



# MARIA MONTESSORI

EEN FILM VAN LÉA TODOROV

*cinéart*

## PERSMAP

Over het leven en het werk van de vooruitstrevende vrouw die het onderwijs voorgoed heeft veranderd.

Drama - 2023 - FR - 100 minuten  
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## Synopsis

MARIA MONTESSORI vertelt het indrukwekkende verhaal van een vrouw die haar tijd ver vooruit was: Maria Montessori streed voor haar nieuwe onderwijsmethode in een tijd die werd gedomineerd door mannen.

In Rome, begin 20e eeuw, ontmoet Maria Montessori (Jasmine Trinca) de succesvolle Franse courtisane Lili d'Alengy (Leïla Bekhti). Lili is Parijs ontvlucht om haar reputatie te beschermen, toen de leerstoornis van haar dochter aan het licht dreigde te komen. Maria legt op dat moment de basis voor haar nieuwe en baanbrekende onderwijsmethode. Door Maria leert Lili haar dochter kennen zoals ze is: niet alleen een meisje met een beperking, maar ook iemand met een sterke wil en talenten. Lili helpt op haar beurt Maria om haar ambities waar te maken.

MARIA MONTESSORI is een indringend verhaal over de kracht van vrouwen; over opoffering en over solidariteit.

Een film die door de Internationale Montessori Vereniging wordt omarmd: *'Dit is een uitzonderlijke film over enkele baanbrekende jaren die Maria Montessori hielpen haar opvattingen en inzichten over de menselijke ontwikkeling en onderwijs vorm te geven. De film laat op prachtige wijze de uitdagingen zien die de maatschappij haar oplegt: een jonge dokter in een door mannen gedomineerde wereld, een wetenschapper en een nieuwe moeder. De gevoelige regie van Léa Todorov kenmerkt zich door authenticiteit. Een aanrader.'*

- Lynne Lawrence, Executive Director, Association Montessori Internationale.





Director: Léa Todorov

## Director's biography

Léa Todorov is a french writer, director and producer born in Paris in 1982.

After studying political sciences in Paris, Vienna and Berlin, she began working as an assistant director in documentaries. In 2012, she directed her first documentary film SAVING HUMANITY DURING OFFICE HOURS and in 2014 with Joanna Dunis RUSSIAN UTOPIA. In 2015, she founded with directors Lila Pinell, Chloé Mahieu, Gaëlle Boucand and Aurélia Morali the production company Elinka Films and produced two documentaries by Gaëlle Boucand. She also collaborates as a writer on several documentary and fiction projects. In 2017, she co-wrote the documentary SCHOOL REVOLUTION: 1918-1939 directed by Joanna Grudzinska and co-produced by Arte. The film was selected at Geneva International History Film Festival and La Rochelle Film Festival. This project on alternative pedagogies will be at the origin of his first feature film MARIA MONTESSORI (2023), Emergence 2021 winner, on one of these pedagogues, the renowned Maria Montessori.

### Filmography

2023	MARIA MONTESSORI
2015	RUSSIAN UTOPIA
2012	SAVING HUMANITY DURING OFFICE HOURS

## Interview with...

### Léa Todorov

#### What fascinated you about Maria Montessori and what inspired you to make this film?

I first read about Maria Montessori while working on a historical documentary on Progressive Education between world wars. I was captivated by the highly romantic nature of Maria Montessori's life - one of the first women doctors in Italy, an international celebrity, a myth and an object of fascination. In spite of coming from a positivist school of thought, she spoke as much about revelations and intuitions as she did about observations and experiments, and she collaborated with Mussolini whilst at the same time advocating for universal peace. For a woman born in 1870 it was not enough to be brilliant and gifted in order to conquer the world, it was also necessary to have a will of iron, unflinching determination, and a dream of success that surpassed the ordinary. But in order to escape the powerful social determinism of the epoch and her gender, it was above all necessary for Maria to renounce that which was most precious to her: her son, Mario, a child born out of wedlock, and who, if she had officially recognised him, would have cost her her career.

But the turning point experience that triggered me to write the film was the birth of my daughter. She was born with a genetic disease and I quickly understood I was going to become not only a mother, but the mother of a special need child. I suffered from the lack of representations of such children - that could help me cope with the situation I was going through. Confronted by the handicap, I remembered the research I had done whilst writing the documentary "Révolution école", having plunged into the writings of various pedagogues from the beginning of the 20th century during several years. Two doctors, major figures of modern education, had begun by working with so-called "idiot" children before working with "normal" children: Ovide Decroly and Maria Montessori. The archive images I had seen of these different children came back to me. With my own daughter, this acquired knowledge went beyond the theoretical field and became anchored in reality. My interest in the subject was renewed by my own personal necessity.

This is how the story of Maria Montessori came about, a story of the lives of two women, one real and the other imagined, Maria and Lili. To approach them through the medium of a period film is to have the possibility to travel back in time and observe the moment where it was necessary to fight in order to impose these different postures on a rigid world, at the risk of losing everything - one's reputation, one's child. The more the "new woman" - educated, enlightened, modern, but also searching for her pleasure, her desire - tried to exist in a patriarchal society, the bigger the obstacles before her, forcing her to make unjust choices. These are collective stories (my own grandmother left three children behind so she could complete her studies and escape from the domestic prison), but often kept secret: what a pleasure to finally tell them!

#### Behind such a project is extensive research. How did you prepare?

I had already done a lot of researches while working on the documentary. But I had to sit again in the library and read a certain number of books. My references were three biographies (the comprehensive one by Rita Kramer, the more critical one by Marjan Schwegman, and the one by Valeria Paola Babini, which focuses on her scientific

feminism), as well as her own writings, among which her diary for 1913, written during a transatlantic trip, where she refers a lot to her son. There was also a thirty-page manual in which she looks back on her work at ortofrenico institute: I used it extensively. Throughout the writing process, I was concerned to be as accurate as possible about what I would say about Maria. Even if her speeches are reworded to make the script clearer, I wanted every word to be faithful to her thinking.

**Please tell us briefly what MARIA MONTESSORI is about.**

In 1900, Lili d'Alengy, a famous Parisian courtesan, has a shameful secret - her daughter Tina, born with a disability. Unwilling to care for a child who threatens her career, she decides to leave Paris for Rome. There, she meets Maria Montessori, a medical doctor who is developing a revolutionary learning method for children then known as "deficient". But Maria is also hiding a secret: a child born out of wedlock. Together, the two women will help each other win their place in this man's world and make history.

**Why did you choose this particular stage of her life?**

It took a long time for me to choose! I had the intuition that the most interesting moment in Maria's biography was when she abandoned her son. At that time, she had not yet set up a school for neurotypical children. She worked in an institute for special-need children, and it was with them she experienced what would later become her method. She was also very involved in fighting for women rights at that time. I think it's a turning point in Maria Montessori's life.

**Could you please briefly explain the main characters?**

*Maria Montessori* is a woman with a rare force of will, she studied medicine and, at the age of 30, runs the orthophrenic institute, a modern place where atypical children, rejected by ordinary schools, are educated. Working alongside her is Guiseppe Montesano, her secret lover with whom she had a child, Mario, a year earlier. If Maria has the impression

that she is managing to live the life of a modern woman in a world governed by ancient laws, she will begin to realise the impossibility of this balance, and must finally choose between her child and her destiny. Lili will be at her side to help her reinvent herself.

*Lili d'Alengy* is a Parisian "cocotte", a courtesan, at the height of her fame, who's past catches up with her when her mother dies. She had abandoned an "idiot" child (Tina) years before and now she has to take care of her. She flees Paris in order to keep her secret from being discovered, taking advantage of an invitation by an Italian prince, her occasional lover, to join him in Rome. When she arrives, she doesn't know what to do with this child she can't even look at, until she discovers, through her maid, the existence of the orthophrenic institute. A long and painful journey of acceptance and love begins - nurtured by Maria's pedagogy.

*Guiseppe Montesano*, 31, is a gentle and intelligent man who cherishes his partner, Maria, and would like to live up to their pact: to love each other freely, without alienating themselves within the marital institution. But can one escape one's epoch? Are we really free to make our own choices? Guiseppe ends up by doubting this is possible. When his mother reminds him of his obligations, he agrees and decides to marry a woman less rebellious than the one he loves.

**Please tell us something about the casting?**

From the very first drafts of the script, I thought of Jasmine Trince for Montessori's part. Her participation in the film was decisive: Jasmine made me love Maria. When I was writing, I didn't have much affection for her as a character. I found her hard, authoritarian, and certain elements of her biography difficult to comprehend. So I wanted to distance myself from her, to show her ambiguities and ambivalences, but Jasmine's interpretation simply makes her be, beyond good or evil. On the set, it was as if she'd been visited by Maria Montessori.

Leila Bekhti is an amazing actrice and it was interesting to offer her Lili's part because it's a character very different from what she's used to play. I think it's her deep humanity that allows us to love this woman who's hard on her child. She had a very clear understanding of the script, and as soon as she accepted the role, we immediately got down to work. Leila has a great capacity for suggestion, constantly thinking about the coherence of her character, and carries an emotional power that impressed me a lot. Thanks to her, I don't think we ever judge Lili for being a bad mother. She manages to draw us in even when the character is frankly unpleasant.

Rafaelle Sonnevile-Caby came in for casting with all the other children, with whom we organized a workshop during the holidays. On the very first day of the workshop, I had the feeling she was perfect for the part. Her reflective intensity, her way of being both with us and within herself overwhelmed me. She's a hyper-intelligent little girl, who understands everything, who is very present to the world, yet has a different way of perceiving sensory signals, and this cognitive particularity interested me. During the shooting, we insisted a lot on the distance between herself and the part, and she really composed her character with us the team, from the very inhibited Tina at the beginning, to the Tina who blossoms in the Institute, to the Tina at the end of the film.



**How important was it for you to portray several facets of women's lives in the 19th century in the film?**

In France, the title of the film is "the new women". It's an expression commonly used by historians to designate those feminist, educated and independent women of 1900 who had succeeded in gaining access to professional positions and academic careers, and who asserted their place in society through knowledge. So that would rather refer to Maria Montessori. But while inventing Lili's character, I was willing to imagine her as an independent woman, so that her situation wouldn't resonate too much with that of Maria and Giuseppe. Making her a cocotte was therefore to offer another model of the powerful, free woman of the time.

**Education is one of the major issues of our time. Do you think Maria Montessori's methods are something to enrich also the current debates about education?**

What I really like about Montessori's education methods is that it demands observation of the child. I believe children are not all alike and that it's up to the school to adapt to the children rather than the opposite

**Do you have personal experience with Montessori's education methods?**

I have a lot of experience with education for special need children thanks to my daughter - a lot of it being very close from what Maria Montessori used to do.

**Why should we remember Maria Montessori's life and achievements today?**

I hope the film will question our society's lack of ambition to be more inclusive. Invisible for so long, often ostracized, it's time to give neuroatypical or people with disability their rightful place at the heart of society.



## Jasmine Trinca

Jasmine Trinca made her film debut at a very young age, in 2001, chosen by Nanni Moretti for the role of Irene in LA STANZA DEL FIGLIO. Two years later she was in the cast of LA MEGLIO GIOVENTÙ by Marco Tullio Giordana, followed in 2005 by MANUALE D'AMORE by Giovanni Veronesi and ROMANZO CRIMINALE by Michele Placido.

Nanni Moretti chose her again in 2006 for IL CAIMANO, the following year she starred in PIANO, solo by Riccardo Milani, while in 2009 she won the Marcello Mastroianni Prize in Venice with IL GRANDE SOGNO by Michele Placido.

In France in 2011 she shot L'APOLLONIDE by Bertrand Bonello, in competition at the Cannes Film Festival (then returning to work with the same director in SAINT LAURENT), while two years later she was at the Locarno Film Festival with UNE AUTRE VIE by Emmanuel Mouret. In 2013 she was the protagonist of UN GIORNO DEVI ANDARE by Giorgio Diritti and MIELE by Valeria Golino, both earning her the Nastro d'Argento Prize.

In 2015 she was in the international cast of THE GUNMAN by Pierre Morel, with Sean Penn and Javier Bardem. In the same year she played NESSUNO SI SALVA DA SOLO by Sergio Castellitto and MARAVIGLIOSO BOCCACCIO by the Taviani brothers.

After SLAM - TUTTO PER UNA RAGAZZA by Andrea Molaioli, in 2017 she was the main character in FORTUNATA by Sergio Castellitto, with which she won the Interpretation Award in the Un Certain Regard section at the Cannes Film Festival, then the David di Donatello and the Nastro d'Argento Awards. The following year she played Ilaria Cucchi in the film SULLA MIA PELLE by Alessio Cremonini.

In recent seasons she appears - among others - in EUPHORIA by Valeria Golino, CROCE E DELIZIA by Simone Godano (Globo d'Oro as best actress), SIMPLE WOMEN by Chiara Malta, LA DEA FORTUNA by Ferzan Ozpetek (David di Donatello and Nastro d'Argento as best leading actress), THE STORY OF MY WIFE by Ildikó Enyedi, SUPEREROI by Paolo Genovese, PROFETI by Alessio Cremonini and MARIA MONTESSORI by Léa Todorov.

In 2018 she made her theater debut in the show "La Maladie de la mort", directed by Katie Mitchell, while in 2020 she signed her first short film as director, BMM - BEING MY MOM, in competition in the Orizzonti section at the Venice International Cinema Art Exhibition, followed by her feature film debut, MARCEL!, in the official selection at the 75th Cannes Film Festival.

In 2024 she will be the main character in the series LA STORIA and in the cast of SUPERSEX and L'ARTE DELLA GIOIA.

## Cast

Lili d'Alengy  
Maria Montessori

LEÏLA BEKHTI  
JASMINE TRINCA

Tina  
Giuseppe  
Carlotta  
Betsy  
Clarisse  
Jean

RAFAELLE SONNEVILLE-CABY  
RAFFAELE ESPOSITO  
LAURA BORELLI  
NANCY HUSTON  
AGATHE BONITZER  
SÉBASTIEN POWDEROUX

Le prince

PIETRO RAGUSA

Anna

RAFFAELLA DUCREY GIORDANO

Giorgia

GEORGIA IVES

Professor Lombroso

STEFANO ABBATI

Baccelli

GIANFRANCO PODDIGHE

Alessandro Montessori

RENATO SARTI

Renilde Montessori

PATRIZIA LA FONTE

Sarta

DANIELA MACALUSO

Le journaliste

ROBERTO ZIBETTI

La femme russe chez Betsy

IRINA VALVILOVA

Madame Montesano

LUCIANA CASTELLUCI

## Crew

Scénariste & Réalisatrice

LÉA TODOROV

Directeur de la photographie

SÉBASTIEN GOEPFERT

Chef électricien

ÉTIENNE LESUR

Chef machiniste

STÉPHANE GERMAIN

Scripte

JULIE DUPEUX-HARLÉ

1er assistant mise en scène

JUSTINIEN SCHRICKE

Chorégraphe

GEORGIA IVES

Directeurs de casting

SANDIE GALAN PEREZ - A.R.D.A

STEFANIA VALESTRO

MARCO MATTEO DONAT-CATTIN

ALESSANDRA MACCOTTA

Chef opérateur son

CÉDRIC BERGER

Directeurs de production

LUCIE BOUILLERET

NICOLETTA MAGGI

ROBERTO ANDREUCCI

Régisseuse générale

MARIE BOITARD

Décors

PASCALE CONSIGNY

Costumes

AGNÈS NODEN

Direction de post-production

FRANCESCA BETTENI-BARNES

Montage image

ESTHER LOWE

Monteurs son

CHARLOTTE BUTRAK

Bruiteur

ALEXIS MEYNET

Mixeur

NICOLAS FIORASO

Étalonnage

SAMUEL AÏCHOUN

BRICE PANCOT



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