

Gabrielle: Grace notes

“In the beginning, I wanted to talk about happiness and people who are outcasts; Louise Archambault says of Gabrielle. In the end, she captured magical moments

BY T'CHA DUNLEVY, GAZETTE FILM CRITIC SEPTEMBER 19, 2013



Louise Archambault with Gabrielle Marion-Rivard. "I learned a lot through making this film," Archambault says. "And I know Gabrielle and everyone else did, too."

Photograph by: Allen McInnis, Montreal Gazette

MONTREAL — It's one thing to make a fiction film about a developmentally disabled young woman; it's another to cast one in the title role. It's the kind of choice that could easily blow up in your face. Instead, it takes Louise Archambault's wonderfully moving Gabrielle into uncharted territory.

"It was a challenge," said the Montreal director, of the process of shooting her second feature. "I knew it would be imperfect. But it was a unique experience — probably one of the biggest things I've lived."

Gabrielle tells the story of a girl with Williams syndrome, a rare neurodevelopmental disorder, who seeks love and independence in spite of her condition and the concerns of those around her.

The idea came to Archambault during a visit to the Y.

"I was thinking about openness toward difference," she said. "I saw this woman from my neighbourhood, swimming at the YMCA with her caregiver. She was arguing about her bathing cap, in the locker room. People around were uncomfortable. Then she was in the water, singing. I thought she was super pretty, but I saw that people were uneasy.

"I wondered why we have that discomfort with people who are obviously different. Meanwhile, we're all different, but we hide it behind facades. We all have faults and strengths. I learned a lot through making this film. And I know Gabrielle

and everyone else did, too.”

Archambault's *Familia* won best Canadian first feature at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2005, and was nominated for several Genies, winning best first feature.

Gabrielle, like *Familia*, is produced by Luc Déry and Kim McCraw of *micro_scope*, the team behind Denis Villeneuve's *Incendies* and Philippe Falardeau's *Monsieur Lazhar*. Following suit, Archambault's project is a simple, human story that has the power to resonate beyond Canadian borders. The film premiered at the Locarno Film Festival in August, where it won the Piazza Grande audience award.

At the heart of the movie is first-time actor Gabrielle Marion-Rivard, 24, who lives in Beloeil with her mother, and whom Archambault discovered on a visit to a choir rehearsal at Les Muses, an artistic education centre for the disabled.

“In the beginning, I wanted to talk about happiness and people who are outcasts,” Archambault said. “I wondered where you get the strength to get through the day, to live and find happiness, when you have more obstacles to overcome.

“Then I met Gabrielle and Les Muses and it all clicked. I said, ‘I want to make a movie with them — not just about them.’ My producers said, ‘Go for it.’ I worked a lot in rehearsal to find a way to make it happen.”

She began by blurring the lines between fiction and documentary. Marion-Rivard's choir is also in the film, with her fellow students playing themselves. Characters kept their real names, allowing Archambault to turn the camera on and off on a moment's notice, and to shoot when her subjects were unaware they were being filmed.

Much of the movie is shot in close-up with hand-held camera, giving a *vérité* style to the proceedings, and allowing the director more freedom to roll with things on the fly.

“The idea was to capture spontaneity,” she said. “Often we were shooting several characters at once — non-professionals, with deficiencies. Sometimes they would look at the camera. We had to manoeuvre around that. We used natural light as much as possible. For 28 days, I was glued to my director of photography's ear, saying, ‘Go left — no, they're looking at the camera, go right.’

“We were seeking magical moments. Sometimes Gabrielle's performance was too big, so we would focus on her hands or the nape of her neck. We wanted a certain intimacy. That was my gut feeling. We left a lot on the editing room floor.”

The plot revolves around Gabrielle's affection for Martin, played by Alexandre Landry, one of a few professional actors in the film. Landry does an amazing job of blending in with his disabled cast-mates, including sharing some sensual scenes with Marion-Rivard — a potentially tricky proposition which Archambault felt was essential to the movie, and which she had to fight for.

“It's a delicate topic,” she said. “I talked a lot with Gabrielle's mother, who was very open about things until three weeks before, when she called and said she wanted to cut a scene. I said, ‘I can't.’

“We had a good relationship; I said, ‘It won't be erotic. We'll do it with respect.’ The senses and romance are so important to the film. We were worried; but the first time they kissed, Gabrielle said it was the nicest thing she had ever experienced. She said, ‘Again!’ ”

In interview, Marion-Rivard expressed unbridled enthusiasm for everything to do with the project, from first being asked to participate to her experience accompanying the film to Locarno. Like many great acting performances, it provided her a chance to do and say things she wouldn't in real life.

“I've never lived a love story like that,” she said, “which is another story, that I can't talk about — but in the film, I felt like, ‘Finally, I'm living true love! Yes!’ ”

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