

Interview: Director Gilles Paquet-Brenner Opens the Door With ‘Sarah’s Key’

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CHICAGO – For every instance of “monumental” history, there are a series of events surrounding it that gets swept under the rug, but have the same bearing as the bigger occurrence. Director Gilles Paquet-Brenner tells one of those background stories in “Sarah’s Key,” a sorrowful piece of French history during World War II.

The centerpiece in the film is the Vel’d’Hiv incident, a round-up of Jewish people in Paris during the Nazi occupation there. The Vel’d’Hiv was a sports stadium, and French officials put the captured Jews into the arena without sufficient food, water and facilities. One character likened it to the New Orleans Superdome during the Katrina Hurricane crisis, but “a million times” worse.

French director Gilles Paquet-Brenner adapted Sarah’s Key from a popular novel that uses the Vel’d’Hiv as a launching point for the tortured story of Sarah Starzynski, who at the age of ten is forced into life and death situations surrounding the round-up. Her survival is the story, which is unearthed and explored years later by an overzealous journalist portrayed by Kristin Scott Thomas.



Kristin Scott Thomas as Julia Jarmond Unravels a Mystery in ‘Sarah’s Key’
Photo credit: Julien Bonel for The Weinstein Company

Paquet-Brenner was in Chicago a couple weeks ago promoting the film, which is going through a limited release debut in America. He spoke to HollywoodChicago.com about the aspect of bringing the difficult narrative to screen.

HollywoodChicago.com: The theme of Sarah’s Key seems to be written in a one of the lines in the screenplay...‘the truth has a price.’ Even though all the characters paid a price, isn’t a better conclusion ‘the truth will set you free’?

Gilles Paquet-Brenner: That’s the question and the answer. [laughs] It’s the truth and the past also. We live in a world that is all about the

now with Twitter and Facebook, but sometimes I think it is interesting to remember that we do have a past, and this past made us what we are today – as an individual and as a country. And sometimes we need to face that past because history needs to be engaged. The problems that we face today are problems that were also faced in history. Understanding that makes for a better present day, and hopefully a better future.

HollywoodChicago.com: The casting of young Sarah was crucial in communicating the desperation of the situation. How did you find Mélusine Mayance and what qualities made her stand out in the auditions for Sarah?

Paquet-Brenner: We were initially quite concerned. Were we going to find a little girl that could play such a difficult and complex character? Because without her there is no movie. Well, the casting process was actually quite easy. I was in a movie theater in France, watching the trailer for François Ozon's film 'Ricky,' and just in one shot in that trailer I could see that Mélusine was very mature, like an adult, even though she was only seven years old. I thought to myself, I need to know more about her. I asked our casting director for children, I saw her, and boom, and that was it. She is a real actress.

HollywoodChicago.com: You bounced around many eras of the 20th century, all effectively. Which era or situation in a different time challenged the production the most? And what did you want to get most right in a period sense about the Vel d'Hiv incident itself?

Paquet-Brenner: The first challenge wasn't necessarily production-wise, but editing-wise. How were we to go from one period to another in a fluid manner? I didn't want to lose the audience in that way, not to be annoyed by it. I worked a lot on the screenplay on this. Transitions and basing [screenplay time spent on each era] were worked out, and then it worked out well in the editing room.

For the production itself, I think it's fantastic to do a period piece. I know what I don't like, and that is anything that looks fake. My goal was to make it as real as possible, to put the audience in that situation. It's about production design, wardrobe and how you deal with the extras. As for the Vel d'Hiv, which has long since been torn down, it was quite a responsibility to get it right, because people who were there still survive.

There was an outdoor vélodrome in Vincennes near Paris, that still maintained that 20th century flavor that was designed by Gustave Eiffel, who had done the Eiffel Tower. It was outdoor, but with computer generated graphics we were able to close it. What was interesting and challenging was how to make it real. I asked a couple of survivors, who were girls about Sarah's age at the time, what they remembered. They told me it was the noise. That's why I made it so noisy in the film. I wanted an impressionist feeling, I wanted it to be very immersive.

HollywoodChicago.com: Kristen Scott Thomas' character, an American in France, has the assignment of being the relentless seeker of truth in Sarah's Key, even though the principal characters don't want her to do it. Is it symbolic, from the novel, that an outsider or American becomes the ultimate pursuer of the truth behind the sin of France?

Paquet-Brenner: It's a narrative pattern. It's not so important that she's American, but that she is a foreigner. I think an American journalist can be pretty bold, and she won't let it go, so in that perspective it fits that she's American. So she's a foreigner and not Jewish but she is going to be connected to it, and even though it's not her story, she can become connected to it. It was very important that we all can be connected to problems we couldn't imagine we would be connected to, anywhere in the world. It's a universal message important to me.



Mélusine Mayance as Sarah and Niels Arestrup as Jules in 'Sarah's Key'
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

HollywoodChicago.com: Death is a theme in the film, as in dead people tell no stories. What responsibility do the living have in telling our history and the stories of the dead? How does that most benefit us?

Paquet-Brenner: That's the whole point. We could let the dead lie down, and we would have no problems, so why would we want to shake

that? I think memory is important, to remember. And I think these people, who became statistics, deserve to get their names back. In the Jewish religion, somebody told me that the name Sarah is very important, so getting her name back was symbolically important. In the end, that happens.

HollywoodChicago.com: Although it may be brought out more in the book, there is a mystery regarding the motivations behind the ultimate fate of Sarah in the film. Why do you think the strongest will of the survival mode that Sarah possesses eventually cannot sustain itself in her later life?

Paquet-Brenner: There is an expression called 'survivor's guilt.' There were two ways to react after the Holocaust. One was full of life, a gift to be highly enjoyed. The other reaction was to commit suicide. They said to themselves, why did I survive and not my mother, my brother, my sister. They couldn't accept it. That was the kind of thing that happened.

HollywoodChicago.com: What in your view are the biggest advantages and disadvantages about using fiction to tell the story of real events, especially fiction surrounding the events of the Holocaust?

Paquet-Brenner: There are some arguments against it. I think there are just different fields. If you're a historian, you can do research and write the true events and it's just the facts. But if you're an artist, it's more than the facts, what brings the fiction is that you can consider the facts in a wider angle.

Sarah is a fictional character, but the author Tatiana de Rosnay is a journalist, and spent two years doing the research for the book. If you read the historic record of the survivors of the Vel d'Hiv, you would realize that Sarah is actually a patchwork of different characters. In doing this film, I had to be true to these real events. With fiction you are freer, but just because you're doing fiction doesn't mean you aren't true to the real events.



Director Gilles Paquet Brenner in Chicago, July 12, 2011
Photo credit: Patrick McDonald for HollywoodChicago.com

HollywoodChicago.com: Was this the first time the Vel d'Hiv incident was portrayed in a fictional film?

Paquet-Brenner: There were two movies in France this year. It was just in the air. This film is the first for a wide audience, based on the novel, and it successfully reached an audience not only in France, but in other countries.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is it about the emotion of the French people that make them so willing to face and make apologies today or recently for the horrible consequences of the Vel d'Hiv?

Paquet-Brenner: After the war, the French society was totally torn apart. The most important thing was to reunite the people in France, we needed our country back. The governments at the time chose to put the Holocaust on the side. In the 1970s, historians thought it was time to start digging and facing the past. It was brutal, because many of the people were still alive.

Now it is different. Much of that generation has died and today we don't feel the direct guilt. They don't have to feel guilty about it, they just have to understand what it is, so it doesn't happen again.

HollywoodChicago.com: What, in your opinion, is the responsibility of politicians and leaders in regards to the most evil parts of our history? How do they need to most honor the overwhelming sadness in association with the actions of the past?

Paquet-Brenner: Politicians have a huge responsibility, but they often only take a short term view. They also use the debate to manipulate voters. President Jacques Chirac was actually very brave to make that speech [an apology for the round-up in 1995], because it was the first time the French state acknowledged that they did have a responsibility. It was a relief to the people of France, but interestingly it caused other problems. The reaction was what about slavery? What about Algeria? It created a competition of memories. It's like when you do a good thing, you get other problems.

HollywoodChicago.com: The Holocaust continues to be a black mark on the soul of modern humanity. What do you think are the main ramifications from those dark days that still permeate the atmosphere of our overall culture and society?

Paquet-Brenner: The Holocaust has a special place in world memory because it is so well documented, so we know about it. There were

other genocides, but we know about The Holocaust. It is still here very much because there are geopolitical tensions in the world, that weren’t created by The Holocaust, but that could be a consequence of the aftermath of the war and those events.

HollywoodChicago.com: You worked with Marion Cotillard earlier in her career in ‘Les jolies choses.’ Did you anticipate her breakout as a major international star in her approach to the twin sister characters in the film?

Paquet-Brenner: I could not imagine that. For a French actress, this is amazing. What I did know that she is a phenomenal actress, she was nominated for a French Academy Award for the film. We shot the movie in 2000, and Marion was already becoming famous because of a series of action movies called Taxi. But she wasn’t considered a serious actress at all. It was Les jolies choses that changed that perception in the public and professional eye. It was her breakthrough as a quality character actress. And the rest is history.

“Sarah’s Key” has a limited release, including Chicago, on July 29th. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Kristin Scott Thomas, Mélusine Mayance, Aidan Quinn, Frédéric Pierrot, Niels Arestrup and Charlotte Poutrel. Screenplay by Gilles Paquet-Brenner and Serge Joncour. Directed by Gilles Paquet-Brenner. Rated “PG-13”



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