating alone, in front of a mirror, in her corner because we could not remove this second skin. Because of the exposure time, she arrived and left after everyone else...

Many people in the team discovered Elina's face at the end of the shooting. For five weeks they only saw her with her dog face. She had become Rainer. She fully inhabited the character, in her body, her voice and her expressions, it was extremely disturbing. Today I sometimes dream of Rainer, my empathy "for the Devil".

*Should we also see in Rainer a reference to the first Daft Punk music videos, those directed by Spike Jonze?*

That's funny I didn't think of that, even though it's a music video I liked a lot in the late 90's.

But I do have a memory of a slightly thick, cartoonish dog face. It's more the first version of Planet of the Apes which remains my reference in terms of prosthesis and disturbance on the human and animal hybridization.

I strongly believe that in the future, humans will be tempted by the animal identity, they will become hybrids of dogs, cats, reptiles, using surgery and genes ...

But it's funny that you mention this music video. When I summoned the 90's aesthetics for the Bronx part, I thought of a film that has influenced many clips, Coppola's *Rusty James*. And also *Coup de coeur* for the lyricism of the studio setting. And then a cult film in the USA, never released in France, Michael Almereyda's *Nadja*, produced by Lynch and with Elina Löwensohn, Martin Donovan and Peter Fonda. A vampire film in New York, made the same year as Ferrara's *The Addiction* - another reference for this sequence...

*Re-creating New York in Luxembourg...?*

Not an easy task... I worked with all the more care on the exteriors, interiors and dialogues for this sequence to make it as real as I could...

*When it appears, it gives the film a new rhythm, which will continue to grow until the great final scene: more ample, more open. This seems to me to be a new possible direction for your cinema, a breath that creates a hole inside the saturation, the accumulation. Is it also a way for you to clarify the message, in a film that is more openly political? Is it a clever and gentle way of addressing a generation that is less familiar with references but that is directly concerned by this message?*

Exactly. The references are there, sometimes in spite of myself: I made them a construction material but not a citation. There is also the universal heroic figure, I wanted to be able to play with a kind of ancient superhero whom I make cross the times, this idea finally is rather Marvel, but carried out with the style of a craftsman, iconoclast, author. It is above all a way of saying that we must not leave the epic imagination in the hands of the big studios.

The film makes its way through my obsessions, through fantasy, through myth, to arrive at our time and address a contemporary generation head-on. Each segment pushes a new cinematographic feature to the limit. The same goes for the narrative, a crescendo, up to the ultimate closed hearing.

*Would you agree that it's a more angry film, or a disillusioned one, or rather a film in response to an era that is disillusioned?*

I have a little difficulty using the term disillusioned, which for me implies a form of nonchalance, even cynicism, and that is precisely what I do not want. It is not a disillusionment either, because I remain optimistic. An anger yes, I believe that here it is present. Against authoritarianism, the thirst for power,

the illusion of happiness, this world in which we are trying to lock ourselves. The ambient cynicism, the opportunistic speeches and the violence, which lead to a totalitarianism. I am absolutely non-violent. But I use my imagination as a disturbing bomb when I feel that the walls are closing in. I try to propose a counterpoint, facing a certain cinema that denounces otherwise.

"What cannot be avoided, one must embrace or bite it" would say Rainer.

***The last part is terrible, from this point of view: "ingest or die!"***

It's a poison, you think you can make it your own, take your share of the spoils without taking the poison, but the opportunism reveals the system in which you are immersed. I am aware that the film differs from my previous features and that it extracts itself from the unbridled dreamlike or imaginary obsession in which they were embedded.

But if I used islands, planets..., it was already to question us. *After Blue* tried to imagine a world after the polluted world. *The Wild Boys* condemned violent boys to become women and change their perception in the deepest sense. The closed world allowed us to go to the end of the questioning. But the real was already there.

*Conann* is not a closed world in an ocean but a succession of hatchings in troubled waters.

**ARTISTIC LIST**

Elina Löwensohn	Rainer
Christa Theret	Conann 25 ans
Julia Riedler	Sanja
Claire Duburcq	Conann 15 ans
Sandra Parfait	Conann 35 ans
Agata Buzek	Conann 45 ans
Nathalie Richard	Conann 55 ans
Françoise Brion	Conann Reine et morte
Audrey Bonnet	Cimère
Christophe Bier	Octavia

**TECHNICAL LIST**

<b>Screenplay</b>	Bertrand Mandico
<b>Cinematographer</b>	Nicolas Eveilleau
<b>Sound</b>	Céline Bodson, Geoffrey Perrier, Simon Apostolou
<b>Editing</b>	Laure Saint-Marc
<b>Original music</b>	Pierre Desprats
<b>Production design</b>	Anna Le Mouël

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