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DE LA CRITIQUE
CANNES 2025

KIKA

a film by
Alexe Poukine



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2025 / Color / 1h44 (104 min)

Belgium, France

1.5:1 / 5.1 / French

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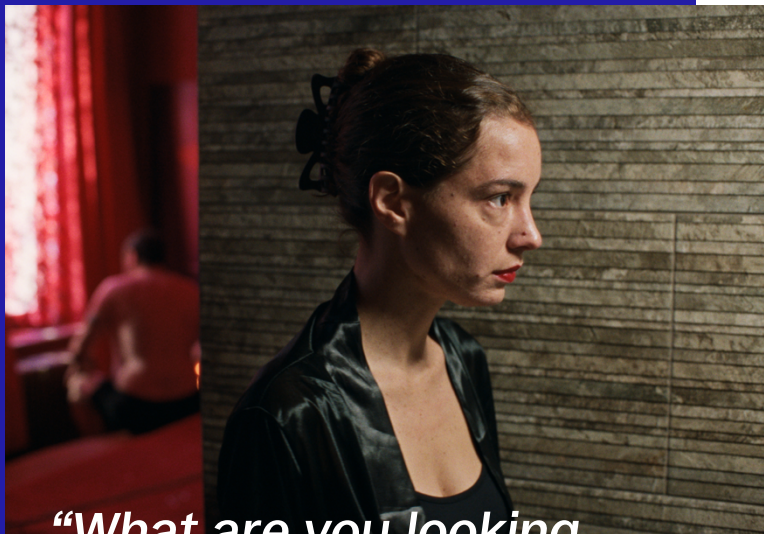
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PRODUCTION

WRONG MEN, Benoit Roland
KIDAM, Alexandre Perrier

SYNOPSIS



*“What are you looking
for in pain?”*

While pregnant with her second child, Kika faces the sudden death of her partner. Totally heartbroken, and broke, she sets her priorities straight:

- 1. make money fast*
- 2. stay strong*

Dirty underwear, dildos and neurotic parents will unexpectedly help.

INTERVIEW

Director Alexe Poukine interviewed by Marilou Duponchel

Why the name Kika? Is it a reference to Pedro Almodóvar's film of the same name?

To be honest, I haven't seen that film ... Kika is a name I love. If I'd had a second daughter, I'd have liked to call her that. When I was writing the film, I had a son, so I called my film Kika. We looked for another title for a long time. Generally speaking, all my films change title during the last week of editing, but not this one.

You've made documentaries as well as a medium-length fiction film (Palma). What made you decide to adopt one film genre over another, even though the two are intimately linked in your cinema?

Indeed, my films often play with the boundary between reality and fiction. In my documentaries, there is often a fictional device that may or may not have existed before the filming. In *Palma*, there's a big element of reenactment: I'm re-enacting a story that happened to me with my daughter, pushing the fictional envelope. I started writing *Kika* when I was pregnant with my second child. At the time, I was very afraid that her father would die. I'd already lived alone with my daughter and I knew what that meant in terms of insecurity. This was a way for me to exorcise that fear. I asked myself how I could get by financially without stopping making films. Because the idea of sex work had crossed my mind, I mixed in the story of a friend who, like Kika, is a dominatrix and a social worker. He burnt out several times because of the pressure of his first job, and then because of his second. I found it fascinating that he takes

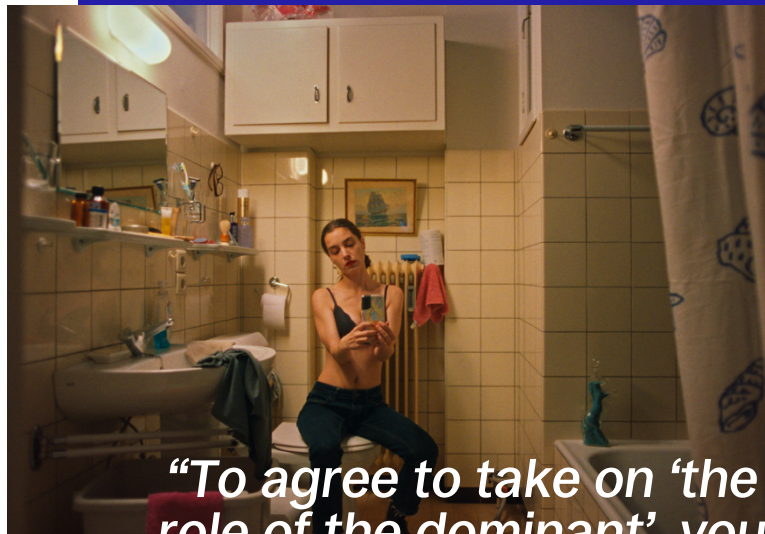
care of people either by hurting them or caring for them. But in both cases, the demand is so enormous, and there are so many people who need to be helped and cared for, that it leads to burnout, and despair at not being able to help those in need. What I find fascinating is how people try to find a way, sometimes an unusual way, to reduce suffering.

So my fantasy story got mixed up with my friend's real story and that's how *Kika* was born ... After that, I did a lot of research into dominatrices and sex workers in general. I also took BDSM workshops and incorporated the stories I gleaned from those experiences into the script.

What did this research involve?

We don't have the same conception of sex work in France as in Belgium, where it is decriminalised. I concentrated on Belgium, where I live. I contacted associations such as UTSOPI and Espace P and conducted lengthy interviews with sex workers who have extremely different practices and working conditions. The dominatrices I met often told me that they also did this work out of tenderness and respect for men. Because, to agree to take on „the role of the dominant“, you have to be very careful and attentive, and love people deeply because the job requires you to go into complex areas of the human soul.

Two dominatrix read the script, a man and a woman. The woman dominatrix, who is also a well-known performer, felt that I wasn't specific enough about the psychology of the clients. Thanks to her feedback, my view of them has changed. It was also important not



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KIKA

to produce a catalogue of sensationalist BDSM practices. Together with Thomas Van Zuylen, who helped write the script, we decided to leave out several sequences that were significant and/or surprising from a documentary point of view, but which were not sufficiently linked to Kika's personal story.

In the film you take a sympathetic view of the clients, and avoid the usual descent into sordidness that often characterises portrayals of prostitution in cinema. Was that a conscious choice on your part?

In France, where there is a strong abolitionist movement, the feedback from commissions was often the same: it's not possible for her to become a sex worker. In many films about this issue, the heroine is already a sex worker. Their approach is almost essentialist, as if we were born sex workers. It's the mother or the whore. People find it hard to imagine that you can be both, and that you can be so many other things. For me, there's also a moral aspect that's very problematic in the way sex workers are always portrayed, as victims. This representation is based on the imagery of a children's story where the princess waits to be saved by a third party (a man, of course). And this representation has an impact on reality because it creates laws. Sex workers are often presented as a counter-example. We don't want to believe that a woman can decide to go beyond, or even embrace, the stigma associated with prostitution. What is transgressive, I think, is for a woman to charge for sexual services that others choose to offer free of charge. For *Kika*, I'm talking about a wo-

man who looks like me and who chooses a profession that I could have done if I'd needed it.

In the same way, with regard to the portrayal of clients, I wanted to film men who did not espouse heterosexual male gender norms. I wanted to show people who turn to a sex worker for reasons that are far more complex than a so-called male drive. In this power dynamic, where one partner assumes a dominant role and the other a submissive one, Kika plays with patriarchal norms. It's a little subversion that I wanted to see in the cinema. In the global landscape, I think it's good.

But what interests me in this film is not so much the work of sex, as the relationship to suffering and to role-playing: what function do we put ourselves in and what happens when we put ourselves in the opposite position? For me, Kika is pretending at first, but eventually gets caught up in the game she's playing. It's a theme that runs through all my films.

Yes, this question is omnipresent in your work, along with the theme of simulation: stepping into another's skin, staging and restaging a scene, repeating it as a form of exorcism.. What interests you in this cathartic movement?

As far as interpretation is concerned, I'm not sure I fully understand what it is about this that fascinates me so much. That's probably why I continue to make films that revolve around this subject.

As far as filmmaking is concerned, I think it's a way of putting life in a box and making it watchable. I think I make films because they

are much easier to comprehend than reality. I've made a film about people who die in the street, a film about rape, a film about a public hospital and a film about a single mother who loses her mind. I think these films are strangely light, even though their subjects are hard.

The structure of the film is astonishing. A lot happens in the first 30 minutes, from the excitement of a romantic encounter to the brutal death of a partner. It feels like this approach allows you to center the character's inner life—her intimacy and subjectivity—before any social framing takes over. Were you deliberately avoiding the typical narrative of the 'courageous mother' whose humanity is overshadowed by societal expectations?

Yes, that's why I wanted to start with a great love story. Kika is someone who takes the risk of leaving for someone else even though she's not sure it will work out, she takes the risk of breaking up a relationship that has lasted since she was a teenager. I wanted the film to start out as a romantic comedy and then suddenly veer towards something more serious. I'm interested in mixing genres. Often in life, you think you're in the middle of a romantic comedy, and then, suddenly, it turns into a drama, and you have to deal with that. I don't really like films that choose between laughter and guns. In general, life is more like a dramatic comedy or a comic drama. I wanted my film to reflect that. I didn't want Kika to be reduced to her profession, her role as a mother, or to the love story that overwhelms her. Images of women from pre-

carious social backgrounds who are just brave mothers... It's certainly good that they exist, but I don't want to do that.

Did the fact that you didn't insist on these details also allow you to say that this precariousness, or the threat of it, concerns all women?

That's for sure. In France, several studies have shown that many single-parent families live below the poverty line. Single mothers in particular are subject to this structural insecurity. So yes, I think it could happen to almost any woman. Kika, could have been me! Except I'm a film-maker even though my great-aunt, who was a numerologist, predicted that I would be a social worker which is something that gave me a lot of anxiety when I was a teenager! That's another reason why Kika is a social worker.

Were there any films or female characters that inspired your writing?

Erin Brockovich. She's a down-and-out woman who's very aware of who she is and what she represents. I also really like Maren Ade. I loved Toni Erdmann, which is both funny and realistic, with colourful characters. I also love Andrea Arnold, she's my heroine. Her female characters are always magnificent.

You talked about sadness and the way Kika deals with her grief from a distance. If Kika doesn't cry, isn't it because she doesn't have the material and financial conditions to allow her to grieve?



“There are so many people who need to be helped and cared for, that it leads to burnout, and despair at not being able to help those in need.”

KIKA

Yes, of course, I think it's a luxury to be able to do "mourning work", as they say. If it's really a job, it means you have to have the time and availability to do it. For Kika, it's true there are material contingencies that mean she can't stop to think about herself or cry. At the same time, I think it's as if she's organising a cloud of smoke. She's constantly on overdrive. This second job that she embarks on is so enormous that it requires all her energy and blocks out her sadness. In a way, she uses this job to avoid being unhappy. Because she's afraid of falling apart. For me, Kika is someone who keeps running so she doesn't fall. To put it simply, this is the story of someone who really needs to cry.

At the end of the film, there's a scene where Kika suddenly allows herself to cry. But she's almost forced to.

It's also a film about consolation and vulnerability. All these men, these clients who put themselves in her hands ... If she's on the side of the domina, it's also because she doesn't want to be on the side of the vulnerable. She wants to be in control. I thought it was really beautiful to see someone who gradually understands, thanks to others, that her strength lies not in power, but in fragility.

There's a secondary character in the film who's an old lady with clairvoyant powers, no money, and is being threatened with eviction from her home. Is this a projection of what Kika's life might be like?

Yes, she's a bit of a pushover for her. It's both

someone she wants to help and, at the same time, someone who is a bit like what she could become. I imagined this woman as a doctor's wife who would have done what many doctors' wives do: assist them, support them, without being paid. Then one day, the husband leaves and takes everything with him. He leaves her with no resources and no recognition. The fact that she has clairvoyant powers allowed me to escape social naturalism to some extent. I wanted there to be a bit of magic in the film. There was a lot more in the script, but that aspect of the film was reduced during the editing.

The film is peppered with little details that might seem banal but aren't, instead they defuse expectations. For example; the absence of conflict with Kika's ex-partner; the complicity with the old lady in the café when she meets her first customer. We might expect a generational conflict, but the opposite happens.

Scriptwriters are constantly being told that the sinews of war are conflict. We have the impression that we live in a world surrounded by atrocious people. And yet, at least in my experience, people are generally quite wonderful. Maybe it's because I'm a documentary filmmaker and I meet a lot of people I think are great. I spend my life in cafés writing, and I meet a lot of very intelligent, surprising people every day. These are the people I want to see in the cinema. I don't want cinema to make me despair of humanity just because confrontation is more attractive. I find that disgusting. I want to film people I love.

The question of violence and oppression in the film is also fascinating, because it's not quite where you think it is.

For me, the violence in the film starts out as institutional violence, which is why we begin with the work of a social worker. It's also because I've just finished a film about the public hospital and I have the impression that the people who take care of others - the carers and social workers - are being asked to be benevolent when they are never given the financial means to do so. It's a violent thing to do, and it's usually the women who do these jobs, because they're the ones expected to do the caring. I think it was BDSM that invented consent: everything is negotiated. Every action takes place within a consensual framework where both the 'dominant' and the 'submissive' can express and respect their needs and their limits. I thought it was great that, contrary to what people expect, violence is not a part of her sex work; even if there is a form of physical violence it's not a psychological violence. For me, the real violence in her life comes through her work as a social worker.

Compared to David's friend who hugs her after the funeral, what I see is Kika accepting distress without being able to express her own. She's armouring herself so she doesn't break down. It's a bit like the sequence with Raïcha at the end, where she finally allows herself to be put down in someone's arms.

There's a very funny mansplaining scene in the film about inventing tomato pasta ...

This morning I was showing some cut footage

from the film at a festival. This sequence lasts twelve minutes, it was a genius improvisation by Bernard Blancan, and it will be in the bonus features of the film. At the end, he's having an anxiety attack because Kika and her daughter can't stop moving objects - it's laugh-out-loud funny. We all know characters like that: neurotic, narcissistic, yet generous and full of good intentions. After the shoot, Bernard wrote to me saying: "Some people find their clown. Thanks to this film, I've found my idiot."

In your films, enclosed or confined spaces—behind closed doors—are often the places where words can flow freely. This is also somewhat the case in Kika, where the amorous encounter is born in an enclosed space. Why this motif?

You're right, but I've never been aware of it. It's true that in my films there's always a kind of ambiguity. In *That Which Doesn't Kill*, for example, I film people at home. Intimacy is a space that we think is safe, but in fact most rapes take place in the home. For *Sauve qui peut*, it's the hospital, a place of care but it's the same thing: it's also a place of terrible institutional violence. In this hotel of discretion, as it's called, there are both adulterous couples and sex workers with clients. We rented a floor there, but the place was still in operation, and most of the sounds of coitus are real. Many of these hotels are next to the European Parliament. Before and after office hours, and during lunch breaks, it's always packed. I think that there are people who live the best part of their lives in these enclosed places. That interested me.



“You find out on the first day of your child's life that the patriarchy is going to devour you.”

KIKA

Did you already know about these places before the film?

Yes, I knew three or four of them. It's pretty crazy when you start to get interested in the subject to see the gap between what people show and what they are. It's a fascinating place to be.

How did you meet actress Manon Clavel? Were you already thinking about her when you were writing the film?

For a very long time I wondered if I was going to play the part. As the film is a bit of a *Palma* sequel, my producer François-Pierre Clavel - who died during the making of the film - was also pushing me to play in it. Then Youna de Peretti, who was our casting director for France, said to me: given the subject, there has to be two of you to do it. I realised she was right. I saw a huge number of actresses in France, Belgium and even Quebec. We searched for almost two years. I saw unknown and famous people. Manon Clavel is called Clavel after my producer, whom I adored. When Youna asked me to see her, I was a bit taken aback. I thought she was too young for the part, and too beautiful too. But when I saw her in the try-outs, it was obvious. She's incredibly kind and I wanted her to be a nice person, so that the audience could identify with her. Some people may be afraid of BDSM, which is often associated with stereotypes of extreme or dangerous behaviour. It is also sometimes perceived as violent or pathological. Given Kika's unorthodox path, I said to myself: people are going to distance themselves from her. That's why it was important for her to be endearing, to have

a sense of humour similar to mine, so that she would understand where I was taking her. Kika tackles life from an angle, by making jokes, it's her way of escaping reality. She's quick to laugh at everything for fear of having to cry about it. And Manon wasn't afraid to follow me, because there were some very complicated sequences. She did it with confidence, professionalism and rigour. For me, she carries the film.

*You've mentioned the connection between *Palma* and *Kika*. Could another link be the way both films explore the societal pressure to be happy; something that's embodied in *Kika* when she's in the Airbnb, looking at the fridge covered with photos of an idealized, happy family?*

Yes, absolutely. I have the impression that people are constantly on Instagram. Between what they share and what they look like, we no longer know what's real and what's fake. *Palma's* idea was to say that all this starts very early, at nursery school with these notebooks that are like Facebook for children where you have to pretend that you are wonderful and that life is great all the time. It's the same thing with motherhood: we're constantly being sold the idea that motherhood is all happiness. For decades, mothers in films seemed to revel in their constant alienation. Motherhood is great, but it's also very hard. Mothers are the worst losers in the history of society. You're led to believe that you're going to be able to work, be a mother and be so fulfilled. It's a total lie. Nobody talks about it. You find out on the first day of your child's life that the patriarchy is going to devour you.

ALEXE POUKINE

ALEXE POUKINE is a French director and screenwriter. She studied filmmaking and screenwriting. She first gained recognition for her graduation film *Petites Morts* (2008), selected for several international festivals. After two documentaries, *Dormir, dormir dans*

les pierres (2013) and *That Which Doesn't Kill* (2019), she directed her first fiction short film, *Palma* (2020) which won a the Special Jury Prize and Best Actress at the Clermont Ferrand Int Festival. *Kika* (2025) is her first fiction feature.

FILMOGRAPHY

2013

*Dormir, dormir
dans les pierres*

Documentary Feature

2019

*That Which Doesn't Kill
(Sans Frapper)*

Documentary Feature

2020

Palma

Short Film Fiction

Special Jury Prize and
Best Actress – Clermont

Ferrand Int Festival

Best Actress Award –
Premier Plan Angers



MAIN CAST

Kika Manon Clavel
Louison Suzanne Elbaz
David Makita Samba
Paul Thomas Coumand

KIKA

CREW

Screenplay Alexe Poukine, Thomas Van Zuylen
Direction of photography Colin Lévêque
Editor Agnes Bruckert
Original music Pierre Desprats
Set designer Julie Irribarria
Sound editing Sabrina Calmels
Costume Designer Prunelle Rulens
Make up / Hair Design Charlotte Dutilleux (MUA), Laure Gaudou (Hair)
Camera operator Myriam Amouri

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TOTEM ATELIER filmography includes **SHORT SUMMER** by Nastia Korkia (2025), **THE HYPNOSIS** by Ernst de Geer (Karlovy Vary 2023, where it won 3 awards), **DEAD GIRLS DANCING** by Anna Roller (Tribeca 2023), **MARCELI** by Jasmine Trinca (Cannes Official Selection 2022).

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