

## **A LITTLE CHAOS – Film at CONCA VERDE on 19.10.15 – Talk by Peter Anderson**

**A Little Chaos** is a 2014 British period drama film directed by Alan Rickman. The story was conceived by Allison Deegan and she co-wrote the screenplay along with Alan Rickman and Jeremy Brock. The film stars Kate Winslet, Matthias Schoenaerts, Alan Rickman, Stanley Tucci, Helen McCrory, Steven Waddington, Jennifer Ehle and Rupert Penry-Jones. The film is financed by Lionsgate UK and produced by BBC Films. It is the second film directed by Rickman, after his 1997 directorial debut *The Winter Guest*. It is the second collaboration of Rickman and Winslet after their 1995 film *Sense and Sensibility*. Production took place in London in mid-2013. The film had its world premiere at the 2014 Toronto International Film Festival as the closing night film on 13 September 2014.

### **The Plot**

After having been appointed by King Louis XIV of France on a project for the gardens of Versailles, landscaper Monsieur André Le Nôtre interviews various contractors for embarking on this project, one of whom is a woman with an unconventional sense of gardening, Sabine de Barra. When noticing her move a plant pot in his garden prior to her interview, André confirms Sabine is not a conformist in gardening, which she explains during the interview as wanting to give something uniquely French and not simply abide by the past.

*Bosquet de la Salle-de-Bal* at Gardens of Versailles, designed by Sabine de Barra in the film but originally laid out by André Le Nôtre between 1680 and 1683.

On the night of her interview, Sabine is surprisingly visited by André at her home; she was sure she would not be accepted for his project, but this visit proves otherwise. Sabine is appointed to the task of building a fountain surrounding a small outdoor ballroom amidst a patch of thick woods, which was later called *Bosquet de la Salle-de-Bal*. She makes little progress at first because the workers she is given are not keen to work for a woman. Monsieur Thierry Duras, a man she met at André's house during the interview, intervenes and offers his and his crew's help. Sabine adjusts André's plans by creating a water pump to take the water from a nearby river, use it for the fountain, and take it back to its initial place.

As time goes by, Sabine is noticed by the higher elite, befriendings above all the King's brother Duc Philippe d'Orleans and his wife Elizabeth Charlotte, Princess Palatine. During this time, the memory of a girl persists in haunting Sabine. Every now and then, she hears the girl's voice calling or sees sudden apparitions of a girl clad in white running past and disappearing. This also keeps her from showing her love to André, who himself is facing loneliness in his marriage to the proud and haughty Madame Françoise Le Nôtre who had insisted on her sexual freedom outside their marriage. When she challenges his at first innocent interest in Sabine, he quotes her own speech of freedom back at her and leaves, intending to pursue the relationship with Sabine.

Queen Maria Theresa dies suddenly, causing the royal family great sorrow, especially in the way her autopsy was said to have been carried out. André notifies his wife about this, which shocks her as she knows that the death of the Queen will cause her to fall out of favour in court. Sabine accidentally encounters the king at a famous garden, befriendings the king after mistaking him for the gardener, something the king finds amusing but plays along, even after Sabine finds out his true identity. She finds great favour in the king's eyes, and he invites her to travel with him and his court to Fontainebleau.

On a stormy day, Françoise visits Sabine on the working site, falsely warning her that André's passionate intentions are only a whim, and when Sabine leaves, two men instructed by Françoise's lover open the sluice gates from the river and flooded the whole project, mostly destroying the plants brought to decorate and some of the earthwork tiers.

After the flooding of Sabine's worksite, André finds a glove belonging to his wife Françoise. He returns the glove to Françoise, using this as proof of her guilt and the chance to leave her for good.

After the flooding incident, Sabine goes to King's court and meets Duc de Lauzun, and is introduced to the female courtiers by the Marquise de Montespan, official lover of the King. There she meets women of the court who welcome her warmly. It is during this time that Sabine reveals her inner pain of having lost her husband and daughter. The women comfort her however, as many have also lost husbands and children, though they warn that they are only permitted to speak of death within the group, for the King abhors discussing death in his court. When the King and his male entourage arrives, the Marquise presents Sabine to him. Sabine offers him a four-seasons flower, which inspires a conversation between the King and Sabine on the metaphorical nature of the rose and its life cycle, a metaphor intended to warm him toward his mistress.

André waits for Sabine outside her room that night, having now fallen completely in love with her. Sabine lets go of her remorse for her husband's loss years ago, and they finally make love. In the morning, André finds himself alone in bed. The scene jumps to Sabine at her home as she relives in her mind the death of her adulterous husband and innocent daughter. Monsieur de Barra had admitted his adultery and left to visit his mistress with his daughter. Sabine heard the carriage start its journey, but when she saw one of the wheels was faulty, she ran to stop it. She had rushed in front of the carriage, the coachman pulled the reins, the horses fled, the wheel broke and the carriage toppled down a small hill, killing both father and daughter. André finds Sabine in the grip of this memory, and convinces her to stop blaming herself for their deaths.

Finally, the fountain-arena project is complete. The court comes to see the long-anticipated site. To the music of a hidden orchestra, the King, Sabine, and André along with the court enter the garden, admire the marble floor surrounded by fountains and tiers of water, and dance around the happy and satisfied King.

### ***Production***

Production began in March 2013. Producer Zygi Kamasa of Lionsgate said that "we are delighted to be working with the best of British actors and directors like Kate Winslet and Alan Rickman as we move forward in doubling our investment in British films in 2014." Talking about the film, Rickman said: "The film is not just frills at the wrists and collars. It's about people getting their hands dirty and building something in order to entertain the other world they serve. It's about how one world maintains the other, often at the cost of women."

### ***Casting***

On 17 January 2013, it was announced that Kate Winslet and Matthias Schoenaerts had been cast as the leads in the film. Rickman had Winslet in his mind for the lead role of Sabine de Barra and continued with her when two weeks into shooting, Winslet announced that she was pregnant. Apart from directing the film, Rickman also portrayed King Louis XIV in the film, about which he said "the only way I could do it was because in a way, he's like a director, Louis, so you kind of keep the same expression on your face. As a director, you see everything somehow. It's like a huge all-encompassing eye that sees everything, and it's able to cherry pick: "Move that," "Don't do that," "Do it this way," "Change this color." And I don't know where that comes from, but it does, once you're given the job, and I have a feeling Louis probably would've been a great film director."

## Filming

Principal photography commenced on 27 March 2013 and continued over eight weeks in Black Park, Cliveden House, Pinewood Studios, Blenheim Palace, Waddesdon Manor, Hampton Court Palace, Ham House, Ashridge and Chenies Manor. Filming ended on 8 June 2013 in Richmond, London. Despite being set in France, complete filming took place in England.

According to Rickman, filming "wasn't easy, though; throwing Kate into freezing water at 1am, the carriage crash, scenes with 80 extras, tight schedules in venues like Blenheim Palace. It's a constant tap dance between control and freedom and of course the budget guides everything."

The soundtrack and score was composed by Peter Gregson. It is Gregson's first feature film as a composer, who previously composed music for a 2014 short film *Every Quiet Moment*. Veigar Margeirsson's 2008 composition "Rise above" was used in the trailer of the film but was not part of soundtrack album. It was released by Milan Records on 16 April 2015.

## Critical response

The film generated mixed reviews from critics, with the performances from the cast being highly praised. Review aggregator Rotten Tomatoes gives the film a 38% rating based on reviews from 65 critics, with an average score of 5.1/10. The site's consensus states that "Stylish and well-acted without ever living up to its dramatic potential, *A Little Chaos* is shouldered by the impressive efforts of a talented cast." At Metacritic, which assigns a weighted mean rating out of 100 to reviews from mainstream critics, the film holds an average score of 51, based on 15 reviews, which indicates "mixed or average reviews".

Catherine Shoard of *The Guardian* gave the film three out of five stars and praising the performances said that "Winslet manages emotional honesty within anachronistic confines, and Schoenaerts escapes with dignity." Mark Adams in his review for *Screen International* said, "the film is a gracefully made delight, replete with lush costumes, fruity performances, love amongst the flowerbeds and even a little mild peril. Yet it lacks real dramatic edge and may be seen as a typical British period costume film, but it is also a classily made pleasure that will delight its target audience." And praised the cast that "Kate Winslet is suitably serious and driven as De Barra, whose back story about being a widow is slowly revealed, and her relationship with Le Nôtre is nicely developed. Matthias Schoenaerts is restrained and gentle as the put-upon architect and grows into the role as the film develops. Alan Rickman is a delight as the King while Stanley Tucci is equally good in his few scenes as the warm-hearted court dandy." David Rooney of *The Hollywood Reporter* felt that "This decently acted film is agreeable entertainment, even if it works better on a scene by scene basis than in terms of overall flow." Tim Robey in *The Telegraph* said in his review: "If you see only one film about 17th-century French landscape gardening this year, it probably ought to be *A Little Chaos*, a heaving bouquet of a picture."

However, David Sexton of the *London Evening Standard* gave the film a negative review, saying that "Kate Winslet charms as a gardener at the Court of Louis XIV, but it's not enough to keep this inauthentic piece from wilting." Dennis Harvey of *Variety* also criticized the film by saying that "*A Little Chaos*" is all too tidy as it imposes a predictable, pat modern sensibility on a most unconvincing depiction of late 17th-century French aristocratic life." Kaleem Aftab of *The Independent* gave the film two out of five stars, noting that while the performances were exceptional, the talents of Winslet and the ensemble players were wasted, and added that "it all starts off so promisingly," praising the camera work and language, but it quickly fails as "a melancholic look at grief" where "at least four different genres [clash] against each other, occasionally in the same scene" and "the romance seems to take place off-screen." She concluded: "There was a 17 year gap between Rickman's first and second film and on this evidence it's easy to see why. While he can get performances out of the actors, he lacks command of pacing and plot."

## Historical accuracy

Some of the characters appeared in the film are fictional, including Kate Winslet's Sabine de Barra. The film is set during the 1682 but André Le Nôtre played by Matthias Schoenaerts began work at Versailles in 1661 and was twice the age of Schoenaerts's portrayal in the film by that time.

So, it lacks pacing and plot, it isn't accurate historically, it wasn't even filmed in Versailles, the Rotten Tomatoes rating is a feeble 38% - a very disappointing reception! If I were you, I'd get up and leave now! I'm joking, of course! I suggest you stay and you make up your own mind about the movie.

## Gardens of Versailles

The **Gardens of Versailles** (French: *Jardins du château de Versailles*) occupy part of what was once the *Domaine royal de Versailles*, the royal demesne of the château of Versailles. Situated to the west of the palace, the gardens cover some 800 hectares of land, much of which is landscaped in the classic French Garden style perfected here by André Le Nôtre. Beyond the surrounding belt of woodland, the gardens are bordered by the urban areas of Versailles to the east and Le Chesnay to the north-east, by the National Arboretum de Chèvreloup to the north, the Versailles plain (a protected wildlife preserve) to the west, and by the Satory Forest to the south.

As part of *le domaine national de Versailles et de Trianon*, an autonomous public entity operating under the aegis of the French Ministry of Culture, the gardens are now one of the most visited public sites in France, receiving more than six million visitors a year.

In addition to the meticulous manicured lawns, parterres of flowers, and sculptures are the fountains, which are located throughout the garden. Dating from the time of Louis XIV and still using much of the same network of hydraulics as was used during the *Ancien Régime*, the fountains contribute to making the gardens of Versailles unique. On weekends from late spring to early autumn, the administration of the museum sponsors the *Grandes Eaux* – spectacles during which all the fountains in the gardens are in full play.

In 1979, the gardens along with the château were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List, one of thirty-one such designations in France.