

INTERVIEW

'Memories fade, but images stay ... as a reminder of bleak moments'

French film icon[oclast] Catherine Deneuve discusses cinema's need to bear witness to the world

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BEIRUT: "I never considered myself a legend." Catherine Deneuve brushes aside the premise of the journalist's question with a casual tap of her cigarette. "My [filmmaking] choices have always been based on my convictions and view of things and I tend to opt for topics that are either hidden, or not discussed before. I am not a legend or an icon. Legends fade away. I am a reality and realities last."

Deneuve is the iconoclast at the center of "Je Veux Voir" ("I Want to See"), the new feature film by Joana Hadjithomas and Khalil Joreige, which enjoyed its Arab world premier on Sunday evening, the closing film of the Ayam Beirut Cinemaiya festival of Arab film.

Her remarks came during a post-premier press conference held at the Phoenicia InterContinental Hotel with the directors and her co-star, Rabih Mroueh. Deneuve's refreshingly clear-sighted observations – both here and in a subsequent interview – betray something of the intelligence she's employed to navigate a film career that is as varied as it is illustrious, an intelligence equally evident in her thoughts on the role of cinema beyond its aesthetic and entertainment value.

A blend of fiction and documentary, high-concept and conceptual art, "I Want to See" sees Deneuve and Mroueh play themselves. It is the aftermath of Israel's 2006 bombardment of Beirut's southern suburbs and South Lebanon. She wants to see the damage, and early reconstruction efforts, and he is tasked with driving her.

The journey takes the actors from northern Beirut, through the capital's southern suburbs and on to the ruins of Bint Jbeil in the South, while the film crew – and the star's French bodyguard – drive just in front.

"I play Catherine Deneuve visiting Lebanon following the summer 2006 war," the actress says, "which is actually a very difficult thing to do. I have many



Deneuve on the evolution of filmmaking: "Talent will always be there. And no talent will always be there."

times refused to play [myself] in movies, but this time the theme of the story allowed for that. The story is simple and accurate and allows the two directors to 'freely' convey their message.

"I also wanted to join in their journey. It was an occasion to discover Lebanon but in a different, more realistic, manner."

Deneuve recalls that she was intrigued by the cinematographic potential of the themes Hadjithomas and Joreige wanted to address.

"This journey was quite outlandish but at the same time very simple, and left the opportunity for each one of us to see, hear, and understand what we wanted to see, hear and understand," she said. "The film does not suggest anything in particular ... It is constructed around my own perception of things."

"It's based on [Mroueh showing] me around, without

making any judgments or insinuations or attempts to influence my thoughts. He wants me to 'see' things.

"The act of 'seeing' is the main theme of the film. It is also how the two directors 'see,' or 'envision' the situation. I was utterly seduced by the film. It's about the war but not a film of war. It's about Lebanon."

Deneuve's motivations in taking the project were political (in the broadest sense of the term) as well as professional and personal.

"Making the movie was a way to demonstrate that action was more important than words," she said. "It was my own way of helping the Lebanese and Lebanon [in a way that] leaves a mark. Cinema is able to rebuild the truth, to revive memory through the images it creates. Memories fade, but images stay and serve as a reminder of

bleak moments."

She says shooting in Lebanon was also a learning experience. "Lessons learned are always very personal. I think I don't read information on this part of the world the same way I did before. Also, something I noticed – not only in Lebanon but in Pakistan and Afghanistan and other parts of the world – is that it's always civilians that pay the price for decisions others have taken. This is outrageous."

Deneuve's first credited film role dates from 1960 – playing a girl named "Catherine" in Jacques Gerard Cornu's "Ladies' Man." The roles she's inhabited in the more than 100 films that followed have been as varied as the filmmakers with whom she's worked.

In the 1967 classic "Belle de Jour," directed by the founding father of cinematic surrealism Luis Bunuel, Deneuve's Severine is a frigid young wife whose fantasies of sexual abuse eventually lead her into part-time work in a brothel.

As Miriam, the Pharaonic vampire in Tony Scott's stylish 1983 thriller "The Hunger," she seduces Susan Sarandon into un-death when David Bowie, her old lover, begins to show signs of wear.

In Regis Wargnier's 1992 period piece "Indochine," her unflappable Eliane is a sort of synecdoche for the last days of French colonialism. In the 2000 crypto-musical "Dancer in the Dark," Deneuve's low-key portrayal of Kathy, opposite Icelandic pop sensation Bjork, breathes an air of humanity into Lars von Trier's otherwise cruel universe.

For all the variety and manifold changes she's witnessed in cinema, Deneuve finds the basics are unchanged. "The evolution [of film] has been very fast, with [High Definition video] cameras and so on and I think it's a very good thing that some people can make their films with less money, because that's the major problem with cinema – it's very expensive."

"It's very interesting the way it's evolved but cinema hasn't

really changed that much ... Maybe in cinema being more realistic, because of the proximity we now have and the fact that the criteria of beauty has changed. Cinema was beautiful before. Now it's beautiful but it's very real as well." She pauses, as if debating whether to light another fag. "I think it's for the best. I think the cinema is more interesting today."

"But when I think of the great, great directors from the '30s or the '40s, I cannot say that we've improved everything. I think the talent will always be there. And no talent will always be there, no matter what kind of camera and cinematographer you use. There are talented people and less-talented people. There are good scripts and mediocre scripts. And film will always be that way."

"I Want to See" makes a blatant reference to Deneuve's role in "Belle de Jour," the effect of which is twofold. On one hand it contrasts Severine's need to be possessed by other men with Deneuve's desire to bear witness to others' suffering. In so doing, it underlines the centrality of her status as a film icon – even if it's a status perceived rather than experienced.

She agrees that the experience of her two characters is very different, "but it's not more distant. It's just another point of view. This film is being seen through me, but Joana and Khalil are making the film. So it's their eye. I'm their eye."

"It's just my character to be used this way for this project," she explained. "I suppose it's in my nature. I've always viewed actors as instruments, you know. And more than ever I accept to be this instrument."

"It's my public face you see in the film. It's me who is sitting, thinking, feeling. But these are very personal matters, you know, and I decided to do the film so I wouldn't have to answer to what you're asking me."

"It's not what I say that's important, it's what I do. I wanted to do that for Lebanon. Because it was the occasion to show more than just compassion for a country that has been martyred."