

# Promise at Dawn

A Film by Eric Barbier

Starring Charlotte Gainsbourg and Pierre Niney

Based on the Award-Winning Novel by Romain Gary



## U.S. Distribution:

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## Synopsis

From his difficult childhood in Poland to his adolescence under Nice's sun, to his career in the air force in Africa during World War II... Romain Gary has lived an extraordinary life. He owes this relentless enterprise to live a thousand lives, to become a great man and a famous writer, to his mother Nina. It's the wild love of his eccentric and endearing mother that drives him to become one of the greatest novelists of the twentieth century, to lead a life full of twists, passion, and mystery. But this unconditional maternal love will also be a burden that he bears his whole life... *Promise at Dawn* is the film adaptation of Romain Gary's best-selling autobiographical novel.



*Closely adapted from Romain Gary's masterpiece, this ambitious and popular film takes us back to a variety of cinema such as *Le Hussard Sur Le Tot*, *Germinal*, *La Reine Margot*, *Jean De Florette*, etc.... A return to classical cinema and drama that is hard to find in today's films.*

*Shot in five countries over fourteen weeks, PROMISE AT DAWN takes us to Poland and Mexico in the 20's, shows us the 50's through the African desert, pre-war Paris and Nice and London under fire... a spectacular and intimate historical epic.*

**Eric Jehelmann and Philippe Rousselet, Producers**

## Technical Details

Country of Origin:	France
Language:	French (with English subtitles)
Running Time:	131 minutes
Aspect Ratio:	2.39:1 Scope
Format:	Color



## Cast

NINA  
ROMAIN  
ALEX GUBERNATIS  
ZAREMBA  
LESLEY BLANCH  
CAPTAIN LANGER  
ROMAIN (8-10 years)  
ROMAIN (14-16 years)

**Charlotte GAINSBOURG**  
**Pierre NINEY**  
**Didier BOURDON**  
**Jean-Pierre DARROUSSIN**  
**Catherine McCORMACK**  
**Finnegan OLDFIELD**  
**Pawel PUCHALSKI**  
**Nemo SCHIFFMAN**

## Credits

Director **Eric BARBIER**

Written by **Eric BARBIER and Marie EYNARD**  
Based on the book by **Romain GARY** published by **Éditions Gallimard**

Producers **Eric JEHELMANN and Philippe ROUSSELET**

Co-Producers **Romain LE GRAND, Vivien ASLANIAN  
and Jonathan BLUMENTAL  
Sylvain GOLDBERG and Serge DE POUQUES**

Cinematography **Glynn SPEECKAERT (AFC-SBC)**  
First Assistant Director **Brieuc VANDERSWALM**  
Production Design **Pierre RENSON**  
Sound **François MAUREL, Ken YASUMOTO, Marc DOISNE**  
Costume Design **Catherine BOUCHARD**  
Editor **Jennifer AUGÉ**  
Casting **Gigi AKOKA**  
Production Manager **Jean-Jacques ALBERT**  
Post-Production Supervisor **Léa SADOUL and Abraham GOLDBLAT**

A co-production of **JERICO  
PATHE  
TF1 FILMS PRODUCTION  
NEXUS FACTORY  
UMEDIA  
LORETTE CINÉMA**

With the participation of **LA RÉGION BRUXELLES CAPITALE**  
In association with **UFUND**  
With the participation of **CANAL + OCS and TF1**  
With the support of **INDEFILMS 5  
PALATINE ETOILE 14  
CINEMAGE 11  
MANON 7  
A PLUS IMAGE 7  
SOFITVCINE 4**

With the support of **TAX SHELTER DU GOUVERNEMENT FÉDÉRAL DE  
BELGIQUE ET DES INVESTISSEURS TAX SHELTER**

Distributed by **PATHE**

## **INTERVIEW WITH ERIC BARBIER, Director**

### **How does one go about adapting *Promise at Dawn* into a film?**

*Promise at Dawn* is a book that the producer Eric Jehelmann wanted to adapt to film for a long time. He spoke to me as soon as he knew the rights were free. I was not completely familiar with the book by Romain Gary, but I had read his less prominent books. In my eyes Gary was above all a romantic, an enigma, Jean Seberg's husband and the orchestrator of that astonishing literary hoax that was the Emile Ajar affair. Gary is multi-faceted - ambassador, filmmaker, novelist, he always hides behind these diverse pseudonyms, he is Polish, Russian, French, a Jew whose mother hurries to the Pope's house at the first sign of trouble, and which self-describes regularly as oriental...

I had read *Promise at Dawn* for the first time since school, it's a great book which sheds astonishing light on this elusive personality. I was immediately interested in the project and I threw myself into the work when he asked me to adapt such a book.



### **What are the main concerns for a filmmaker trying to adapt such a classic?**

The *Promise of Dawn* is a picaresque novel, an adventure and coming of age story that covers the 20 years that Romain Gary spent with his mother. They face

challenges, move through adventures and twists and turns, across country after country. Their life is a parade of opportunities lost and taken advantage of, of reunions, of happy coincidences and unfortunate accidents. It's an abundance of every imaginable situation. The first part of the story exceeds all understanding and confronts the reader with a plethora of scenes that are dizzying. I had to find a scriptwriting method to conserve the essence of the novel while at the same time reducing it by two-thirds.

I cut up, chopped up the novel into all of its small moments of action: by the end of the book, I had made a list of 876 moments of action... I obviously had to reduce that. Or rather to concentrate it. I never stopped asking myself whether going against what happens in the book was acceptable, and when it was no longer okay. I wanted to be absolutely loyal to the spirit of the book.

**In the book, the historical continuity is totally disrupted: the timeline passes from one time period to another throughout the whole story.**

The novel functions that way, especially at the beginning. Gary structured his book in three major acts: childhood in Eastern Europe, his adolescence in France, and his early adulthood with the war, but it goes back and forth in time, it relies on events from different eras between them to analyze and develop certain themes, ideas, and reflections on his past.

The method is very beautiful and functions well in literature, but it's not quite as transposable to film. I had already organized the snippets of action in chronological order (according to history) before to tighten up the story in order to start with a more cinematic approach. In this way, the film is organized in a more classic manner than the book, but it was necessary to the epic dimension and the historical aspect. I wanted the viewer to be able to follow it as simply as possible. Adapting a book is a peculiar exercise in loyalty, which revealed itself to be even more particular in the case of Gary's book.

### **Pourquoi?**

Because in *Promise at Dawn*, the truth and the false, the real and the imaginary, are mixed together all the time, throughout. It's an autobiographical story where memory is sublime - they are reconstructed memories. Some episodes of the book that I imagined as false were revealed to be exactly what happened, and other very important events from his childhood I later discovered from the Wino archives in 2014 for the one-hundred year anniversary of his birth, and were never mentioned. For example, Romain Gary had an older (firstborn) brother named Joseph, who was the product of his mother's first marriage. Joseph spent a whole year in Wilno with Romain when he was 12 years old, and then Joseph left to Wiesbaden where he died of a serious illness in his early twenties.

**Basically, a writer like him doesn't hesitate to adapt his own life story.**

Exactly. He drew from the real events of his past but he transcended them in order to create an extraordinary epic. It demands a respect for this strange back and forth. As such, one of the difficult principles of this adaptation consisted in making the frame in which this story can unfold tangible. Because if the frame stays close to the book, you realize that few details are given. The reality is never described with precision. It's almost abstract. The context is not given clearly.

If the scene is situated in Wilno, who should I film exactly? What should I show? What should the room where Romain and his mother live resemble? I was forced to read between the lines and search in the margins of the book in order to decide how to embody the lines the people evoked in the book, in order to represent the social fabric of each village where the characters exist. As for Wilno, there is for example two books which helped me a lot: Yosik: a sweetheart! the history of a child in this village in 1918. It's conceived as the opposite of Gary's book, with an abundance of details and a rich description of an extraordinary village. The second is a book of lectures like these which allowed me to imagine a grain of reality of the era. These were very important to read because books like these, where I can see photographs, to go to the place, give me an idea of the place and the atmosphere in a literal sense.

**You show a lot of attention to realism and documentation that Gary doesn't but, at the same time, often scenes are filmed like his sublime memories that you referenced. I see this in the first sequence in Wilno, for example. A disturbing ambiance is created, with the snow, and the fog, and it's also close to complete realism. You could say that it displays an event reconstructed by memory, like a dream...**

What you say is true, but I did not see one contradiction between the desire to represent what was closest to reality as possible and the attention to be loyal to the manner with which Gary always strives to transfigure or sublimate his memories. You have to know where the novelist parted. You must have an idea of the reality of Wilno in order to understand the path which he travels in his work as a writer.

Concerning that first sequence in Wilno, I wanted an abstract frame, fog, a large enough street, empty, snow, and that was it. The scene is the first meeting between the son and his mother. Nina appears like a monster. It appears that she is behind the walking child and at the same time she emerges suddenly and abruptly before him. Romain is nearly afraid of her. It's the first meeting of the couple! Immediately, Nina tells Romain his future: "You will have a car, you will be the ambassador of France, you are the tallest, most handsome..." And it goes directly to the heart of the subject. I imagined this moment as a dream-like scene.

**You mentioned your concern to be faithful to the writer's work as he returned to his past. Did you hesitate to cite his text or did you immediately think that it was necessary to construct the story with this voiceover?**

Throughout the novel, Romain Gary comments, analyzes, and mediates his path and from the beginning I knew that the voiceover would be omnipresent. Gary's text came to be the conductor of the story that permitted me to offer a strange or often quirky point. The voiceover relays serious or tragic events with frivolity, irony, or tenderness while escaping sympathy, or melodrama, or pity.



**In order to introduce the voiceover, you change the set-up of the story that was imagined by Romain Gary. Promise at Dawn begins on Big Sur beach in California, when, faced with the ocean, a man recalls his life alone. The film begins in Mexico at the time of a trip that Gary took with his first wife. Why this change?**

The pages about Big Sur take place at night. They are surely the most moving and melancholic pages in Promise at Dawn, but they did not allow me to connect the film to Gary's book. But, I wanted the viewer to understand at the same time that the voiceover which was going to accompany the viewer during the next two hours was the same as in the text of the book.

In order to get there, an idea came to me while reading Romain. A particular expression, from Lesley Blanch's book, Romain Gary's first wife. She tells a story that while he was the French consul in Los Angeles, they decided to leave together to go to Mexico for the Festival of the Dead. They put themselves up in a little village where they scheduled a series of tourist attractions visits.

But very suddenly, Gary had a crisis. He locked himself up in his hotel room. He explained that he needed to work. And that was how he began *Promise at Dawn*. I did not know how which Lesley Blanch fictionalized that or not, this episode of her shared life with Gary, but she says that because he had a headache, he thought he had brain cancer and he imagined that he was on the brink of death.

So, they decided to leave Mexico immediately by car in order to consult a doctor. They were in the Mexican capital for many hours and there's the assumption that Lesley read the first draft of *Promise at Dawn* during this wait. This permitted me to establish a direct line between the voiceover and the novel. For the viewer, the voiceover clearly corresponds to Lesley reading the book. The viewer enters into the novel with the same initial reader, Lesley, and is absorbed right away, and all the story which is told by him is the same in the book, that the phrases heard in the voiceover are his own citations. They understand immediately that *Promise at Dawn* is a beautiful and good story of a writer telling part of his own life.

### **Which films in particular have inspired you in your work to adapt this novel?**

*Little Big Man* by Arthur Penn was adapted from the book by Thomas Berger, is the film which I often thought of....

### **That's a surprising reference!**

It's a western that I adore and it had a construction that I found helpful. How to adapt a novel which multiplies the periods, the eras, the places, by using a voice over? This inspired me to see how Arthur Penn posed this question himself. *Little Big Man* and *The Promise at Dawn* have the proliferation of situations in common, both funny and amazing, which convey the heroes in one place and another, moving them around from one meeting to the next encounter, from failure to success, from disappointments to happy surprises, from illusions to deceptions, across all of History. In these two cases, the story evokes a man between two cultures, who finds himself in difficult situations often because of this double affiliation. In the book, the hero creates a mockery of himself in Poland because he pretends to be French and is expected to be. Another time in France, he sees himself equally mocked and humiliated because he is a Polish Jew.

Jack Crabb, the hero of *Little Big Man*, is regularly threatened he will be killed by the whites because he is Indian, and by the Indians because he is white. In both

cases also, it's masterfully handled by a particular narrative motive that I will call the inversion of values, which allow the absurd, contradicting, and fascinating difference between the manner in which one sees oneself and that which is the reality to be highlighted. This method catches us off guard, challenges our given ideas and at the same time makes us turn these convictions, turn our admitted morals and the foundations of our principles upside down.

**Promise at Dawn unfolds across about thirty years and in various countries, with spectacular war scenes. Taking the breadth of the project into account, did you ever consider directing it in English?**

It's true that the idea of shooting in English is introduced in terms of economy when the film's budget is very high. But to shoot Promise at Dawn in English would be a heresy, and the producers were conscious of this from the start.

**Because France is one of the major themes in the story?**

Exactly. Promise at Dawn is the story of this mother who dreams of an ideal France, and transfers this desire onto her son, this will to become French. She is like a tourist who fantasizes about French cuisine, French elegance, French style, French seduction ... "France, it's the most beautiful place in the world, she said with her old naive smile. This is the reason that I want you to be French," Romain Gary's wrote, recalling what his mother said to him about it.

In the book, the plot point of the son character making an effort to reconcile the reality of french-ness with his mother's idealized version of it is a very strong and beautiful theme that produces many symbolic scenes.

In this way, in order to hide the development that he could not be sub lieutenant, because he was a naturalized citizen and Jewish, he must believe what his mother says - that he was punished for seducing the wife of his superior officer. The image of the seductor - and as such, French - that he created with this deceit became a source of pride for his mother. France is part of the son's initial course. Love of this country entirely guides the two characters' destiny from the beginning.

Gary finishes by writing that if "not one single drop of French blood is in his veins, France flows in him". Considering the importance of this theme, it wouldn't make sense to direct the film in English. The French flag, Marseilles, French culture but above all the French language is plainly part of the story. French is the language that Gary chose to write this book while he was living in Los Angeles and working at the same time on Lady L, which he wrote in English. I think that this was important also for Diego Gary, Romain's son, that the film be shot in French.

**Speaking earlier about Gary and his mother, you used the word couple...**

Promise at Dawn is the story of a couple merged together. I worked with this concept in mind. In the book, there are a lot of digressions about Gary's life, but I wanted to stay centered on the story of this couple: there was the subject. It informed how I approached the film. People are introduced, but they move around this couple. No one is able to join it. It's something that struck me in the novel. There are no friends, and when there are, they disappear immediately. All of the characters are silhouettes, more or less consistently, in the margin of the rise of this couple. There are some people who like them, who help them, but which are not a part of their project. Regarding this Romain notably said: "To make my mother exist, I must make her a celebrity." I believe that the whole book is founded on this desire. It's the purpose behind his writing. And I wanted the film to remain centered on this motive.

### **This subject, how did you formulate it?**

It's a double promise. Nina makes a promise to her son to love him no matter what happens, to support him unconditionally, entirely. In exchange, Romain promises her to be successful and to become famous. The film is a story of a son who fights to make his mother's dream become reality. But the dynamic of the story is justice, revenge. Gary sees all of the injustices which his mother has been a victim of, and he wants to avenge her. It's a basic sentiment among children. The suffering they see in their parents as they are discredited, humiliated, can cause tremendous rage and fierce energy. The scene at the beginning of the film, where he is under the table and sees his mother humiliated by the police marks a fundamental moment.



She suffers terrible, obscene violence. I think that the book is related to this violence which in the eyes of a child takes on frightful proportions and determines their character. "I must avenge my mother," is in essence what he thinks, "I must avenge her socially, my mother is stronger than this, no one knows her, I must help them discover who she is." It's this reasoning which he writes *Promise at Dawn*, in order to reestablish her place in the world. At the end of the film, Lesley Blanch says to Gary: "Writing this book, it's the only thing that you could do for her". And it's true. But at the same time, this success plunges him into a great depression. He suffers thinking that his mother will die too early before she can see that he has kept his promise. He says, "She'll never know, she'll never know." This pain and darkness in Gary is felt intensely, in the pages about *Big Sur* at the beginning and the end of the novel. His mother never knew that her son would become one of the major French writers of the 20th century, that he would become a consul, that he would be rich, that he would have lovers, wives, everything that she wanted for him. That he would succeed in creating this character that she had completely invented.

**Promise at Dawn is a story of possession, almost in a fantastic sense of the word...**

Romain Gary wrote plenty of crazy and decisive phrases along those lines: "I always knew... that I only existed, in a way, by proxy; that the mysterious but just force which presides over the destiny of men has thrown me into the plateau of balance in order to re-establish the equilibrium of a life of sacrifices and self-denial. He paints his mother in these pages as a heroic character who merits a place in history. He proves to her, posthumously, that all of her sacrifices were not in vain: "I had decided for my part to do everything that was in my power to make her become, by my actions, a celebrated and acclaimed artist."

**In the book, the father is barely mentioned - but he is there. In the film, you depicted him as totally absent. There's not even a single allusion to him.**

Yes, but it was not disloyal to the spirit of the story, where the father is not truly named. Across many chapters, he makes sure to allow some lingering doubt about his descent from the celebrated Russian film actor Yvan Mosjoukine. In many interviews with him, he retells his Tatar lineage... He never gives the whole truth. He says only that his father is a furrier, for example. The only time where, alongside a few quick mentions, Gary lingers on the subject of his father is when he tells the story that he received a letter by which he learned that his father had died in Auschwitz. I shot a scene in the car with Lesley Blanch where she asks him, "But you never talk about your father?", and Romain responds, "I did not know my father but my father became my father when he died from a cardiac arrest in the gas chamber." I removed it because, strangely, it became off-subject. The story had the objective of creating an absolute, total mother character. Making the father

absent in the film allowed it to best portray that Nina is at the same time mother and father. She is both. There is not space for anyone between the mother and son.

**The viewer is placed without a doubt before this mother in sublime and terrible times, with her monstrous love: Is she a good or bad mother, from her son's perspective?**

This issue is omnipresent. During his entire childhood and young adulthood, Romain experienced unlimited love but was also confronted with humiliation, arguments, crises. She often made him feel ashamed. His mother could be very violent towards her son. She does not allow him anything. With Charlotte Gainsbourg, she has worked a lot in this dimension, this sphere: unconditional love of a mother who demands a lot, whose expectations are high. In the face of his mother's desires, because she desires those things for him, he doesn't have a choice. He only has one path to follow, above and against all else. The destiny that she promised him is great but it's predetermined, drawn in advance. He is not free. He doesn't have any space. She tells him how his life should go. But at the same time an eccentric mother, a little scatterbrained, from a comical, silly place.... Her eccentricism produces implausible situations, such as when she pushes her son to leave alone to Berlin so he can go kill Hitler.... Before happily reconsidering. That's where I found Gary very strong, in that moment when she acted out of character when his mother was nearly monstrous, in effect, frightening when she was always so tender and fun, and then at the same time he was awakened to how he had to share in her feelings. Certainly, we do not all have a mother who has such megalomaniac power to project on their young son, but the novel speaks to the whole world because we all share in childhood a complicated connection to our parents' desires, what they want for us, and the shame which can be created by them... In the film, the scenes where one sees this, the embarrassed, unsettled son, occasionally overwhelmed by shame are often funny because they are initiated by the excess and generosity of the mother.

**You stage the scene where Nina comes in on her son losing his virginity like a burlesque comedy number. It's a little out of place, and at the same time it's the extreme point of a comical thread that is essentially very present throughout the film.**

Promise at Dawn is a dramatically intense novel, but Gary manages with genius these ironic, displaced moments, and ironically they're very funny. In the book, the scene that you reference is written in an outrageous, over-the-top, grotesque manner. Gary describes Mariette for example saying: "Mariette was endowed with a sensational ass, that I saw without ceasing during class and in place of my mathematics professor." There is a treatment of the scene by the writer that is truly ludicrous. I could not integrate all of these funny moments from the book. I adore, for example, the pages where Nina discovers that her son sells objects from their

apartment to go see hookers. She is proud - he's a "real man" - and makes it so that if she does not see it and he only steals from them in order to go see these women, it's okay. Regarding this laughter which emerges often throughout the film, apart from this scene of him losing his virginity which is in effect burlesque, the effort was to not situate them in such a way that would overlook their characters.

### **Which is to say?**

When Nina tells her son that he should go to kill Hitler, she is not joking, she is sure that she should send her son to Berlin in order to therefore save France. The comic effect comes from this absolute conviction. And that which is very beautiful is that Gary never makes fun of his mother's questions or suggestions. He never looks down on her. Romain does not have contempt for her eccentricism or her foolishness. It's the law, the rule of the house, between Nina and her son, that he must respect the demands of his mother. The son follows this path. Therefore the comic scenes always come from the action that there is not second degree, the son never takes what his mother tells him lightly. Whatever his mother may say, she has a reason and he must defend her. It's all the tie between them.

### **Did you already have the actors in mind when you were writing the screenplay?**

No, the two characters are larger than life, and at the beginning of the project, I preferred to not focus myself on the actors, on the bodies and the known faces. What's more, I had a sizeable problem - to make a film that spanned 30 years. To show that the characters aged without just saying so. In order to incarnate Romain Gary, I knew that I was going to be obligated to have three interpretations: a child, an adolescent, and an adult. This made me very nervous. For the child, I needed a perfectly bilingual child in both French and Polish. I had seen close to 580 kids in Poland, in Belgium, in France. It is difficult to work with children - kids will be kids. You looked more for a personality than a budding actor. Impressive naturally in their improvisations. The actor imposed this from our first meeting. He is a child whose parents had been in Poland for a long time in order to place themselves in Belgium. At the time of shooting he was 9 years old and he was very focused. The strength of the scenes of Gary's novel brought Charlotte and Pawel closer a little bit more each day, there was a true connection between them. They had a great time finding themselves in the scenes and improvising. They were attached to each other. For young Romain, I already knew Nemo Schiffman. I had seen him in Emmanuelle Bercot's film SHE LEAVES with Catherine Deneuve. He played a 10 year old character and he was extraordinary. I said to myself that when he was 14 or 15 years old I would call him. He had auditioned a few scenes and very quickly I knew that it was him. I was very scared of the scenes with Mariette which were zany but also very sexual. Nemo and Lou Chauvain (who played Mariette) took it on with this great humor. Each tried to find more improbable positions than the other. It was very funny. I imagine that if I had had to do that at 15 years old, I

would have been terrified! But not Nemo. The only thing that was left for me to find was adult Romain. I only knew few actors who were capable of incarnating a character from 18 years old to 44 years old, the age at which he wrote his book.



### **You immediately thought of Pierre Niney?**

From what I could see, he was the only actor who, by his talent and his physical appearance could carry out all the time periods of the film. His passion for Romain Gary made him all the more perfect for the role. He adores the writer and he re-read the book. He's someone who often exchanges good ideas for the scenes, throughout the shooting, as well as about the montage that I had shown him where he proposed these brilliant things. For example, the famous phrase which titles the book, "With maternal love, life makes a promise at dawn that it can never hold" - arrived early in the film like in the novel. Pierre found this passage extraordinary, and asked me why I did not place it at the end of the film. He was evidently right! This phrase captures the melancholy that is picked up throughout Gary's story. I placed it at the end of the film, at the moment when Lesley embraces her husband. As such it was more forceful: Gary said before his own wife that no one could ever have loved him like his mother. Pierre is an actor who really challenges himself, who is completely invested throughout the film. He does not hesitate to watch how a scene functions outside of his own personal performance. While I was shooting the scenes from Romain's childhood in Hungary, I reminded myself that the editor of the film, Jennifer, showed him the rushes (the scenes that were ready to be

edited from the shoot, the shots) of the shot scenes with Pawel. He wanted to see certain mannerisms from the child so that he could reproduce them in the scenes that he was going to be playing. Pierre is very young but he has a very impressive maturity to him.

### **Was Nina's role difficult to assign?**

I had met Charlotte Gainsbourg many times in the past and I have wanted to work with her for a long time. I was going to see her in New York, where she lives. We both were familiar with the screenplay and the book, we had spoken a lot. Charlotte posed a lot of questions to me, of the scenes, the why and the how of characters and situations, the historical context, the underlying history of Wilno, the stories of Gary's family. She showed me photos of her own family, of her Russian grandmother, who like Nina had traveled across to France. I saw that she had an intimate understanding of the character. She had a very meticulous way of asking about these things, of visualizing the way that Romain's mother would look, as an exuberant woman, in the flesh. This meeting had made these things very clear to me. Charlotte would be cast as the mother. There was not a single doubt.

### **How was it working together?**

From the beginning she said to me: "I can't embody such a woman the way that I am, it's impossible, she's much more heavy, more earthly (down to Earth)." Very quickly she asked me how to adapt her body to the image of such a character. Each instant of her life as Nina was a battle. What kind of body would a woman like this have who works on call, who walks in the cold and the snow of Wilno, who smokes like a chimney day and night? At the end of some of the work scenes Charlotte said to me that she would have to modify her physique. She wanted hips, a belly, breasts, stringy hair. We had to make prosthetics, wigs. Charlotte integrated all of these elements into her body and I assisted little by little until the transformation was complete. She really became the character... the opposite, Nina became her! She acted the Polish scenes over a few hours. She picked up smoking in order to recover the automatic quirks of a compulsive smoker. In order to increase her likeness, she gave Nina a walk slightly like a duck. Nina was a woman who was always tired, who did not stop working and schlepping herself around all day, her arms full of as much as she could carry. Charlotte incorporated this particular way that some people are, where they will continue to walk around and keep busy even if there is nothing to do. Once clothed and with full hair and makeup, the monstrous character of THE MOTHER unpolished, Charlotte IS Nina. There is not one scene where she does not have a wig or prosthetics. And you would forget she was wearing it completely. One day, she suggested that her character should have an accent. I was against it. I had said to her that would never work, that it would be too unrealistic. She insisted. I was nervous that it would make her fall into a caricature. I was stuck on an idea: in Wilno, the mother spoke

French with her son and Polish with the men who she worked with. I did not truly ask myself the crucial question of the accent. Charlotte explained to me that she remembered her grandmother's accent, without doubt closer to what Nina would have and she asked me to consider letting her try it. The first day of shooting the accent that she had found was so right, so incarnated, a once slight but obvious, that it became an integral part of her character. She had found the perfect amount / level. Charlotte is an actress who has a capacity for enormous work while reserving a liberty to play and a being fully available to new ideas which can come out of nowhere. She is such a staggering natural it feels like working with a child who discovers each moment as if were their first when working with her.

### **Which was the most difficult scene to shoot?**

I could say the scenes in the Moroccan desert, in a village that was difficult to access, the more technical filming of airplane fights, the scenes with the most people, the trains, the snow... But the most difficult scene I maintain is the one where Romain, hidden under the sewing machine, watches the police search the apartment. Pawel, who played Romain as a child, cried because of the violence of the policemen. It was very painful to get the right emotion for this scene, to show the suffering of a child who is seeing his mother humiliated.

### **I imagine that shooting the last part of the film, when it becomes a war film, was particularly painful....**

It was a part which was very technically heavy and cumbersome. Gary was the navigator for a bomber called The Boston. This airplane no longer exists in Europe and the only two Bostons that we could track down were found in the US. But they were brand new, guarded by passionate collectors that I imagined they would not want them banged up and used for flights day and night, covered by shots from German guns. The setup of the Boston was particular since there were three men on board - the pilot whose function was to navigate the airplane under fire and to keep the airplane on target; the navigator in the transparent cockpit at the front who gives directions to the pilot before releasing the bombs above the target; and the gunman at the back, waiting backwards, facing the back of the plane, who should protect the bomber in case of attack from the German fighter planes. These three posts were totally compartmentalized and neither the navigator, nor the gunman, nor the pilot could take up a different post. This placement is very important in the book since Romain goes to save his gunman and pilot at the end, attacked by the German fighter planes, having lost control of the plane. The chief set designer Pierre Renson persuaded me to allow myself to use some Flamants - which were similar to the Boston. He recreated the three posts in these bombers.

Then they started to do repainting for days and days... But I understand the pressure the company was under. For example, we were shooting on an unused

runway and I could not imagine the complexity of landing those monsters on the tarmac. We started filming bombers rolling on the ground, it was enough to make you sick... When you shout "another take" you understand quickly that a bomber weighing 10 tons and spanning 20 meters is not a Fiat 500. Then you have to film the planes in the air, planes landing... We finished shooting these sequences by filming closer shots of the bomber in the studio. Pierre Renson recovered a plane carcass he had repainted and restored and installed on a hydraulic system that he designed to move the cabin however you may want to. The cabin seized, went up, trembled in a brutal way. Pierre Niney, Finnegan Oldfiel, and Martin Loizillon were shaking very violently inside of it.

**What part of the shooting and work required special effects in each part of the film?**

It was necessary to use special effects for the squadrons in flights, the bombers moving in "boxes" of 6 planes to go bomb the German coast.

We worked under the direction of David Danesi with a special effects team who got involved in the movie as soon as we began development. They did a really amazing job. We worked together to shoot 3D previews of all of the war scenes which were then reassembled by Jennifer Augé, the editor of the film. Visual work on the special effects in these scenes took seven months and the rendering of the bombed places, the planes, and the skies is really very realistic.

**That ending part is very striking, when the film becomes very spectacular, fitting all of the markers of a big action movie, then the story returns again and is also always concentrated on the face-to-face between Romain and his mother. The viewer is always with them. Like if the immense decorum of the war film moves the story place itself at the service of an intimate and familial drama between two characters...**

Yes and you have highlighted a very important point. Everything that Romain does during this period, all of the risks that he takes are linked to the promise that he made to his mother. The film must keep this at its axis whatever the violence and the power of the war scenes. That's what I like in this part of the film. Romain risks his life each day, but he keeps in mind two things: to finish his first book *European Education and Liberté France* in order to meet his mother. He leads these two fights at the frontline without flinching. The first thing that Romain does when he climbs into his bomber is slip a photo of his mother's face in the cockpit. With this photo, there is the sentiment that Nina is watching forever, pushing him, forcing him. Like writing, war is a platform by which Romain can keep his promise." I would be able to return to the house with my head high: my book has given my mother that little bit of artistic glory of which she dreamed, and I will be able to give to her the

highest French military distinction that she has so well-deserved." He succeeded! As a hero, he can finally return.

**In your opinion, why does *Promise at Dawn Speak* still speak to a reader or a viewer in 2017?**

A strange, tragic joy reigns in it. "It is finished," and "I have lived," are the two phrases that begin and end a melancholy, grief-filled book, but there's not a trace of bitterness, cynicism, or of defeatism. Rather, you find an elegy of hope and of will, tolerance, and heroism also. Gary is never self-righteous or plaintive. He distills a vision of existence which exalts that why could be better in us, which valorizes the desire to make real our dreams and the fictions that carry them, all with a terrible humor. You can only identify ourselves in the heroes of *Promise at Dawn* because that which it tells is none other than an initial journey.



**Even if this course goes against our usual course?**

It's true that it's a story of a child who becomes a man, not by emancipating from the straightjacket of his family, but on the contrary, by conforming to his mother Nina's desires. "The Gods have forgotten to cut my umbilical cord." But that's what makes the story original and singular. And as a love story between a son and his mother, it's a universal and timeless story! Unconditional faith which Nina has proved towards her son explores a question that is alive and well in all of us: "How

have we been loved by our parents?" Few of us have known such an absolute love. Many have, on the contrary, suffered a lack of love and we are all ready to envy that privilege that Gary had. But at the moment where we envy him, we also see how he is comically and entirely aware of the perverse effect of this love: a quest for the ideal that can never be resolved or completely satisfied, a fear of not being good enough, guilt that we're not able to live up to what has been given us, an inevitable disappointment in the domain of love. Romain Gary always ties it up nonetheless to show that there was good in this passionate love.

**The theme of France, stuck between the reality and the fantasy that we have of it, resonates with what we see in the news about immigration: We have never seen so many newspaper articles about "the identity of France" and about the status of refugees than in recent years...**

What does *Promise at Dawn* show us about integration, and the republic? Gary and his mother were Polish, Jewish immigrants. And there is indeed this crazy love in Nina for an ideal France, where one would ceaselessly shout "Freedom, equality, fraternity!". Where the women of the world dressed in Paul Poiret are going to drink champagne in palaces! Where Victor Hugo was - like she dreamed of him - President of the Republic! Nina is more French than all Frenchmen, she loves her adopted country before she placed foot in it, and nothing could ever distort this love. This story of Jewish polish immigrants choosing France as their homeland to the point that Gary becomes the consul in the United States and a major literary figure makes a mockery of all the sectarianism and protectionism which flourish today.

## INTERVIEW WITH CHARLOTTE GAINSBOURG

**Were you familiar with *Promise at Dawn* before Eric Barbier proposed that you play the role of Nina?**

No. I did not know Romain Gary, except his story with Jean Seberg. A little bit before Eric spoke to me about his film project, a friend had told me that it was absolutely necessary that I plunge myself into the work of this artist. But I had only already read *Gros-Calin*. It was through his screenplay that I discovered *Promise at Dawn*. I was terribly moved by the magnitude of the story it told, I am completely carried away by Eric Barbier's writing. It was afterwards, in reading the end of the novel, taking into consideration the measure of his adapted work, that I realized how faithful he had been to the novel. I think my not knowing Romain Gary well originally allowed me to embark on the project in a somewhat spontaneous way, without too much apprehension or nerves. I was not overwhelmed by the reference material.



**How did you perceive your character?**

Eric showed me every document possible. I have looked at all of Nina's photos, scrutinized any trace that she left behind... on her childhood town, on the different eras of her life. But these traces are few. In fact I completely appropriated Gary's mother's character by thinking about my own grandmother. Very quickly I made an

amalgam between Nina, what I perceived about her and my father's mother. For example, her Polish accent that I imagined, I was hearing as a Russian accent that I had known well ... These two women, about the same generation, come from the same world, have the same culture. They resemble each other in my eyes. My grandmother was less troublesome than Nina but still was a very strong character. There was something identical in her relationship to my father, that was obvious. Gary is THE son, the only one. For my grandmother, it was not exactly the case but it was almost worse - she only had girls, which she considered bad, and her one darling son. She demanded a lot of him - expected a lot of him, I imagine, but not in the same way as the possessive mother in *Promise at Dawn*.

**That is to say that the emotion that is felt by the reading, from the screenplay and then from the book, resonated in an intimate way with your memories, with the history of your paternal family?**

Ah, yes, yes! That's exactly what it was like. I used what I remembered from my grandmother and then what I fantasized about my own story. There is obviously a lot of differences, but a common foundation. My father was born in France, but without having placed foot in Eastern Europe he harbored a nostalgia for his origins that he transmitted to me very early. The fact of being rooted in Jewish tradition, in particular, without ever thinking of religion. My father's family left Russia in 1917. My father spoke about his parent's departure in a very romantic way, how they were fleeing the revolution to come take refuge in France. I remember a fake story in the papers ... With my father and my grandmother there were discussions about the war which were like adventure stories which I was told up until I was about 13 years old.

**And the theme of Gary's mother's dreamy, idealized idea of France, which is central in *Promise at Dawn*?**

I didn't think about it right away, but it's obvious. My grandparents did not want to go to the US, like others who were able to make it in the United States. The dream was France, French culture, a certain fantasy designed after art! It's amusing to see how they gave such French names to their children. It's hard to beat Lucian, Jacqueline, Liliane...

**In short, you projected the image of your grandmother on the role of Nina.**

That's why I care about the accent. After sending me the script, Eric came to see me to discuss his vision of the role and the film. When I therefore offered up the possibility of giving Nina an accent, he was completely opposed. He found it a ridiculous idea. He was afraid that the viewer would see the actress pretending, trying too hard, and he thought no one would believe it. I let him speak. Six months before the shooting, I went to Poland for a job. It was a very intense job.

And hearing my different teachers and a notable actress who coached me, it seemed unimaginable that Nina wouldn't have an accent, or at least a trace of an accent. It was impossible to see the woman's character speak Polish in certain scenes, when she speaks French in others, to hear it with a Parisian accent. This perspective seemed ridiculous to me. I gently tried to press the idea upon Eric and he let himself be convinced. The role was therefore built thanks to the Polish language and accent. The result was very successful, you can hear a very believable trace or a ghost of an accent which now indeed seems indispensable. I had incredible coaches. I could not have done that alone.

### **There was Nina's voice to find, but there was also her body....**

Indeed, I was in Poland shooting the previous movie and Eric came to see me in order to make the first set of costumes. A designer arrived with a case full of dresses from the period. I tried them all on. I looked at myself in the mirror, and Eric was looking at me and the resulting images were never good. It was not Nina. I did not have the right physiognomy. There was something that just didn't work. I was too thin to look like a woman who had a life like Gary's mother's. I had to make myself more burdened, I had to weigh more. I felt a need to conceal myself, to disguise myself. I could not look like a disguised Parisian, who appears to be trying to make you believe that she has spent her life on the snowy streets of Wilno. It was necessary to come into a girth. It was necessary not to be afraid to be damaged, to be afraid to play with age. I was given everything that could have helped me: costumes, makeup, wigs, prosthetics. I decided to play with fake butts, fake breasts. For the first time, I felt like I had a mask, and was entirely transformed and able to play as an actress. It gave me a lot of freedom and was a great pleasure to get outside of myself as much as possible. I never had the impression of exaggerating, but when I finished the film, when I left the shoot, I was very scared. A bit like after Lars Von Trier films. I asked myself if I had not done a little too much, if I was going to come off like a clown. Eric, whose opinion I trust, reassured me, it was only a feeling I'd have at the end of the shoot...

### **What do you think of the character? I'm asking from the viewer's perspective which is a pervasive feeling while watching the film. In watching Nina with her son, one wonders if it's a blessing or a curse to have a mother like her....**

I also have this question. I love this mother so much.... I think at the same time, that it's a curse, because she puts an anvil, a great burden, on his back. It's a constant test, every moment. But, at the same time, there is everything that she gives him, the strong character that she enables him to acquire, his appetite for life. But you know, I do not judge her. I did not want to ask myself the question to determine if she is more evil or good for her son. She is a weight, she is a lot - that is clear. I was looking to feel love in the first degree, the passion this woman has for her son. I could not live so intensely. I did not want to have to recoil. It was

difficult to articulate the profound comic dimension of this character with her hardness, but at the same time her poignant idea of destiny? Nina is a character at once funny and pathetic...

**The script is so well written. It's truly strong in how he engenders empathy towards both the characters. The frame was pretty amazing and it is also very rare to act such dialogues.**

I had fun with this role. The comic element resonated because my grandmother had a sense of humor that was very particular and was not a far cry from Nina. And it's true that during the work I brought my own history into it very often. I don't mean Gary, I mean my father, my family. I needed to involve myself in that way. Sometimes I wonder if instead of having someone who had total admiration for Gary, if it was instead swelling for Eric. Because I was constantly having parallel emotions. But Eric was very generous with me. He involved me in all the stages of his work, as if my opinion really mattered. About the accent. About certain scenes too. He was very attentive to what I might feel and think. It's pretty rare to be led by a director who also listens to his actors. And it was so nice to feel that he loved my work, to feel that I surprised him successfully....

We sometimes get the feeling the Nina is hiding something. It's a pretty opaque character. We do not know much about her. Her obsession with her son, which she seems to have alone, provides the essentials of her character. In one scene, the little one asked why the mother does not talk about the father, and my character replies evasively. Eric told me that he finally cut out any trace of the father. I think this was a great idea.

**The film paints the mother as a little monstrous, who's at once the father and mother. She's seen as a sort of omniscient God for her son....**

Yes. Eric had told me about this monstrous side of her character. A monster of vitality and obstinance. I remember a particular plan he often held - Nina walks in the snowy streets and Eric wanted to see nearly a monster that walking ....

**Which scenes were the most difficult to play?**

I can think of two things in particular. First, the Polish was really difficult. We had to start shooting the scenes in Wilno and it made me have to get right into the role with all the scenes in Polish and forced me to do a truly enormous amount of work. I think that it ultimately helped me for the whole role, but it was very difficult. There was notably a long scene, at the beginning of the film, when cops harass me, which took place in the apartment then in the yard. My speech was very quick, and all of it was in Polish... the Second difficulty that I remember is from the scenes with little Pawel, who played Romain as a child. I loved that child. He was truly

moving in his work as actor, fierce but modest at the same time. He responded to all of Eric's requirements that were sometimes a little harsh with him.

**And playing with three actors for the same role, of the son at different ages in his life, was that difficult?**

You get attached to an actor and another takes over his place. It was interesting. Pawel and I were really close. We initially got into our roles together. And then there was this very real relationship with him. When I went to touch his face, I felt as if I was touching my own face. With Nemo, who played Romain as a teen, as with Pierre who played the role as an adult, the difficulty lay in the effort to discover or find the same closeness that I had with the child.



## INTERVIEW WITH PIERRE NINEY

**Were you familiar with *Promise at Dawn* before being involved in Eric Barbier's film?**

I had read *Promise at Dawn* and many other of his books. But I totally rediscovered the work of Romain Gary in beginning to prepare for the film. *Chien Blanc* and *European Education* have been, notably, a particular echo for me. Although they are both autobiographical, they are very different and inventive in their own ways, evoking two distinct emotions and an obvious common intelligence that impresses the reader. What I love about Gary is his humor. His way of never coming off as "totally desperate" in the way he says something. This is the drama of his life, and at the same time the origin of many of his writings. There is always, with Gary, the generosity of laughter, of drama and despair. Especially when it's about himself. I rediscovered, through *Promise at Dawn*, the unconditional and magnificent love that Gary and his mother had for France, country of liberty and human rights. In this respect the book is also resolutely modern and topical, telling how a Polish Jew is persecuted and flees from his country, dreaming with all of his strength of becoming French. He will literally fight to realize this dream and becomes one of the greatest French authors of the 20th century forever.



**What was your first thought when Eric Barbier proposed to you to play the role of Romain Gary? How did you represent this man, the character that he creates for himself in the novel?**

I remembered vivid images of *Promise at Dawn*. I had already found this book very cinematic upon my first reading, when I was a teenager. But what convinced me the most was Eric Barbier's passion that he carried throughout the project. He wanted to make this film for years. With the desire to draw these two portraits of this mother and son who are connected by a bond so singular and at the same time so universal. I didn't have a preconceived notion about the role. But leaning on the life of Romain Gary, I immediately loved the duplication of his identity that was his work and his life. There was an evident parallel between this and acting as a profession. And even beyond this, with the artist's condition in general. On the other hand I knew I was going to play a fictionalized and romanticized version of Gary's character. *Promise at Dawn* is obviously autobiographical but with an important element of transformation and fabrication, big or small, of the reality. So I was going to create this role as a version of Gary filtered through an adaptation and through the perspective of the director. It was less about playing Romain Gary than it was finding, with Eric, a version of that person.

**This is not the first time you have had to interpret a role of a person or character that has really existed: how do you approach such a role? Is it a particular type of job?**

I don't have a predetermined recipe. There are some consistencies that I keep, since I learned this profession in the theater: learn the script by heart many months before shooting, preparing myself as if I were getting ready for a huge, uninterrupted journey. Repeat certain important scenes from the film. Feed myself as much of the life of the character's work if they are real. But, then, the ability to adapt is what I think is most essential - without predicting or being presumptuous - to the project, the director and his vision.

**One question does not leave the viewer whether reading the book or viewing the film: is it a blessing or a curse to have a mother like Romain Gary's? How do you respond to this?**

It's such a difficult question. It would be far too simple to try to respond here. That bond is so strong, crazy, passionate, and destructive and constructive at the same time, it is the very essence of Gary. It's through this that *Promise at Dawn* is a crucial and revelatory book. It tells where the profound desire of a writer like Romain Gary comes from. His vital energy, as well. What's certain is that this mother made him someone extraordinary, in the strongest sense of the word. From a more universal point of view, I think that this story tells us that we all inherit

things from our parents and our mothers in particular. Some aspects that we like, and others that are harder to bear.

**How was working with the other two actors playing Gary as a child and a teenager?**

The three of us met and the filming began with Romain's childhood in Wilno, shot in Budapest. I was still in France then to prepare for the film, but very early Eric sent me pictures from all the scenes with Pawel Puchalski, who plays the character in this period of his life. It was very useful for me to immerse myself in what he was doing, physically and in his acting, in order to take it and relay the best of it a few weeks later. It was the first time I had done that - an exciting job!

**Eric Barbier told me that you had made decisive suggestions as soon as you read the script about the general outline of the story: I'm referring specifically to your feeling that the movie should conclude with a passage from the novel that appears very early in the book. Is it important for you to work on your character from the level of writing, the script?**

Of course. The sooner I can be integrated into a project, the more it inspires me. I thought Eric's adaptation was magnificent. His development decisions and cuts were very well thought out because he obviously needed to cut things in order to be able to carry the book to the screen.

"With maternal love, life makes a promise at dawn that it can never hold..." this quote contains the whole story. Indeed I had asked Eric very early if he would consider putting that voiceover at the end of the film. I liked to be able to exchanged ideas with him about this kind of thing. And to continue to create and consider the screenplay as free material, still living. I think it's important to have this philosophy, especially on a project like this one. Respect the work without being crushed by the final draft.

**What were your reactions when you embarked on the movie? Were there any surprises? Unexpected emotions discovering certain scenes?**

I liked how Eric refocused the story on the mother-son bond, which is the essence of the work. I saw the scenes shot between Charlotte and Pawel, during Romain's childhood, for the first time. It was a very moving discovery and a nice way to enter into the movie for me. I also found that light played a real role in the film. It brings a strong emotion to the scenes. There's occasionally a nostalgia, at other times a heat in the moment... Lighting is something that we don't necessarily perceive as an actor on the set when you're focused on working. And I really liked to discover this aspect when watching the finished film.

## INTERVIEW WITH ERIC JEHELMANN, Producer

**Was adapting the *Promise of Dawn* something you've wanted to do for a longtime?**

Yes, I had wanted to adapt it for a long time. *Promise at Dawn* is the book on my nightstand. I realized that it's a cult book for many readers, and each finds something special in it. Often it's related to the relationship between a mother and her son, which is obviously central. I found the story of a young man, personally very accomplished, making a promise to become someone very uplifting. This coming-of-age dimension made a lasting impression on me. For 10 years, I called Gallimard each year to see if the adaptation rights would be released. And one day I found that they would be surrendered. It was like a crack of lightning in the sky! I thought it couldn't be possible - we couldn't miss this opportunity. I spoke to Eric Barbier, and he wrote a note of intent that was about 10 pages long and very convincing, with the dramaturgic center and very strong suggestions for pulling off the adaptation. Without a doubt, the quality of his work and the finesse of his vision blew away Gallimard and Diego Gary. We acquired the rights. But we still had to find some more funding. I knew that would not be an easy task: the story takes place in several countries and over a period of 30 years. Such a movie is expensive. The film cost 24 million when all was said and done. It's true that aside from films directed in English, like *Valerian* by Luc Besson, or comedies with popular actors, budgets like this are rare in France. This year, for example, you can count such films on the fingers of one hand: *The Odyssey* by Jerome Salle, *A Bag of Marbles* by Christian Duguay, and *AU REVOIR LA-HAUT* by Albert Dupontel. Three movies in total, which isn't a lot.



### **How did you get to be a part of that selective group?**

For *Promise at Dawn*, there needed to be a group that followed us. Pathé has followed us since the project was in development. Partners like TF1, Canal, and Orange also followed us by contributing large amounts. Amounts that are not relevant today. Also, success of the *Ariel Family*, which we had produced, put us in a favorable situation. Since mainstream partners were also a part of the film, it was good that they immediately understood that the adaptation that Eric Barbier designed could create a big popular film. To this point, I want to ingrain one thing: my partner, Philippe Rousselet and myself did not want to adapt *Promise at Dawn* unless we could find a way to make a big, popular story. I wanted a great adventure story to be born from this book. That's what I had always imagined in Gary's book. The film had to have an epic dimension. You know, sometimes I think that the project benefited from the stars aligning and I'm not sure that tomorrow we would have the same luck. When I started thinking of this film ten years ago, I did not think that it would have been possible.

### **As a producer who dreams for ten years to adapt a book like *Promise at Dawn*, was it ever sometimes frustrating to have to pass the steering wheel over to the director?**

No. There has never been frustration about that. At every stage of the work, Eric Barbier was above and beyond what I could have imagined for the book. He's so hardworking, he leaves nothing to chance, and he is attentive to the slightest remark and the smallest detail. He listens. He always convinced me. There were some scenes that I had marked on my first viewing that I had not like that he deleted in his adaptation. All went well, and they were preserved....

## **INTERVIEW WITH PIERRE RENSON, Production Designer**

**What was your first reaction as chief set designer when you discovered Eric Barbier's screenplay, which tells a story that takes place in several countries and at different times in history?**

It was an incredible honor as a chief set designer that he offered to incorporate me into a project of this magnitude. What's very interesting with a story like *Promise at Dawn* is precisely the challenge of the chronology, the mists of Wilno passing into the bright sun of Nice to the rainy London atmosphere under the bombs... Romain Gary's novel goes through 20 years of his life and it was necessary to imagine all the different settings that served and told the different stages of his and his mother's journey, and how to transcribe the emotions that the screenplay evoked in me into the sets?



**By which you mean that upon first view, the moods, the atmosphere, the visual context must adequately serve the story?**

Indeed, I only wanted to rely on strong visual elements. I asked a part of my team to devote themselves to searching the main sites in which the action unfolded in several directions. There was a part in Poland in Wilno where Romain is a child, a part in Nice where he is a teenager. Paris is where Romain goes to study and write his first novel. His military service is at the base in Salon de Provence, before he

finally leaves France in 1940 to join De Gaulle and the FFL in London. From there, it was necessary to show the war, from Africa up to his return at Hartford Bridge which was a back base where the free French bomber forces alongside the RAF notably flew into the Normandy coast to prepare the landing, a campaign where Romain will shine and fulfill the promise he made to his mother by becoming a hero. The idea from the start was for me to make “paintings” or visual patchworks around each of these places. Which is to say not to focus directly on the sets that needed to be made but rather to work on creating an atmosphere, faces, sketches, lessons extracted from the text, tissue samples, color tests, pictures of times we could use as inspiration for scouting, elements of details that I borrowed from contemporary painters from one story or another. For example, I loved the colors and atmosphere in certain pictures by F. Vallotton, Balthus, Theo Van Rysselberghe, Van Gogh.... So little by little, the film was constructed by an accumulation of these visual references.

### **You talk about “paintings”...**

Yes. The walls of our offices were lined with these charts, which followed the screenplay’s chronology. From producers to props, from the chief camera operator to the seamstresses, everyone could walk from one wall to another and see the whole movie from Wilno to the end of the war. It was a way to help Eric visualize his film, to look for ideas and be able to refer to them at any time. It also helped me to ensure homogeneity of different sets and to make sure that confusion or redundancy didn’t happen.

These panels created a very strong interactivity between the teams of the movie. As we were coming up on preparation, we came to gradually add to the story’s work - borders, visual 3D special effects, pictures of the costumes. Eric liked to add these onto the “paintings” of the actors he was casting, or images of the lighting effects, the detailed accessories, which helped him think. This visual construction principle around the movie locations also allows me to understand what the director’s will is, what are the points to which he tirelessly returns in the script. Because one of the first difficulties that I face is not so much to imagine the many sets as it is to understand what the director’s wishes are and what are the most important parts of the film according to him. Only once I’ve accomplished this work of understanding what the director seeks concretely can we shoot.

### **You moved then from the clothing design more to the sets. And in Promise at Dawn, that number is colossal.**

Yes. In reading the screenplay, we could list more than a hundred. In the face of such profusion, we could moreover be brought to discuss them with the director, to choose and select these sets, eventually changing them if they involved too many complications. Because when I’m studying a set, I always imagine its feasibility as

well. Eric Barbier had his screenplay, which is to say his vision, which implied what he thought the sets should be throughout, but he was open to other suggestions. At all times in manufacturing the film there's the work of adapting and adjusting. There has never been a serious question of shooting in the studio. I believe that the quality of the locations is one of the keys to success, and I do not hesitate to get involved very quickly. I have the films and its necessities in mind constantly, when I participate in scouting I see the places with the frame of the vision and can judge the potential of the place very quickly.

### **The scouting was long and complicated?**

We had done a lot ... Spain was considered, we had a Mexican village that was very convincing, but not enough decorations, or too far from each other. Italy came up later because we had fabulous places to shoot the scenes that took place in Mexico and in Nice. For the bases I remember a site in Belgium. But the challenge of the "places" was mainly with Wilno, where the Jewish quarter no longer exists, and in Nice, where neither the old town or the English promenade (which were so essential in the first scene) have the same shape and look that they had in the old days.

### **What role does loyalty, historical accuracy play in contributing to the frame of the film?**

Above anything else, it's important to analyze what is in the interest of the narration. It would be useless to devote disproportionate energy to preserving historical details if they do not serve the overall narrative. Romain Gary is the first to betray the reality of the history if his story requires it, for example in the movie with Yvan Mosjoukine that Romain and his mother see at the Wilno cinema. It's clearly a reference to THE WHITE DEVIL by Alexandre Volkoff, but that movie was made in 1930 and Romain leaves Poland in 1928. So he couldn't have seen this film in Wilno.

Who cares about that when reading Promise at Dawn? What we remember is that Nina wants her son to be inspired by Mosjoukine so much that she makes him a Caucasian warrior costume to wear to a birthday party... But the historical accuracies are nevertheless very real, and they obviously did not miss major ones. When you rebuild a shopping district from 1910 in Wilno, Lithuania, you can not just do whatever. Another central aspect of the decor is the physical link between the actors and them.

It must help them dive in unrestrained into a scene, the actors must believe in the space in which they are transforming. This is the place where they go to force their emotions. The decor must serve them, help them develop their emotional work. I grant a lot of importance to this aspect of set design.

### **Why, as you noted above, was it never seriously considered to shoot the film in the studio?**

Shooting in the studio allows certain capabilities and often gives the director a certain sense of control over space, but the studio deprives you of all the accidents of reality. When shooting outside, we are of course faced with difficulties and impediments, but often those fuel us and we can profit from them. For example, when we visited Budapest, where we decided to shoot the scenes from Wilno, we could not find a place to build the decor of the Jewish district at all.

Budapest is a very inhabited city, much of which has been destroyed and which is under permanent construction. We could not move an entire neighborhood, block the traffic, stop all activity of stores. That option soon proved to be an impossible task. One day, disappointed, we were walking in the city and we went down a street where I saw the entrance to an open car park. All of one block of destroyed and razed houses surrounded by the stone and brick wall fronts, some very old. That was where we could build Wilno: a series of walls without windows, a free space without buildings, some period buildings to the horizon, the clear sky. All surveys, plans, the sketches were made to fit this place. But it was not possible to dispose it and it took looking for another place. We fortunately found a wasteland in the center of Budapest, by chance, which had common features of that original site. We built, we tore down, we were able to construct the street just as we wanted. We were at home there. We could have done the same thing in a studio, but we would have missed, without realizing it, that touch of reality, the backgrounds: behind the panels that we built were existing constructions and then, most importantly, natural sky and light. It was the same for many other sets for the film.

### **How does one create Wilno from the thirties out of Budapest today?**

The physiognomy of today's Wilno has been completely transformed by the Soviets after the war. The majority of the Jewish quarter was razed to give way to large avenues and immense parks. Our various on-site trips have taught us a lot. They showed us the different important details of life at that time. They gave us the ability to not only rely on the adaptation of the book but also on what we were told by the people who were still living there and who knew the city's past well. Thanks to their testimonials, we discovered the spirit and the life of the inhabitants from Wilno before that part of Poland became Lithuania. To give you an example, at the time when Romain and his mother lived at 16 Pohulanka Street, only three or four percent of the population was Lithuanian. 45% of the city's inhabitants were Russian. The repercussions of this information on the set decoration are very important. Polish and Yiddish were on almost all the store signs. It's amazing how the most essential things sometimes lie in the details...

## **In what way?**

Without the visits and the meetings we had, some of the subtleties we made would have remained unknown: the buildings that have disappeared or the state of remains for example, or traces of almost invisible writings on the walls. We have managed to discover the exact place where Romain Gary lived. Gradually, Eric and I finally understood contextual elements which Romain Gary doesn't linger on in the book. It wasn't possible, for example, that Nina's sewing salon would be in the Jewish quarter, where the child was against his mother's advice. We illustrated the traffic between the neighborhood and Romain's house by a kind of secret passage that doesn't exist in the novel. In the screenplay, Nina's apartment and the Jewish quarter where Romain goes to hide are adjacent. Imagine this secret passage between two worlds that is able to illustrate the particular situation of Nina and her son between the poor Jewish community and the more affluent inhabitants of the city.

## **And the work on Nina's apartment?**

It was very important! We had a beautiful site, in an old building in the center of Budapest, but it was necessary that the space tells the different stages of life in Wilno. First poverty, when Nina goes door to door selling ladies' hats, then abundance when she has the idea to transform the apartment into a couture French salon. Finally ruin when she loses everything, before they leave for France. I wanted to make it plausible that Nina, with the few means that she had, could transform a slightly modest apartment into kind of flashy Paul Poiret Workshop. If you pay attention to this decor you will see little elements of change between the poor apartment at the beginning and the "high Parisian fashion lounge" it turns into. Nina hides misery, she masks the holes in the walls with a curtain, unrolls a rug to cover bad ground, glues the peeling wallpaper, installs an imposing chandelier made of fake stones to create a sense they're "Rich". I wanted to show through the change of scenery how Nina was a very clever woman!

## **How was the work to restore London under German bombs?**

During the searches in Hungary we discovered an unused industrial site that was a good start for the London Street sets. The place was really interesting and I suggested to Eric to maximize the use by also building the Wellington, the bar where pilots from different countries meet. In the novel and the screenplay, Romain fights with Polish military in this bar, then they go out to take a taxi, cross London to get there to a hotel where they end up dueling and then the German air force bombs the city. We had made a lot of sketches in order to shoot this scene in a studio. Finally I suggested the hotel to Eric, and to make sure that the duel takes place in the street. This allowed us to condense the set decorations. So we built the

portion of a street, a series of buildings destroyed by bombs up to the exit of the Bar Wellington! The strength of these two scenes chained in a same sequence shot is that the carefree atmosphere of the bar gives way immediately to the brutal reality of London ravaged by bombing.

**What was your reaction when you discovered the movie and therefore your sets on the screen?**

I have already seen the film five times, at different stages of editing, and each time, my greatest pleasure is not seeing my decor, to not think about it anymore. I am fascinated by the story and the history, the actor's work. Discovering the finished film reminds me how happy I was to work there. It's the case with all those who I worked with constantly. I had a tight team. I could not take them all around the world but I wanted to bring the so-called heads of post - the assistants, the head painter, the assembler, the props - everywhere the shoot took us, to keep an energy, a vital continuity. I had great teams everywhere we shot: in Hungary, Morocco, Belgium, Italy, Nice.

