



HIGH TENSION

A film by Alexandre Aja

Starring
Cécile de France
Maïwenn
Philippe Nahon

Preliminary Production Notes

Rating : R (for graphic bloody killings, terror, sexual content and language)
Run Time: 85 mins.

THE CAST

Marie CECILE DE FRANCE
AlexMAIWENN
The killerPHILIPPE NAHON
JimmyFRANCK KHALFOUN
Alex's father..... ANDREI FINTE
Alex's mother..... OANA PELLEA
TomMARCO CLAUDIU PASCU
Inspector JEAN-CLAUDE DE GOROS
CopBOGDAN URITESCU
Man in his car.....GABRIEL SPAHIU

THE FILMMAKERS

Director.....ALEXANDRE AJA
Producers.....ALEXANDRE ARCADY and ROBERT BENMUSSA
Screenplay ALEXANDRE AJA and GREGORY LEVASSEUR
Art Direction GREGORY LEVASSEUR
Director of Photography..... MAXIME ALEXANDRE
Sound RecordistPIERRE ANDRE
Film Editor BAXTER
Sound Editor.....EMMANUEL AUGEARD
Sound Mixer..... DIDIER LOZAHIC
Original ScoreFRANCOIS EUDES
Production Manager INIGO LEZZI
Production Coordinator CATHERINE GRANDJEAN
1st Assistant DirectorTHEODOR HALACU-NICON
Script Supervisor ANDRA BARBUICA
Location Manager ATILA EGRY
SteadicamBOGDAN STANCIU
Focus Puller.....TITI GAVRILA
Key Grip.....REMUS TANASE
Gaffer VIOREL DIACONESCU
Artistic Coordinator..... TONY EGRY
Set Dresser..... ANN CHAKRAVERTY
Construction Supervisor.....SERGE RECORBET
Storyboard ADRIEN CANCER
Coach..... EDOUARD NIKITINE
Stills Photographer TONI SALABASEV
Stunts SZOBY CSEH and VON TOTOJESCU
SFX Make-up artist GIANETTO DE ROSSI
Digital SFX AUTRE CHOSE and STEPHANE BIDAULT

HIGH TENSION was originally shot in French as an ode to the 1970s American horror/slasher films I loved as a teenager. When Lions Gate Films decided to distribute the film in U.S. theaters, we were faced with the problem of how to best present the film in English to an American audience. We tried both subtitling and dubbing the entire film, yet neither proved satisfactory for the horror genre. In the end, we re-imagined some of the characters as bilingual and created a hybrid solution, which uses dubbing in the dialogue-driven beginning of the film and subtitling in the latter half. This approach, which is justified by the story, allowed us to retain as much of the original sound as possible, enabling American audiences to experience the film on the same visceral level as French audiences.

Additionally, the new version of HIGH TENSION that you are about to see has been re-edited slightly for an R rating by the MPAA, resulting in a running time that is about one minute shorter than the original. I am exceedingly happy with the final English-language version of the film, and I owe it to Lions Gate Films for making it all possible.

-- Alexandre Aja, Director, HIGH TENSION

SYNOPSIS

Marie and Alexia are classmates and best friends. Hoping to prepare for their college exams in peace and quiet, they decide to spend a weekend in the country at Alexia's parents' secluded farmhouse. But in the dead of night, a stranger knocks on the front door. And with the first swing of his knife, the girls' idyllic weekend turns into an endless night of horror...

Prepare to take a white-knuckle journey into the heart of terror with Lions Gate Films' **HIGH TENSION**, the nightmarish story of two girls' battle for survival at the hands of a sadistic psychopath. Marking a return to the raw intensity of 1970s horror classics, director Alexandre Aja reduces the genre to its bare essentials, building a narrative of growing dread that culminates in a truly shocking climax. Relentlessly tightening the screws of suspense, **HIGH TENSION** will have you struggling to catch your breath...

Produced by Luc Besson (**LA FEMME NIKITA**, **THE PROFESSIONAL**, **THE FIFTH ELEMENT**), **HIGH TENSION** stars Cecile de France, Maïwenn and Philippe Nahon, from a script by Aja and Gregory Levasseur.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Two young women. An isolated farmhouse. A psychotic killer. One endless night. An intense story of murder and survival, Lions Gate Films' HIGH TENSION is a horror movie that brings us back to the basics of fear. Working from a deceptively simple premise, French writer/director Alexandre Aja and co-writer Gregory Levasseur have crafted a visceral, unpredictable film of almost unbearable suspense, a dark nightmare that touches on our most primal fears.

"From the beginning, we had only one aim: to scare people!" says Aja. "We play on people's most basic fears: the unknown, the dark, claustrophobia, the significance of death. In a single night, the two heroines confront pretty much the whole spectrum of flesh-crawling experiences."

"We dreamed up all the scariest situations we could think of and then we put them all together for 90 minutes of pure suspense," says Levasseur.

Adds Aja with a smile, "The film has no message, except maybe that studying for your exams in an isolated farmhouse is bad for your health."

HIGH TENSION was conceived as an homage to the horror movies that marked Aja's and Levasseur's youth. From their early teens onward, the two childhood friends were horror addicts, seeking out every American horror movie they could find. "We are steeped in horror movie culture and we love it," says Aja. "We grew up with masterpieces of the genre, like THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE, THE HILLS HAVE EYES, MANIAC and HALLOWEEN. They were all films that scared us to death as kids. HIGH TENSION became a great opportunity to salute all of our influences."

Looking back to the horror classics of the 1970s, Aja and Levasseur have purposefully distanced themselves from the more self-conscious horror entries of recent years. "Nowadays, most horror movies use irony to take a sardonic look at the genre while still using its tricks, as if people are afraid of making an out-and-out horror movie," says Aja. "We wanted to go back to the roots of the genre and give audiences a real 'battle for survival,' a real cinematic experience. There are no in-jokes or elements of parody in HIGH TENSION. It's a bone-chilling story that's intended to chill a lot of bones."

HIGH TENSION marks the fourth collaboration between Aja and Levasseur, who have known each other since they were ten years old. As in the past, the two friends worked

closely together on the script until production, at which point Aja assumed the directing reins while Levasseur oversaw the production design. Says Levasseur, “We’ve known each other long enough now to be perfectly in sync. It’s a great relationship.”

Despite the simplicity of their premise, Aja and Levasseur were careful to construct a script that hinges on numerous twists and turns. “We did all we could to stick to the principle of surprise,” says Levasseur. “The action takes place over a single night, almost in real time, but we didn’t want people to be able to predict what would happen next.”

“We started out with the idea that the whole movie would take place in the house, where the killer finds a way in and the battle lasts until sunrise,” recalls Aja. “But we soon realized that this restricted us. So we decided to prolong the chase outside of the house and make the night itself a kind of suffocating, enclosed space.”

The constant threat of darkness is a motif that runs throughout the film, enabling Aja to create an atmosphere of mounting dread and hopelessness. “The night is almost another character in the film. Darkness is everywhere,” he says. “With our DP Maxime Alexandre, we decided to make the shadows a real protagonist, whether the scene takes place in the house, on the road or in the forest.”

Demonstrating a keen understanding of the workings of suspense, Aja deliberately taunts the viewer, often manipulating what is, and isn’t, seen. The killer, played by French actor Philippe Nahon, is often no more than a bulky shadow for the first part of the film, an effect that only intensifies the terror. “You have to wait a long time before you glimpse much of him,” says Levasseur. “At first, he exists through his actions and his heavy breathing, his shambling footsteps, the blade, his coveralls.”

With so few elements employed to carry the story, Aja was well aware that his casting choices for the two heroines were vital to the film’s success. “The audience’s identification with the story depends entirely on the actresses,” says Aja. “The plot revolves around their relationship. They drive the story. The actresses had to be capable of switching between varying emotions in the blink of an eye.”

Their search wasn’t easy. Aja and Levasseur met with almost every young actress in France for the part of Marie, the brooding tom-boy who battles the ruthless killer. “We don’t have horror movie culture in France, so it’s not very easy to find actresses here who are able to play fear,” admits Aja. “French actresses are used to acting with a lot with dialogue. But in HIGH TENSION, there’s maybe ten minutes of dialogue in the whole movie. We were so lucky to have found Cecile. She was just the best.”

For a self-described horror fan like Cécile de France, *HIGH TENSION* was the opportunity of a lifetime. “Ever since I became an actress, I've wanted to make a movie like this,” says de France excitedly. “*HIGH TENSION* is exactly the kind of movie I love. It's the genre that kept me up as a kid and fuelled my teenage dreams and made me want to act. When a movie like this comes out, I'm always the first to see it.”

After meeting with Aja and Levasseur, de France “devoured” the script and committed to the project only two hours later. “I knew before I even got to the end of the script that I would love to do it,” she admits. “I got into it right away. I got scared. I read it like a good book that you never want to end.”

“Cécile is so great. She never repeats herself in the character's fear. She's always giving something new, something you don't expect,” says Aja. “She brought a lot to the character of Marie and brought to life all that we had hoped for when we wrote it.”

Unlike the disposable characters found in most horror fare, *HIGH TENSION* is distinguished by a complex heroine whose emotional layers are revealed gradually as the tension mounts. “It was really exciting to play someone who appears fragile and slowly reveals her true self,” says de France. “At first, Marie seems vulnerable and withdrawn in comparison to Alex, who's more extroverted. Marie seems like a typical victim. But when evil arrives, she tackles it head on. Her determination and inner strength are much more powerful than you initially imagine.”

Due to the intense physical demands of her role, de France spent over two months training with Edouard Nikitine, an amateur Thai boxing world. “I lost a lot of weight and gained a lot of muscle. I was stronger than I've ever been in my whole life,” says the actress.

The exercise regime also helped her transform into a personality that, she says, bore little resemblance to her own. “I had to go and find the character to the extent that I'm actually quite bubbly and happy with my body and self-aware. I wanted to dredge up something darker and edgier,” says de France. “I lost weight so my face would become more angular, giving a glimpse of the shadows in Marie's mind, the inner strength. I also cut my hair to capture that sense of post-adolescent awkwardness and her tom-boy side.”

Maiwenn, who plays Marie's best friend Alexia, had been performing a one-woman hit show for over a year when Aja and Levasseur came backstage one night and offered her the part. After reading the script, Maiwenn accepted. “I had been wanting a change of scenery, and I thought the script really worked,” she remembers. “Going from an autobiographical one-woman show to a pure genre movie was such a great and unexpected opportunity.”

Maiwenn's commitment was a relief for both Aja and de France. Finally, both the director and star could envision the central relationship between Marie and Alexia that carries the story. "Finding Maiwenn was like finding the missing piece of the puzzle," says de France.

The role of Alexia, however, was no easy feat for the seasoned stage actress. In the film, Alexia witnesses the brutal slaughter of her family, only to be bound and kidnapped by the killer and subjected to endless psychological and physical torture. "I act in film like I do on stage, giving it my all, but this was very demanding," says Maiwenn. "My character doesn't say very much and is often crying. It was hard."

The actress often found herself gagged and bound in her scenes, a production reality that sometimes proved to be as nightmarish as the movie's plot. "Once, they even lost the key to the padlock on my chains," she remembers. "That was truly frightening."

"Maiwenn played the game to the very end, with buckets of energy and honesty," says Aja. "Her role in the film is crucial, since she's the character that people identify with the most in the film."

"If you break the movie down, only the first few scenes in HIGH TENSION require a classical acting approach," says Levasseur. "The rest is raw emotion, which required total physical and mental commitment from the two actresses. They threw themselves heart and soul into each scene as if it was a battle to be won."

Fortunately for the actresses, Aja was able to schedule most of the film in chronological order, allowing both de France and Maiwenn the opportunity to fully grasp the emotional and physical evolution of their characters. "The actresses could only be sure of one thing: that the next day would be a little tougher than the one they just completed," says Aja.

When the film's climactic scenes were upon her, de France was ready. "All the extreme scenes were a real pleasure to do," she admits. "I was nervous about acting sheer terror, real fear, because it's a feeling I've never experienced. But shooting the climax of the movie was so exciting. It was almost like an orgasm. I let out this scream – I have no idea where it came from."

If there was one challenge everyone on the production had to face equally, it was the cold. Due to the demands of the story, the production shot mostly outdoors at night, in increasingly frigid temperatures. "If audiences are as scared by the movie as we were cold making it, they're going to be screaming!" laughs Maiwenn.

"Everybody had a bad time of it," remembers de France. "I was barefoot in a t-shirt. The blood was sticky like wax and I couldn't even put a jacket over my shoulders in between

shots. Maiwenn was in pajamas, often soaked to the skin in blood. The harsh conditions really brought us together. We were in the same boat so we gave each other as much support as possible.”

“We got along so well and I’m so glad she was there,” says Maiwenn of her co-star. “Like our characters, we were often together. I often tried different things on different takes and she'd shoot stuff right back at me. We were very complementary. We formed the second duo of the movie, after Alexandre and Gregory.”

Another challenge during production was the relatively tight shooting schedule. “We had to work hard and very fast,” recalls Aja. “Each shot demanded total commitment, and we often finished at dawn totally exhausted. Every day, we just hoped that we'd gotten what we needed so that audiences would forget their surroundings and join Marie in her nightmare.”

Despite the limitations that time imposed on the shoot, Aja feels that tight schedules are “almost inherent to this kind of picture. Those kinds of constraints imbue the film with energy, rhythm and a very distinctive feel,” he says. “I didn’t mind it at all.”

Post-production became an equally important period in the formation of HIGH TENSION, with Aja paying particular attention to the sound design. “When you are making a horror movie, the sound is almost half of the film,” says the director. “For example, the sound of the killer’s foot-steps is very important in the movie. His breathing. The sound of his clothes. Every detail is crucial.”

In order to intensify the suspense, Francois Eudes, the film’s composer and sound designer, created a non-traditional score using highly original computer-generated sounds. “It’s not a classic score. It’s more like music sound design,” says Aja. “It was so great and so unexpected; the music really influenced us during the shoot. It played in our heads while we shot. It allowed us to take the necessary time in each traveling shot, each crane shot.”

The commitment and craftsmanship of Aja, Levasseur and their cast and crew is clearly evident in the visceral, and unrelenting, scares that mark the finished film. After HIGH TENSION’s release in France, Aja and Levasseur felt fortunate to screen the film in North America at the Toronto International Film Festival. But they never expected Peter Block, the President of Lions Gate Films Acquisitions, to offer them a U.S. distribution deal. “Aja took a very simple story and turned it into one of the most frightening films I’ve ever seen,” says Block. “He has total mastery of cinematography, sound design and editing.”

Block and Aja, however, faced several hurdles in bringing HIGH TENSION to American soil, the first being the film’s MPAA rating of NC-17. Fortunately, the film required less than one minute’s worth of cuts to qualify for an R rating. “I have to say that I

am very, very happy with the new cut,” asserts Aja. “There are just a few trims of shots here and there, but it’s really exactly the same movie.”

The greater problem was the film’s subtitles, a handicap that would banish the film to art house theaters, thereby preventing it from reaching its core audience. Block and Aja decided to investigate a variety of modifications through trial and error. “Our goal was to change as little as possible while still bringing Aja’s vision to as wide an audience as possible,” reports John Hegeman, President of Worldwide Marketing.

“We tried everything. We even tried dubbing the entire film into English,” says Block, “but no solution was satisfactory. Each one diluted the impact of the film in different ways.”

In the end, everyone agreed on a creative hybrid solution, in which dubbing was used in the dialogue-heavy start of the film, followed by subtitles in the mostly wordless latter half. Minimal added dialogue recasts Alexia and her family as Americans living abroad in France (with American actors dubbing their voices). Marie now speaks French-accented English when interacting with Alexia and her family, and French when she is alone – a clever way of maintaining the integrity of de France’s original performance in the emotional latter half of the film. Even better, de France, who is in fact bilingual, dubbed her character’s lines into English herself, lending the new version even more authenticity.

“I think the new version’s great,” says Aja. “None of the changes are distracting because they’re so logical. The dubbing, too, is fantastic. You really don’t see it.”

For Aja, having *HIGH TENSION* distributed in America, the birthplace of modern horror cinema, is a dream come true. “It’s something we never expected,” says the director. “In France, we don’t have horror addicts like in the U.S. Here, people know all the references. It’s the real core audience for this kind of film.”

And how does Aja hope American audiences will react to his French homage to American horror classics? “I hope that people who see this movie are going to be as exhausted and traumatized and shaken by it as the two girls in the movie,” he says with a smile. “I want it to be a big experience. That was the idea, to make an experience more than the film.”

ABOUT THE CAST

CECILE DE FRANCE (Marie)

Cécile de France made her international film debut in Disney's *AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 DAYS* in the lead role of Monique, a charming and adventurous French artist who jumps at the chance to hitch a ride around the world with Phileas Fogg (Steve Coogan) and his valet Passepartout (Jackie Chan).

Ms. de France was born in Belgium, and moved to France when she was 17. Ms. de France received the coveted CESAR (equivalent to an Oscar) for her performance in *L'AUBERGE ESPAGNOLE*, and she recently wrapped production on the sequel, *LES POUPEES ROUSSES*, in which Ms. de France reprises her role as Isabelle, the sensual French student (now businesswoman) who educates Xavier (Romain Duris) on how to excite a woman. She also received the Prix Louis Lumiere for Best New Actress in 2003, as well as the Best Actress award at the International Film Festival in Barcelona for *HAUTE TENSION*. Her film *LA CONFIANCE REGNE*, directed by Etienne Chatiliez, in which she stars with Vincent Lindon, received critical acclaim in France.

Ms. de France has been involved in theatre since she was 6 years old, and began her formal training with Jean-Paul Denizon, a protégé of Peter Brook, while in France. She was accepted into the famous French National Theatre School, *École Nationale Supérieure des Arts et Techniques du Théâtre à Paris et Lyon* ("ENSATT"), quite an honor as they rarely accept non-French students.

Ms de France has been acclaimed for her wide range and chameleon like quality. She enjoys performing her own stunts. Ms. de France had a theatre commitment at the time she cast in the role of Monique in *AROUND THE WORLD*, and she passed on the role three times, only accepting it after a proper replacement was found for her for the play she was in. She had 10 days to prepare for the 8 month film shoot, including learning the script in English. She has several films in development for her in France, including the lead in the film about the turbulent life of the Belgian nun Sister Luc-Gabrielle (aka Sister Sourire) whose hit song "DOMINIQUE" knocked "LOUIE LOUIE" off the American charts in 1963, and who committed suicide in 1985.

MAÏWENN (Alex)

Maïwenn started her career on stage in *Yerma*, *Antoine Vitez' Hippolyte*, and *Daniel Mesguich's Ribeiro*, then *Le Terrier* and *Le Triomphe de l'Amour* before working with Mesguich once more in *Lorenzaccio* (1985). She studied drama under Corinne Blue and Bob McAndrey. Recently, she starred in *Une Petite Entaille* before scoring a huge hit with her "One Maï Show", *Le Pois Chiche* in 2001.

Maïwenn made her film début in 1983 in *L'ETE MEURTRIER* by Jean Becker. She won the best actress award at the Brest festival for *Hélinat Sans Toi*, a short directed by G. Ruquet, then featured in *LACENAIRE* by Francis Girod before playing her first lead in *LA GAMINE* by Hervé Pallud, co-starring Johnny Hallyday.

Luc Besson cast Milla Jovovich as the Diva in *THE FIFTH ELEMENT*, after which she starred in *LA MECANIQUE DES FEMMES* by Jérôme de Missolz and, more recently, in *LE MARQUIS* by Gilles Paquet-Brenner.

PHILIPPE NAHON (The killer)

Philippe Nahon has had a long, distinguished career in the French cinema, harking back to 1962 when he appeared in *LE DOULOS*, directed by Pierre Melville. Among his other noteworthy appearances are roles in such films as 2003's *NICKEL AND DIME* (dir. Sam Karmann), 2002's *IRREVERSIBLE* (dir. Gaspard Noé) and 2001's *SUPER NOVA* (dir. Pierre Vinour).

His other extensive credits include 2000's *LE MONDE A L'ENVERS* (dir., Rolando Colla), *VIRILITE* (dir., Ronan Girre), *CRIMSON RIVERS* (dir. Mathieu Kassovitz) and *BROTHERHOOD OF THE WOLF* (dir. Christophe Gans); 1998's *LE POULPE* (dir. Guillaume Nicloux) and *I STAND ALONE* (dir. Gaspard Noé, for which Nahon won Cannes 1998 Semaine de la Critique Special Critics' Prize as well as Best Actor Award at the Namur Festival), and 1995's *A VERY DISCREET HERO* (dir. Jacques Audiard). Other film appearances include *LES FRERES GRAVET* (dir. René Féret, 1994), *HATE* (dir. Mathieu Kassovitz, 1994), *FAUT PAS RIRE DU BONHEUR* (dir. Guillaume Nicloux, 1993), *CARNE* (dir. Gaspard Noé, 1991), *LA JAVA DES OMBRES* (dir. Romain Goupil, 1982), *LA COMMUNION SOLENNELLE* (dir. René Féret, 1976), and *LES CAMISARDS* (dir. René Alio, 1970).

ABOUT THE FILMMAKERS

ALEXANDRE AJA

Co-writer/Director

Born in Paris on August 7, 1978, Alexandre Aja has been a passionate movie-fan since he was a boy and grew up on a film set, since his father is director Alexandre Arcady. He wrote and directed his first film in 1997. *Over the Rainbow* was selected for the Cannes Festival in the short films section.

In 2000, Alexandre directed his first feature, *FURIA*, a futurist movie starring Stanislas Merhar, Marion Cotillard and Wadeck Stanczak. Alexandre also wrote the screenplay based on a short story by Julio Cortazar.

Alexandre Aja has also co-written, with Grégory Levasseur, *BREAK OF DAWN*, directed by Alexandre Arcady.

GREGORY LEVASSEUR

Co-writer/Art Director

Alexandre Aja's regular collaborator, Grégory Levasseur was Art Director on *OVER THE RAINBOW*, *FURIA* and *HIGH TENSION*. He co-wrote with Alexandre Aja the screenplay for *FURIA*, *BREAK OF DAWN* and *HIGH TENSION*.