# Endémie Merlant A FILM BY

AUDREY DIWAN



# NOÉMIE MERLANT A FILM BY AUDREY DIWAN

RUNNING TIME: 105 MIN

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## **SYNOPSIS**

Emmanuelle is in search of a lost pleasure. She flies alone to Hong Kong on a business trip. In this sensual global city, where she initiates numerous encounters, she meets Kei, a man who constantly eludes her. Audrey Diwan's film, freely adapted from Emmanuelle Arsan's novel, casts a female gaze on the intimate quest of the woman whose name still evokes one of cinema's most provocative characters.



# INTERVIEW WITH AUDREY DIWAN

## HOW DID YOU GET THE IDEA OF EMMANUELLE?

One day my producer handed me the book by Emmanuelle Arsan. I read it, just for fun. First of all, because I'd never seen the whole film. I didn't feel that was meant for me, so I never watched it to the end. The book left me feeling more ambivalent. It is filled with lots of unbearable vestiges of the 1950s: unquestioned patriarchy, triumphant colonialism. But at the same time, it's written in the first person by a woman. The heroine is more the subject than the object, which cannot be said of the 1974 film. The first decision I made was to give the power back to Emmanuelle: to make her the subject of her own story.

YOU'VE ADAPTED THE BOOK FREELY, YET YOUR FILM BEGINS AND ENDS WITH TWO SEX SCENES THAT ALSO BOOKENDED THE 1974 FILM: THE ENCOUNTER IN THE AIRPLANE, AND THE THREESOME AT THE END. BUT WITH A NOTICEABLE DIFFERENCE: IN YOUR FILM, THE HEROINE EXPERIENCES THESE EVENTS RATHER THAN MERELY FANTASIZING ABOUT THEM. WAS THIS A WAY FOR YOU TO FREE EMMANUELLE OF THE FANTASIES OF WHICH SHE WAS AN OBJECT, SO YOU COULD FOCUS ON HER?

I tried to make a clean break. I wanted to tell the story of a woman who feels no pleasure and of who sets out to discover and claim it. How do we find ourselves? How do we let go? What got me to want to do the movie was a long philosophical discussion about eroticism in the book. I concluded that eroticism is above all a question of framing, of restriction, of reflection about what is shown and hidden. From there, other more intimate questions surfaced, notably about my journey as a woman and my own relationship to sexuality, to pleasure, to my desire for freedom from the norms governing seduction and sex. Nowadays, pleasure seems totally bound up with the imperative of performance, in the capitalist sense of the word. We must maximize, optimize, monetize. For me the question the film poses became: "How do we escape this framework that forces us to "like" (enjoy, consume) everything nonstop, without feeling real pleasure?" The only way to overcome this dynamic is to find the courage to put oneself in danger. To take the risk of not "succeeding" in order to better reconnect with oneself and others..

## TO CONTINUE DOWN THIS PHILOSOPHICAL PATH, THE FILM EVOKES THE WORK OF MICHEL FOUCAULT ON SURVEILLANCE SOCIETIES, THE DISCIPLINE OF THE GAZE AND THE WAY THAT DESIRE AND BODIES ARE PRISONERS OF IT.

The film is definitely interested in the gaze. Emmanuelle works in quality control for a chain of luxury hotels. She must verify that every guest is having the ideal experience. My Emmanuelle is a cog in the omnipresent ratings system, where the gaze is controlled, where pleasure is fabricated, calibrated. For me, the hotel – including the "reverse shot" of the wing under construction which management wants kept hidden at all costs – is a metaphor of the body, which we hold to false standards of perfection. Actually, this perfection is a

way of disciplining desire by means of hushed, normative violence. Noémie and I worked a lot on this mirroring of the body and the hotel. The body is an armor that gradually cracks. Noémie found a carriage, a way of holding herself stiff and straight at the beginning of the film, that slowly morphs into freer, more fluid movement. She has an innate intelligence of situations that illuminates how she says her lines, how she occupies the space around her.

#### WHY DID YOU MOVE THE STORY FROM BANGKOK TO HONG KONG?

I was looking for someplace in Asia that conveyed cosmopolitism yet allowed me to question the traces of colonialism in our current system. Despite its exotic aesthetic, the place comes off as out of touch, devoid of substance, based on a violent class relationship. Unlike the book, I wanted to point out the colonial and classist violence of these places, where the pleasure of the happy few comes by the sweat of the unhappy masses.

## ONE OF THE RICHES OF THE FILM IS THAT IT CAN BE VIEWED AS A PURELY MENTAL SPACE. WHEN DID THIS BOLD DECISION COME ABOUT?

Late, because strange tales require time to take form. But from the start I wanted to cast away naturalism and create a world apart. Not a dystopia, but something slightly out of synch with reality. I wanted the film to unfold in this uncanny space, where the lines are blurred between dream and fantasy, reality and fiction.

## THE 1974 FILM WAS AN EROTIC ROMANCE, WHEREAS YOURS IS AN EROTIC THRILLER. NAOMI WATTS'S PRESENCE RECALLS MULHOLLAND DRIVE.

I wanted the film to have a venomous, paranoid side. I was inspired by my actors' filmographies. Of course, Naomi carries the memory of a certain cinema with her. She can be gentle and imperious at the same time. Hard to pin down. As for Noémie, I adored her in Céline Sciamma's *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*, as well as in *Tàr* by Todd Field, where I noticed how well she acts in English. She can embody freewheeling joy or total iciness. Her smile is disarming. But I also



thought of *White Lotus* while writing. The style of the hotel led me there... and I found that Will Sharpe personifies a somewhat dissident masculinity, openly displaying a kind of impotence that was very valuable for this role. When I offered him the part, he was happy because he'd just seen my previous film, *Happening*, while taking care of his children on New Year's Eve. That answer is so him. It made me want to know him better.

#### SPEAKING OF SERIES, THE ICY DIRECTING STYLE EVOKES STEVEN SODERBERGH'S THE GIRLFRIEND EXPERIENCE. WAS IT A REFERENCE?

I hadn't thought about it, though Rebecca Zlotowski and I did see a few episodes when we began writing. Like Lodge Kerrigan's Claire Dolan and Jeanne Dielman for the way it shows the dreary repetitiveness of prostitution.

#### SINCE YOU MENTION CHANTAL AKERMAN'S FILM, THERE IS A POS-SIBLE PARALLEL WITH THE WAY YOUR FILM IS CONCERNED WITH THE DISQUIET ENGENDERED BY PLEASURE.

It's is one of my all-time favorites. When you like to create a character as a "surface" on which possibilities can be projected, you can't top Jeanne Dielman. I admire the trust Chantal Akerman places in her spectators. I like that idea of blind trust. It's risky, but I needed to take this risk after *Happening*, where the gaze is more "directed". Here, the story is open to interpretation. In a different genre, I also thought of Agnès Varda's *Cléo from 5 to 7*, a film about the revolution of the gaze. I was inspired by how Varda turns the camera around, mid-film, to observe the world through a prism other than that of social function and representation.



#### IT MAKES SENSE THAT YOU COLLABORATED ON THE SCRIPT WITH REBECCA ZLOTOWSKI, BECAUSE SHE MADE AN EASY GIRL INTO A SORT OF 21-CENTURY EMMANUELLE.

I love that film. The clarity with which she showed the body, both raw and sophisticated, really impressed me. We worked a lot on the first draft of the script. She is the one who realized that the male lead "escaped" the confines of the script. By following that thread, we realized that he must be a sort of ghost. And we played that up.

#### THIS IS THE SECOND TIME YOU ADAPT A BOOK ABOUT SEXUALITY THAT IS CURTAILED, SUPPRESSED. BUT DESPITE THAT CONNECTION, THIS FILM IS, FORMALLY, A BREAK FROM HAPPENING.

For me, the connection between the two films lies in the verticality to which women are subject. I also liked the idea of developing a female character who isn't necessarily likeable because I don't think that that's a given, these days. I still see too many female characters whose existence depends on them being nice or kind... That annoys me.

## THE SOUND IS EXTREMELY RICH, ALMOST ASMR-LIKE, MAKING THE FILM AN IMMERSIVE, SENSORIAL EXPERIENCE.

That comes in part from the original score by Evgueni and Sacha Galperine's, who worked on my previous film. I really wanted the score to place us in her body. In the film there's an eroticism of touch: a hand caressing velvet, a cigarette on the lips.

#### YOU WORKED WITH LAURENT TANGY AS DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY. HOW DID YOU APPROACH THIS RADICALLY DIFFERENT AESTHETIC?

Step by step we found a common language. The basis was the relationship between eroticism and time. We worked a lot on the light, the very artificial and composed light of the hotel, then, in the second half of the film, a more blinding, fragmented light. Laurent developed a strong bond with Noémie. Sometimes I'd see them improvising, very inspired. I would let them continue. Directing is also about keeping quiet and letting the unexpected happen. As with my character, my desire was to let go. Accept the idea of not controlling everything. To be afraid sometimes, often even. And embrace the unknown.

# KATIA WYSZKOP CREATED SUBLIME SETS, THAT MAKE THE FILM SEEM LIKE A MENTAL SPACE. HOW DID YOU IMAGINE THIS TOGETHER?

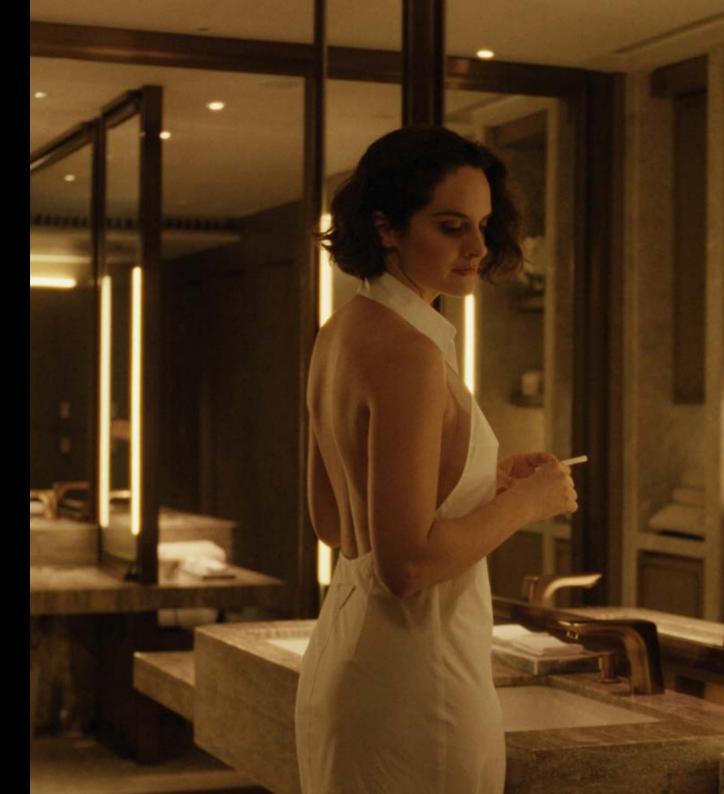
I wanted the sets to be the dreamlike prolongation of the very particular rhythm of the directing. We wanted to evoke a form of orientalism (the set of the hotel) but to make it slightly unsettling, uncanny. I trust her implicitly. Sometimes I'd discover set on the day we shot the scene. Once again, a path toward letting go.

## YOU WERE SURROUNDED BY A LOT OF GOOD PEOPLE, BUT THE MAIN CHARACTER OF YOUR FILM GIVES OFF A SENSE OF OVERWHELMING SOLITUDE.

*Emmanuelle* is alone, just like Anne was in my previous film. Solitude is the greatest key, or threat, to the society. We live in a world of "surrounded solitude". I wanted to start from the bottomless solitude, then try to break it, to create a bond, to overcome the fear of the other. I like the idea of everyone baring themselves, everyone vulnerable. The possibility of creating delicate, fleeting connections among the characters.

HOW DID YOU GO ABOUT THE SEX SCENES? THERE AREN'T MANY, BUT TWO OF THEM FRAME THE FILM. THE WAY THEY ARE DIREC-TED SAYS A LOT ABOUT OVERALL ARCH OF THE FILM.

In the first one, Emmanuelle turns her back on the man, with that empty look in the mirror that shows how dissociated she is. In this scene, there is no connection to the other person, neither for him nor for her. At the end, it's the opposite. In this last scene, I wanted the eroticism to come from the words as much as from the images. Emmanuelle finally says what she wants. The appropriate representation of the female orgasm took a while to find. Noémie and I tried relentlessly to get it right. Most of the time in films, the female orgasm serves only to reassure the man of his sexual power. Pornography has produced hundreds of thousands of images of screaming women. Here, I tried to find the truth in a form of exhaustion, a final letting go, which takes the form of a sigh, with the feeling that we climbed Mount Everest just to pick a flower.







# INTERVIEW WITH NOÉMIE MERLANT

## WHAT DID YOU LIKE ABOUT THE WAY AUDREY PRESENTED THE PROJECT TO YOU?

I didn't know *Emmanuelle* at all, neither the book nor the film. All I knew was the buzz that had surrounded the film when it was released. I only learned two days before meeting Audrey that she was looking for her Emmanuelle and that she had thought of me. I was very flattered. When I read the script, I was caught up in this intimate journey. I had the feeling of going on an inner journey since it resembled my own somewhat, that's to say the journey of a woman who tries to connect to her body, to reconnect, period, as if ultimately she'd never really been able to connect to herself, to her pleasure. When I met Audrey, it was actually the first thing she told me, that this was about a woman trying to reconnect with her desire. And for me, that's kind of THE subject. It touches me very personally, like many women. I'm not saying that this quest for pleasure is an obligation: there are people who don't have orgasms, or a sex drive, they're just not interested. But when you're engaged in the process of desiring, it's complicated because society implies that you find yourself first and foremost by satisfying male pleasure.

#### AT WHAT POINT DID YOU BECOME AWARE OF THIS IN YOUR CAREER AS A WOMAN AND AN ACTRESS?

Suddenly, my eyes opened, and I realized that this discomfort, this malaise that I constantly felt in personal relationships, in social dynamics as well and even in the public arena, was something that weighed heavily on me and frankly hurt me. But at the same time, I was playing a role, even thinking that I liked playing this role, because society convinces you it's so. I did it by telling myself, "It's okay, I'm fulfilling my role well, it's cool", when in fact, I didn't feel pleasure. And over the years, it ate me up. Beyond not feeling anything and forcing myself to please, there is something necrotic here: the libido retreats, taking pleasure and desire with it. In fact, I reached the point at which the film begins. For me, in my life, things have changed quite recently. Not so long ago, I was in Emmanuelle's position. I behaved like a kind of robot that patriarchal capitalist society had completely dispossessed of its body and its own desire.

## YOU STARTED YOUR CAREER AS A MODEL. WOULD YOU SAY THAT THIS HAS SHAPED YOU AND HAD A HUGE EFFECT ON YOUR RELA-TIONSHIP TO THE BODY AND TO DESIRE?

Yes, it even started before, at school, in performances, in advertising, on TV, in movies, everywhere. From the moment you enter puberty, there's enormous pressure from the gaze of others. I started modelling early, I was immediately made to understand that I was a body only, that I had to keep my mouth shut, that I must smile and that I had to be thin, even thinner than I am. Every day, I was weighed and touched. During my first photo session, I was sexually assaulted by the photographer, and I was minor. The agency defended the photographer. And it went on like that for years. So, inevitably, I began my adult life, as a woman, with the feeling that I didn't belong to myself either sexually or physically. Nothing, nothing belonged to me, in fact. I was a model for the other. Besides that, there were intimate relationships where there's the dynamic of a performance shaped by the man's satisfaction. For me, everything I have just said is at the heart of the film and of my character's lone-liness at the beginning. So I felt a very strong connections with the project, with Emmanuelle and with Audrey too.

### THE FILM EXTENDS THIS QUESTION OF DOMINATION TO ISSUES OTHER THAN GENDER, LIKE CLASS RELATIONS OR COLONIALISM. THERE IS ALMOST A DYSTOPIAN DIMENSION TO THE WORLD IT DEPICTS. DID YOU FEEL THIS FROM THE SCRIPT?

Personally, I have the feeling that the film talks about the world we risk ending up in if we don't free ourselves from injunctions and power relationships. *Emmanuelle* also proposes an attempt, a pathway to smashing the frames and rediscovering sensuality, that is to say emotions, carnality, texture, roughness, risk-taking, fluidity, respect.

#### WHAT WAS THE CLIMATE IN WHICH THE FILMING TOOK PLACE?

It was very immersive. We were all in Hong Kong. There was a very suffocating aspect to it because we were in the land of absolute capitalism. Yet at the same time, we felt that around us, not far away, hidden from our gaze, there was a lot of love and life. We began the shoot in this hotel, the same as the one in the film, and we were cloistered away because there was really a typhoon, also like in the film. This parallel between fiction and shooting immediately plunged us fully into the atmosphere of the film. We found ourselves totally immersed as we filmed and slept on site in this hotel, which is one of absolute luxury. All this already gave a colour, a very particular atmosphere. I established a routine for myself, which I don't normally have, but which formed the backbone of my days. It had a very solitary and robotic side to it. I'd get up in the morning, always eat the same thing, exercise, go straight to the shoot and later finish my day. Every day, I had set up a series of rituals that brought me closer to this character who tries to retain absolute control so that everything goes well, to avoid any confrontation with herself. But little by little, I had to find a way to depict the letting go. I had to find, in my body, a way to be closed, opaque, to pretend to be «the powerful one», in order to then abandon myself, to let go, to give up control, to let my fragility express itself, my emotions, a smile. It was absolutely intricate work for everyone involved.

#### **HOW DID YOU WORK ON THE SEX SCENES?**

We addressed them very early on with Audrey and Stéphanie Chene, a choreographer and intimacy coach with whom I have been working since Jacques Audiard's *Paris, 13TH District*. We were looking for ways to show this reconnection to desire, we were looking for positions, for a way to show this evolution. It's subtle, though, to show how, without words, without anything, she first has sex devoid of pleasure, then how she finally manages to access it. I have absolute trust in Stéphanie, and Audrey too. And I'm not shy in my work as an artist, whether in the film I'm directing or the one I'm acting in. Talking about sexuality, and even more about female sexuality, thrills me and interests me the most.

## YOU ARE A FILMMAKER, AND ACT IN YOUR OWN FILMS; DO YOU FEEL THAT YOU APPROACH YOUR WORK AS AN ACTRESS IN OTHER PEOPLE'S FILMS AS AN AUTHOR IN YOUR OWN RIGHT?

Yes, but it's also thanks to Audrey who leaves lots of space around her. From rehearsals on, she worked very collectively, more horizontally than vertically. I think a lot of people felt very invested and super involved in the film. There was also Dany Héricourt who worked with us, my English coach who is also a deeply engaged artistic ally. And then Stéphanie of course, and Will Sharpe with whom I was able to have genuine conversations. They led to suggestions that enriched the film. Obviously, Audrey has the last word, since she's the director, but she is totally willing to take into consideration and feed off others, which is very important.

## DID YOU EVENTUALLY WATCH THE FILM OR READ THE BOOK FROM WHICH EMMANUELLE IS ADAPTED?

I've read nothing and hadn't watched the film at all until very recently. The only thing that happened was that people were telling me, «Aren't you afraid? Do you know what happened to Sylvia Kristel? Aren't you afraid of being locked inside a box and being ostracized by the industry?» When I heard that, I told myself that if I was scared, I was in the right place. If there is fear, it is risktaking. If people are afraid, it's because there's something worth looking into.





## **BIOGRAPHIES**



## AUDREY DIWAN

Director, author and screenwriter Audrey Diwan made her feature film directing debut with *Losing It*, starring Celine Sallette and Pio Marmaï. Her second film, *Happening*, won the Golden Lion at the 2021 Venice Film Festival. That same year she was part of the Official Jury at the San Sebastian Festival. In 2024, she was awarded the Best Screenplay César with Valerie Donzelli for *L'amour et Les Forets* (*Just the Two of Us*). Her third feature, *Emmanuelle*, will make its world premiere at the San Sebastian Film Festival as Opening Film In Competition.



## NOÉMIE MERLANT Emmanuelle

Noémie Merlant has been nominated for her performances three times at the César Awards, including a nomination for her breakout role in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (2019) and a win for *The Innocent* (2022).

Merlant was born on 27 November 1988 in Paris Both of her parents are real estate agents. She was raised in Rezé near Nantes.

Merlant began her career as a professional model before attending the Cours Florent acting school in Paris.

She had her first breakthrough in the 2016 film *Heaven Will Wait* for which she was nominated for the César Award for Most Promising Actress.

In 2019 Merlant starred in *Portrait of a Lady on Fire.* She won the Lumières Award for Best Actress for her performance and was nominated for the César Award for Best Actress alongside her costar Adèle Haenel. In 2020 she starred in Zoé Wittock's *Jumbo*, a film about a woman who falls in love with an amusement park ride. She also starred in Marie-Castille Mention-Schaar's *A Good Man*.

In 2022 Merlant portrayed Francesca Lentini, a musician and personal assistant to the celebrated composer/conductor Lydia Tár (Cate Blanchett) in the movie *Tár*, directed by Todd Field.

In 2024, Noémie Merlant stars in the title role in *Emmanuelle*, directed by Audrey Diwan and premiering as the opening film at the San Sebastián Festival.

Merlant has directed two short films, the 2017 film Je suis une biche and the 2019 film Shakira. In 2021, she made her feature directorial debut with *Mi iubita, mon amour*, which premiered at Cannes. She now will present her second film *The Balconettes*, a horrific comedy co-writed with Céline Sciamma.

## WILL SHARPE KELSHINOHARA

Will Sharpe is an Emmy nominated and BAFTA Award-winning English-Japanese writer, director, actor, and showrunner.

This year, Will can be seen in Audrey

Diwan's *EMMANUELLE* alongside Noemie Merland and Naomi Watts as well as Jesse Eisenberg's second feature as a director, *A REAL PAIN*.

Upcoming, Will will star as the co-lead in Lena Dunham's Netflix rom-com TOO MUCH and he is currently filming the lead role in Joe Barton's Sky Studios series AMADEUS. Will made his name as an auteur, writing, directing, and starring in the dark comedy-drama FLOWERS opposite Olivia Colman, Julian Barratt, Daniel Rigby and Sophia Di Martino. His other writing and directorial credits include four-part HBO/ Sky drama, LANDSCAPERS, starring Olivia Colman and David Thewlis, THE ELECTIRAL LIFE OF LOUIS WAIN starring Benedict Cumberbatch and Claire Foy and BLACK POND which he codirected with Tom Kingsley and THE DARKEST UNIVERSE. His acting credits include, the role of 'Ethan Spiller' in season two of Mike White's hugely popular THE WHITE LOTUS (HBO/Sky), the eccentric sex-worker 'Rodney' in the critically acclaimed BBC thriller series GIRI/HAJI, BBC 2 sitcom DEFENDING THE GUILTY and WIA (BBC)

Accolades include the BAFTA TV Best Supporting Actor award (2020) for his role in *GIRI/HAJI*, the Evening Standard British Film Award (2012) for Most Promising Newcomer for *BLACK POND* and the SAG Award (2023) for Outstanding Ensemble in a Drama Series for *THE WHITE LOTUS*. He has also received multiple nominations for his writing, directorial and acting work including the Emmy and BAFTA Supporting Actor award (2023) for his role in *THE WHITE LOTUS*, the BAFTA TV award for Best Scripted Comedy (2021) for *FLOWERS* and the BAFTA Film award (2012) for Outstanding Debut and the SXSW award (2012) for Emerging Visions Audience for *BLACK POND*.



## JAMIE CAMPBELL BOWER

SIR JOHN

Jamie Campbell Bower is currently filming the highly anticipated fifth and final season of *STRANGER THINGS*. Jamie can currently be seen in Kevin's Costner's *HORIZON*, which was released theatrically by Warner Bros/New Line on June 28, 2024. Jamie will next be seen in Audrey Diwan's feature film *EMMANUELLE* opposite Noémie Merlant, which will have its world premiere at the 72nd San Sebastian International Film Festival on September 20, 2024. Jamie also stars in the forthcoming feature film *WITCHBOARD*, written and directed by Chuck Russell, which is slated for release later this year. Previously in film, Jamie is known for his roles in Tim Burton's *SWEENY TODD: THE DEMON BARBER OF FLEET STREET, THE TWILIGHT* SAGA,

A CALL AND A CALL AND



## CHACHA HUANG



1991, Sichuan, China

Chacha Huang is a Chinese actress who has lived in Madrid for more than ten years.

Born in Sichuan, Chacha Huang begins her artistic training at an early age. At the age of 4 she began practicing rhythmic gymnastics, at the age of 5 traditional Chinese dance, and at the age of 7 she took her first acting classes. At the age of 10, she participated in the Youth Games representing Dazhou, her hometown, where she won a silver medal and a bronze medal. In 2011, she traveled to Spain to study Spanish and was fascinated by the culture, so she decided to stay and the following year she was admitted to the Complutense University of Madrid, where 4 years later she obtained a Bachelor's degree in English and Italian Literature with honors.

She made her film debut in the film "Perdiendo el Este" (directed by Paco Caballero) in 2019 just after her first appearance alongside Angela Molina in the film "Ánimas" (directed by Laura Alvea and José Ortuño). Since then she has made Spanish and international films and series playing characters in Spanish, Chinese, English, Catalan and German, highlighting his work as the protagonist in Xiao Xian (nominated for the 2020 Goya), Night Breakers (selected at the Sundance Festival and SXSW), On The Go (selected at the Locarno Festival and Goes to Cannes), Zorro (Amazon Prime), and Emmanuelle, her first English-language film directed by renowned filmmaker Audrey Diwan. She has finished filming "Delivery girl" a Peruvian production film where she has the lead role.

## C A S T

EMMANUELLE KEI SHINOHARA MARGOT SIR JOHN ZELDA THE EYE MAN IN THE PLANE Noémie Merlant Will Sharpe Naomi Watts Jamie Campbell Bower Chacha Huang Anthony Wong Harrison Arevalo

## **C R E W**

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