

Intimate threads of life

By ROSEMARY NEILL

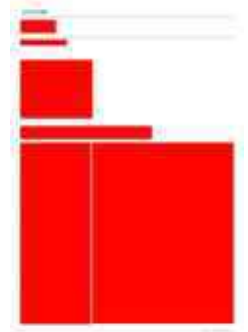
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Intimate threads of life

For French director Alice Winocour and superstar Angelina Jolie, *Couture* is a film that cuts close to home

ROSEMARY NEILL

FILM

Alice Winocour is sitting in a Paris hotel suite near the hustle and buzz of the Champs-Élysées, and speaking in a voice so soft you sometimes need to lean in to hear her. The French writer-director's low-key delivery is deceptive: It belies the visceral potency of her new movie, *Couture*, not to mention its turbocharged star power. A film of rare emotional honesty about fashion and fragility, life and death, and women's bodies, *Couture* is anchored by Angelina Jolie, and Winocour says it has proved to be far "more than a movie" for both her and the Hollywood A-lister.

"Of course we shared this very intimate time," the Parisian director says of her emotionally taxing shoot with the Lara Croft and Maria star, adding that Jolie felt the impact of her role deep "in her flesh". In the movie, Jolie plays Maxine, an American film and video director and divorcing mother who receives a devastating breast cancer diagnosis while negotiating the backstage frenzy of Paris Fashion Week.

Jolie, an Oscar and three-time Golden Globe winner, famously underwent a preventive double mastectomy in 2013

after losing her mother and grandmother to cancer, and her latest role has close parallels with her real-life ordeal.

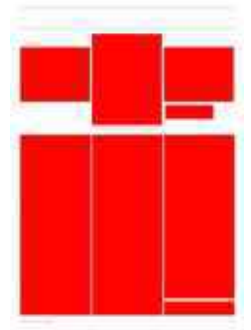
Indeed, *Couture* – a highlight of the nation's biggest film showcase, the Alliance Française French Film Festival, which begins on March 3 – features what is arguably Jolie's most searingly personal performance to date. At one point, we see a doctor draw red lines on Maxine's breasts ahead of her cancer surgery – this image appears on the movie's promotional poster – and in another scene, Maxine initiates a pre-surgery fling that goes awry.

In December, on the back of her *Couture* performance, Jolie appeared on the inaugural cover of *TIME* France. With a sombre yet confident gaze, she looked directly at the camera, loosely cupping her right breast and wearing a low cut black shawl. She was publicly revealing her mastectomy scars for the first time, in order to promote breast cancer awareness. "I share these scars with many women I love. And I'm always moved when I see other women share theirs," the mother of six wrote on Instagram.

At the hotel suite, Winocour is also sharing something personal: she reveals that while her feature film mirrors aspects of Jolie's past, it is also autobiographical. The 50-year-old writer-director is a survivor of breast cancer and the screenplay she wrote is "about my personal story with cancer".

"So it's something I've experienced myself. It is my story, basically," she says. "Because it was so intimate, I decided I needed to have someone who was connected to that story (for the lead role), and Angelina lost her mother and her grandmother to cancer."

Asked about the emotionally or psychologically exposing scenes Jolie performed, the director says "there was a mutual



trust, I think, that we were fighting for the same cause and trying to help other women in the world who had been through the same thing”.

While Jolie has never been diagnosed with breast cancer, in 2013 she discovered she carried the BRCA1 gene that gave her a high probability of contracting the disease. Her mother, French actor Marcheline Bertrand, died from ovarian cancer, aged just 56. In a clear reference to her maternal heritage, Maxine often speaks French in *Couture*.

While promoting the film at the Toronto International Film Festival, Jolie became teary as she confirmed she wore her mother’s jewellery while filming, explaining this was “a way of communicating with her”. Winocour’s film, she said, was “for me ... probably one of the more intimate films I have done, speaking to the audience and communicating with the audience”. After her mastectomy, Jolie underwent reconstructive breast surgery and later had her ovaries removed. She has written that “I feel empowered that I made a strong choice that in no way diminishes my femininity”.

Winocour says that because Jolie “underwent a double mastectomy to avoid her family’s fate ... it created an instant connection with (her) and the other women (in the film)”. When asked what her own cancer treatment involved, the writer-director seems to shrink back into herself; in this moment, her vulnerability is palpable.

“I really did that movie because it’s difficult for me to talk about it,” she replies. “Because the film is about showing stitches (she often uses the word ‘stitches’ to describe emotional and surgical wounds) I thought I had to say I went through this, but it’s something that I’m not able to talk about.”

Winocour and Jolie agreed *Couture* should not solely be a cancer story. There is a romantic subplot and, in the lead-up to Paris Fashion Week, Maxine’s path intersects with those of Ada (Anyier Anei), a young South Sudanese pharmacy student ambivalent about her burgeoning modelling career, and Angèle (Ella Rumpf), a makeup artist harbouring writing ambitions. Winocour says these characters are outsiders: “They try to get into that world of fashion, but it’s not really their world.”

The film also offers insights into behind-the-scenes pressures of big fashion shows, with one character likening them to “a war machine”. Chanel gave Winocour unprecedented access (for a narrative filmmaker) to its historic Paris showroom and ateliers so she could research her feature, and she says “I spent hours in ateliers”, observing dressmakers at work and interviewing models.

Couture’s romantic subplot involves Jolie’s Maxine and her fashion video cinematographer (Louis Garrel.) Presumably speaking from personal experience, Winocour says: “I think what is also terrible about cancer is that for other people it erases everything you are. The romance subplot was also to say that you stay a woman, even when you go through this.”

The director claims “so many men separate from their women once they learn they have breast cancer. I don’t know

the percentage, but it’s huge. We wanted to show also a love story, which was (developing despite) the harshness of the illness.” A particularly poignant scene involves Maxine “fear-welling” her natural breasts. “It’s probably the last time she will make love or have sex with her breasts,” Winocour says simply. “Her two breasts.”

The filmmaker describes working with a star of Jolie’s magnitude as surprisingly “normal (and) natural”. “I think she has a kind of rebellion in her,” adds Winocour, who has also worked on films about a Turkish teenager escaping forced marriage and a female astronaut bound for a space station. “I’m really interested in people who try to have their original voice and try to make their own way, and I think that’s what Angelina does in Hollywood.”

She says that Jolie – who was once Hollywood’s highest-paid female actor – is “that big ... At the same time she’s still like the punk she was when she was a teenager and she has remained that punk, which is amazing, given what she’s been through. All the men she’s been with – it’s something I really admire.”

Jolie, she says, “is also this voice for women in the world. She’s very famous in Africa”. Winocour says that cast member Anei’s brother attended a school in Africa that was named for the Hollywood star. (Jolie spent many years as a special envoy to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and she has also supported community development in Cambodia, birthplace of her adopted son, Maddox Jolie-Pitt.)

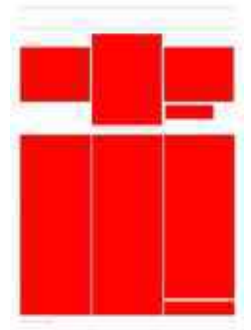
Based in Paris, Winocour is a bilingual law graduate and mother who pivoted to screenwriting, and then to directing, in her 20s. In 2016, she won best screenplay at France’s Cesar Awards for a script she co-wrote for feminist coming-of-age film *Mustang*. Set in a conservative Turkish village and directed by Deniz Gamze Ergüven, the movie went on to earn an Oscar nomination for best foreign film.

Winocour has garnered two Lumière Award nominations, including a best film short-listing for *Revoir Paris*, about a woman struggling to recover from a terrorist attack in a French bistro.

Often, the filmmaker has immersed herself in the environments where her films will be set. For *Proxima* (2019) – featuring former Bond girl Eva Green as an astronaut balancing motherhood with an international space station posting – Winocour spent two years conducting research at the European Space Agency. There, she befriended astronauts and other professionals, several of whom were cast in her film.

Similarly, for *Couture*, she hung around the back rooms of fashion shows and conducted extensive research into the lives of South Sudanese models working in Paris. “I met maybe 30 of them while I was writing and all of them had the same story ... It was not like the big dream to come to the fashion world, but in the end they were sacrificing a bit of themselves to earn money for their families to live. And I thought it was interesting to tell the story of fashion from this perspective.”

In one scene, a photographer barks at teenage African



model Ada to “seduce the camera”, and she clearly doesn’t have a clue what he is talking about. While Ada is shivering in a sheath dress – and meant to look sultry – the crew are rugged up in puffer jackets. Winocour explains this telling, comic moment stemmed from Anei’s real-life transition from model to actor. Screen performers are told not to look at the camera directly and Anei “was always saying, ‘Oh it’s very hard for me; as a model you’re supposed to seduce the camera’ ... So we made a scene about that because we thought, ‘It’s so horrible when you see all those girls when it’s really freezing who are wearing those (light) dresses and they have to pretend like everything is (okay)’”.

The film’s original French title, *Coutures* – meaning stitches – carries a double meaning that is woven through the narrative, denoting haute couture’s delicate stitches and medical sutures. Visually, it encapsulates both worlds: the red lines the surgeon traces on Maxine’s body before her operation are mirrored by the lines seamstresses draw on a mannequin.

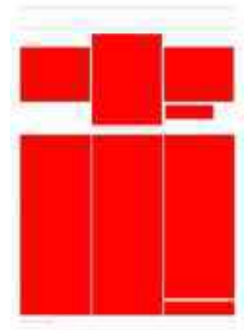
“There are a lot of echoes of one story to another,” Winocour says. “We were really sewing the (characters’) destinies. ... A surgeon had told me that when he was sewing bodies, when he was doing an operation, he had this feeling he was doing couture; it’s with flesh and blood, but it’s coutures

(stitches).” Conversely, she says that “when you arrive in an atelier, you really have this feeling of being in a surgeon’s place ... The dress is like a body and they have this feeling of being like Frankenstein, like they’re creating bodies. That is really something we wanted to capture.”

While much of her story is centred on Maxine’s Gothic-themed fashion show shoot, Winocour insists her movie’s concerns are broader. “To me, the fashion world was not so interesting in the movie – it’s more like a metaphor for the contemporary world; the world where you have to hide your wants (desires) and maintain a world of appearances,” she says. “Of course, this also has a lot to do also with the world of cinema, but it’s even worse in the world of fashion – behind red carpets, behind all of those perfect images of women. The ones you see on posters in the streets, in the airport, in the metro, all those women smiling with perfect bodies and perfect expressions.”

She says her film asks: “What are the wants those women are hiding?” The filmmaker also sought to depict “the reality of the women’s bodies because I think in fashion especially, there are those bodies which are glorified, magnified, but they have an expiration date. At 23, it’s already the end. I mean, it’s a terrible world, it is very hard for the girls.” 🐣





**From left: Angelina Jolie in Couture;
the cast at the San Sebastian festival;
Jolie and Louis Garrel in a scene from
the film. Opposite page: Alice Winocour**

Couture will screen at the Alliance Francaise French Film Festival. The festival runs from March 3 until April 26 across 18 cities and towns, including all state and territory capitals. Rosemary Neill travelled to Paris with Unifrance.