



GIORNATE  
degli **AUTORI**

# SIDONIE IN JAPAN

A film by Elise Girard

**INTERNATIONAL SALES**  
**Indie Sales**  
sales@indiesales.eu  
festival@indiesales.eu

France | Drama | 95 minutes | French | 1.66 | 5.1 | Stéréo

## INTERNATIONAL PRESS

**Rendez Vous**

Viviana Andriani

+33 6 80 16 81 39

Aurélie Dard

+33 6 77 04 52 20

festival@rv-press.com



# VENICE SCREENINGS SCHEDULE

## **PRESS/INDUSTRY SCREENING**

Wednesday, August 30th,  
9:45 PM  
Sala Corinto - via Falier, 4 - Lido di Venezia

## **OFFICIAL SCREENING**

Friday, September 1st,  
4:45 PM (followed by Q&A with the director and cast)  
Sala Perla - Palazzo del Casinò, Lungomare Guglielmo Marconi 4, Lido di Venezia

## **ADDITIONAL SCREENING**

Thursday, September 7th,  
10:00 PM  
Sala Corinto





# SYNOPSIS

Japan, nowadays.

Sidonie Perceval, an established French writer, is mourning her deceased husband.

Invited to Japan for the reedition of her first book, she is welcomed by her local editor who takes her to Kyoto, the city of shrines and temples. As they travel together through the Japanese spring blossoms, she slowly opens up to him.

But the ghost of her husband follows Sidonie: she will have to finally let go of the past to let herself love again.



# DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Sidonie in Japan was born of the feelings I experienced when I first discovered Japan in 2013. As soon as I started writing, I thought of Isabelle Huppert's face, and I chose the name Sidonie for its Japanese consonance, but also as a tribute to Colette, a writer I'm particularly fond of.

Through this film-travel, I wanted to talk about mourning, but also about rebirth, about love coming back when it's no longer expected. Sidonie in Japan films this "connection" between past and present, the end of mourning and the beginning of love, the meeting of two characters who could embody France and Japan.

My film is also a declaration of love to this country, to which I feel both close and foreign, my taste for the ancient and the ultra-modern finding a real echo, like a constant coming and going between the two, which makes Japan a country of choice for cinema in my opinion.





# INTERVIEW WITH ELISE GIRARD

**Sidonie in Japan is your third feature film. The first one was entitled *Belleville Tokyo* (2010). Your love for Japan goes way back...**

*Belleville Tokyo* is in fact entirely a French film, where the main character lies to his girlfriend, pretending that he's going to Japan for professional reasons when in truth he's hiding from her in another Parisian neighborhood, Belleville. Belleville stands for reality and Tokyo for fiction. In that film, Japan is just a fantasy, as it very often is in the eyes of cinephiles. Also, when I was doing press for Cinémas Action in Paris, I organized the rerelease of many classical Japanese films – directed by Ozu, Mizoguchi, Naruse... – : so my first relationship with this country has also a lot to do with cinema.

**And yet, *Belleville Tokyo* is in fact the reason why you went to Japan for the first time.**

In 2013, I was invited there by the Japanese distributor. I stayed for a week. We went to Osaka, Kyoto and Tokyo. It was my first experience ever in an Asian country. It wasn't a very long stay and yet it turned out to be very important and deeply moving for me. I was the only French person there, constantly surrounded by Japanese people. And just as it happens with *Sidonie*, I met with the press, gave many interviews, experienced how strange things can be when your French is translated into Japanese and Japanese into French...

During the course of that week, I came to realize that Japan is really a strange country, where everything seems to work differently from the way it does in France. I was also surprised and struck by how silent and delicate Japanese people are. I experienced a lot of emotions that were incredibly rich and new to me.

Without exactly realizing why at the time, I was deeply shaken up by this trip. Things began to appear a little bit clearer when I went back to Paris. I started to write down everything that had happened to me there and all the emotions that I had been going through. I had to ; I often feel the need to transpose my experience. The idea of a film came rather quickly. And I began to have a better grasp of why I had been so deeply moved. During this trip, I had been looking back at my life for the very first time. This, of course, had to do with *Belleville Tokyo* being more or less an autobiographical picture, and also with me looking at this film for the last time, two years after its initial French release. But it had even more to do with me finding myself suddenly estranged from my life, both in the geographical and spiritual sense of the word. This made me realized that, contrary to what I was thinking, I was doing quite ok. True, I had been going through some tough experiences – raising a child on my own for one –, but these experiences were behind me. As a whole I was doing fine! This also helped me realize that this was one of cinema's greatest gifts : helping one to live, accept and understand what one has been going through.

**One the one hand, cinema is a way for you to tell your own story, but on the other it helps you to transpose and overcome it... Could you please expand on that ?**

Each movie that I make comes from the desire to write down or transpose a certain feeling, in order to better understand it. In making *Drôles d'oiseaux*, I wanted to show certain aspects of a love story that films usually don't care to show : small things, silences, how slowly and quietly love can grow... As far as *Sidonie au Japon* is concerned, I wanted to show what happens when a person suddenly finds themselves away from home. *Sidonie* just happens to find herself there. It's almost

as if someone had taken her away or moved her like a piece of furniture... I had exactly the same feeling there myself!

This might explain how moved I was when I heard Isabelle Huppert say the words I had written for her, words having to do with this very feeling of being displaced, or even perhaps misplaced, and not being able to understand what goes on around you. I am used to saying that I am not very good at understanding what's going on in my life! I don't consider it to be a problem. On the contrary, the difficulty or even the incapacity of understanding is something that I enjoy a lot! Incomprehension is a good thing. Nevertheless, I am very grateful to fiction, cinema and art as a whole for helping me finding a way to some kind of understanding.

**Your first trip to Japan was 2013. When did you go there for the second time ?**

It was 2017, six months after the French release of *Drôles d'oiseaux*. Thanks to a scholarship from l'Institut Français (Louis Lumière Hors les Murs), I was able to spend a month and a half in Kyoto. It was then and there that I wrote the script for *Sidonie au Japon*. The main inspiration came from my own experience, even though I made some changes. Among other things, I wanted *Sidonie* to discover how very modern Japan can be. That's why I spent some time on Naoshima island, where I visited the famous Benesse Museum built by Tadao Ando. I made a third trip to Japan at the beginning of 2019 in order to cast the actors and a fourth one in August 2021. At the time, we were scheduled to shoot in September. But we had to postpone because of Covid. Eventually, we shot in June and July 2022. It was absolutely exhausting : first we went to Japan, then France for three days, then Germany for two weeks, then France again. The first shot of the film







– Sidonie is in her Parisian apartment and she seems to be having some second thoughts about leaving... – is the last one that we shot!

**Sidonie in Japan is not only a French film, but also a Japanese and German one...**

I originally worked with Japanese producer Michiko Yoshitake, a frequent collaborator of Japanese director Nobuhiro Suwa. We got some funding there (the Japanese equivalent of the French « Avance sur Recettes »). Sadly, Michiko died in June 2019. But knowing she was ill, she had built a partnership Sébastien Haguenauer. Sébastien became our French producer. There is also a German producer, Felix von Boehm, as well as a Japanese producer and a Swiss one.

**What about the crew ?**

Our shooting team in Japan was half Japanese and half French ; ten people each. As you can imagine, it was a little bit different when we shot in France and in Germany.

**Going back to Sidonie... : why did you want her to be older than you are and to work as a writer and not as a filmmaker ?**

I wanted Sidonie to look back at her past, just as I did when I first went to Japan. But I wanted her to have a richer past than my own, I wanted her experience to be rich enough to be worthy of a movie ! So I created this character of a female French writer who, at one point, became extremely famous and then, at another point, decided to quit writing – I suppose that I was somewhat thinking of JD Salinger, whom I very much admire. And then I just needed to send this character to Japan, so to speak, and to observe how she would react

there, both emotionnaly and physically. Almost as if I was experimenting with her physicality, her facial expressions ...

**When Sidonie is in Japan, she's suddenly confronted with her late husband's ghost.**

When I went to Japan for the first time, it suddenly became very clear to me why there are so many ghosts in Japanese cinema. It made me want to have one in my own film. But I wanted my ghost to be closer to the one portrayed by Rex Harrison in Mankiewicz' *The Ghost and Mrs Muir* than to Akira Kurosawa's ghosts. When I was in Japan in 2017, a friend of mine invited me to have dinner at her mother's. She has been a widow for some years. And there it was : a table dressed for four, the fourth person being the late husband. This was the solution my friend's mother had came up with in order to ease her sufferings. And there was nothing strange, everybody was perfectly ok with it. This dinner gave me the idea of a quiet and friendly ghost coming back in his wife's life which, on the contrary, is not quiet at all! I found this contrast very funny and interesting. Antoine's ghost is very much like a normal person. This has to do with one my deepest beliefs : death doesn't change much about how we feel and relate to our loved ones.

**Each time Antoine « appears », it does look very simple and almost natural...**

In almost every scene with Antoine, there is a greenscreen. Therefore, there are several scenes where Isabelle Huppert was really alone in front of the camera. And I was the one playing Antoine offscreen! I was very happy to use greenscreens because it allowed us to do some unusual things that would have been impossible otherwise. For instance, when Sidonie and Kenzo share a taxi on Naoshima Island, you can see the exact same landscape on both sides of the car.

Japan as you see it in Sidonie is very different from the kind of Japan one can usually see in movies, where everything is hectic and loud and crazy... « My » Japan is strange but very peaceful. Almost « flat ». This is exactly how I experienced it the first time. To me, there is nothing disturbing about strangeness. As I said, I am ok with the fact that I am not completely clear with everything. I find it only natural that we have to deal with incomprehension and misunderstandings on a daily basis. We find it almost impossible to understand the Japanese mindset. As a matter of fact, they also find it impossible to understand ours! I am ok with that. Incomprehension creates many interesting and funny situations. It's very enticing to me. I have always been fond of foreign accents : they are the very shape and form of incomprehension itself. I am not saying that foreign accents are a key element in *Sidonie*, but they're there, as a secret maybe... And you may very well look at Sidonie's story as something going from one accent to another ; first the German accent of her late husband, and then the Japanese accent of Kenzo, her publisher.

**Sidonie's story definitely takes her from one man and one love to another...**

I have always believed paths, transitions or passages to be of the utmost significance in one's life. Especially moving or going from one man to the next. The very reason for the existence of Antoine's ghost has to do with him helping Sidonie to pay attention to Kenzo. *Drôles d'oiseaux* tells a similar story. The activist played by Pascal Cervo eventually appears to be a much younger version of Georges, played by Jean Sorel. They are more or less the same person at two different points in history. As long as Sidonie is mourning Antoine's death, she will never be able to meet another man. This is a very Japanese approach towards love. As long as a woman is obsessed by one man, there's no chance for her to fall in love with another one. So I guess one could think that Sidonie is only dreaming









of Antoine's ghost in order for her to move ahead... Or you could very well imagine that Antoine is the one opening the window, that it was he who took Sidonie's suitcase and put it at the bottom of the stairs... just to make it easy for Kenzo and her to get closer.

### Why did you choose German actor August Diehl for the role of Antoine ?

Firstly because of his very peculiar, strange looks... Unlike many, Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* wasn't my first experience watching him. It was Arthur Harari's first feature, *Dark Inclusion*. I saw August again in Terrence Malick's *A Hidden Life*. From one role to the other, he seems not only to change faces but also to change age. August has something very westerner about him. He has big eyes, there is both an wicked and an angelic quality about how he looks. On top on that, he's very lively and very funny. August lived in France as a child. He speaks French fluently. He is also a stage actor. He and Isabelle even realized that, at the time of the shooting, August was playing in the very same theatre where Michael Haneke partially made *The Piano Teacher*!

### How did you meet Tsuyoshi Ihara, who plays Kenzo ?

We organized a casting in Tokyo in March 2019. All the main male Japanese stars were there. I was looking for someone with an imposive look. Tsuyoshi Ihara is a very handsome man. He's very tall, whereas Isabelle Huppert is rather petite : I liked the contrast very much. Tsuyoshi is very famous. He is in movies and TVs shows, he is a singer and a model, he's Yoshi Yamamoto's male muse... He's probably sixty but he looks younger. Just like August there is no way one can tell exactly how old he is. He lives in Los Angeles, so he speaks perfect English, which made it a lot more convenient for him and me to talk, and a lot easier for him to learn his French

lines. I love how peculiar and strange his French sounds. Georges, in *Drôles d'oiseaux*, also has a very peculiar way of talking. I like it when people on the screen don't talk as we're used to. I like it when there's some sort of musical quality to it. I just love dialogues, I love writing and and I love hearing them. Tsuyoshi and I did a lot of rehearsing via Skype, which helped me to obtain the kind of music I'm talking about...

### Was it always your wish for Isabelle Huppert to play the lead ?

Isabelle's daughter, Lolita Chammah, plays the lead in *Drôles d'oiseaux*. She introduced her mother to me. So I knew Isabelle informally. This is actually how I first came up with the idea of working with her. I didn't meet her in a professional capacity, so the way I look at her is very different from the way people usually do. The Isabelle Huppert I've come to know and appreciate is a very warm and a very funny person, there's nothing intimidating about her. In fact she possesses the same kind of energy as I have!

I wanted Sidonie to be very French, in opposition to Kenzo. I was hesitant at first. I waited a whole year before asking Isabelle. But it eventually became the most natural choice. Everyone who read the script immediately thought about her. She immediately said yes. Just before shooting I was a little bit apprehensive. I was afraid that she might turn out to be a very different person on set that the one I knew. I couldn't be more wrong! As soon as she put Sidonie's clothes on, it was clear to me that Isabelle knew exactly what she was doing. And as if she could have sensed how apprehensive I felt, she told me that she would do everything in her power to help me make the movie I wanted to make. And that she did! We even shot some « unauthorized » material aboard the Shinkansen, Japanese fast train, very early in the morning. Isabelle was ready for anything without even trying to make me change the smallest detail. You can virtually do anything with her.

It probably has to do with the very simple fact that she just adores being an actress. She loves being on set. When you see Sidonie asleep in Naoshima, that's Isabelle actually sleeping! Working with her made me realize that she's truly a star with a unique talent. When Isabelle stares in the distance off camera, the audience immediately starts to imagine what she's dreaming or thinking of. Her face is like a landscape.

### Why is your film entitled *Sidonie in Japan* ? It almost feels like a children tale...

The first name Sidonie comes from Colette, my favorite writer, it was hers. Her first novels were the Claudine stories. The title is also partly a reference to Eric Rohmer's *Pauline at the Beach*, which is hardly a movie for children! —



# DIRECTOR'S BIO

Elise Girard is a French director living in Paris. A lifelong cinema enthusiast, she started out as a press attaché for Cinémas Action before becoming a director. Her first two films were documentaries: one on the Cinémas Action and the other on Roger Diamantis, founder of the Saint André des Arts: *Seuls sont les indomptés, l'aventure des cinémas Action* (2003) and *Roger Diamantis ou la vraie vie* (2005).

Her first feature, *Belleville Tokyo* (2011), was acclaimed by audiences and critics alike, as was *Strange Birds* (2016), presented at the Berlinale Forum in 2017.

For *Sidonie in Japan*, Elise Girard benefited from the French Institute's Louis Lumière grant, which enabled her to reside in Kyoto in 2017.

## FILMOGRAPHY

2023 **Sidonie au Japon**

95'

*La Mostra de Venise 2023 Venice days*

2016 **Drôles d'Oiseaux**

72'

*Berlinale 2017 Forum*

2011 **Belleville Tokyo**

75'

*Festival Entrevues Belfort*

*Festival Film de Femmes Créteil 2011*

2005 **Roger Diamantis  
ou La vraie vie**

55'

*Festival International du Film*

*de La Rochelle*

*Nouveau Cinéma Montréal*

2003 **Seuls sont les indomptés,  
l'aventure des Cinémas Action**

52'









# CAST

<b>Isabelle Huppert</b>	Sidonie
<b>Tsuyoshi Ihara</b>	The editor
<b>August Diehl</b>	The husband

# CREW

SCENARIO **Élise Girard, Maud Ameline** AND **Sophie Fillières** DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY **Céline Bozon** EDITING **Thomas Glaser** COSTUMES **Khadija Zeggaï**  
SOUND **Masaki Hatsui, Nicolas Van Deth** MUSIC **Gerard Massini** PRODUCTION MANAGER **Louis Houdoin**

A FILM PRODUCED BY **Sebastien Haguenauer,**  
COPRODUCED BY **Felix Von Boehm, Elena Tatti, Shozo Ichiyama, Michiko Yoshitake**

A COPRODUCTION **10:15! Productions, Lupa Film, Box Productions, Fourier Films, Film-In-Evolution, Mikino** AND **Les Films Du Camélia**  
INTERNATIONAL SALES **Indie Sales**

*Credits non contractual*



