

Turned to Stone

With her shocking new film *Alpha*, director Julia Ducournau leans into discomfort – and tests the body horror boundaries of lead actors Golshifteh Farahani and Mélissa Boros.



RUNS IN THE FAMILY: GOLSHIFTEH FARAHANI AND MÉLISSA BOROS

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JULIA DUCOURNAU

by **Giovanni Marchini Camia**

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Julia Ducournau's debut film, 2016's *Raw*, followed a medical student's cannibalistic coming-of-age. Her second film, *Titane* (2021), was about a serial killer impregnated by a Cadillac – it saw the French director become the first female filmmaker to win the Palme d'Or solo. So, what went through actor Golshifteh Farahani's head when she was asked to take a look under the hood of Ducournau's third feature?

"Well, the irony is that I didn't know Julia," Farahani admits. "I haven't seen either of her films." Urged to read the script for *Alpha* by her agents, the Iranian French actor was moved to her core: "I just wrote her a message saying, 'I'm so honoured that you chose me to play this part.'"

The part is that of an unnamed doctor bearing witness to a surreal and highly contagious disease that threatens both the patients she's helpless to cure and her vulnerable tween daughter, Alpha (Mélissa Boros). In contrast to the supernatural transformations seen in Ducournau's previous films, the body horror here feels all too real, and all too grim – even if the disease's symptoms do involve the afflicted bodies slowly, and often beautifully, turning into marble; their blood dissolving into bright red dust.

Speaking along with the film's cast at the Cannes Film Festival, Ducournau confirms that her third film found its origins in unease. "I was writing another film in which I felt like it was too comfortable," she says. "It was boring... So I tore everything away, deleted the file, and I was a go for discomfort. Go with what you think you can't do, which is this film."

The creative risk involved in *Alpha* has left critics divided, with some viewers considering Ducournau's fictional sickness a distasteful interpretation of the AIDS epidemic. Alpha's uncle, Amin (Tahar Rahim), a heroin addict and victim of the infection, is shown to waste away before the audience's eyes – a tragedy made all the more tangible through Rahim's weight loss to play the role.

When Alpha gets a dodgy stick-and-poke tattoo at a party, she and her mother fear that she's caught the blood-borne disease, too. Soon she's ostracised at school and rejected by her boyfriend.

"It is about the fact that everything that is left unsaid, every single death that is left taboo, is going to have an impact on the next generation," Ducournau summarises. "Everything that we let slip, everything that makes us numb, is going to have a terrifying domino effect."

Intergenerational trauma and pandemics such as COVID-19 are raised by the filmmaker and her cast as equally bleak sources of inspiration, but Ducournau seems to confirm that the throughline of medical and social contagion begins with the HIV/AIDS crisis.

"I personally feel guilty for being in such a shock and I think my way to deal with that was to go back to the first time that I felt our society let us down, as a body of people."

The film's young protagonist is played by the relatively unknown Boros, who manages the challenging material with grace. "For Alpha, this anxiety has to do with the fact that she's confronted with things that are not for her age, and that's the reason why she grows very fast," Boros says, through an English translator.

The 19-year-old describes learning "the way of behaving, the way of walking around, the way of speaking" that suited her vulnerable 13-year-old character. Farahani, Boros' on-screen mother, says working with the new talent was "one of the most incredible privileges" of the project.

Both women also praise Rahim's work in the film, describing the *A Prophet* (2009) performer as a startling presence on set. "He lost all these kilos when he appeared," Farahani recalls, "and he came in so fragile; trembling like a piece of jewellery that could break anytime".

Ducournau and Rahim worked closely with doctors and nutritionists to make the actor's physical appearance function within the film's emotional landscape. "He is putting so much work into transforming his entire body, I have to show his work the best way I can," Ducournau explains. "How am I gonna light it, how am I gonna find the angles?" One of the director's favourite shots sees Amin weeping under savagely bright light, back arched and

shoulder blades jutting. "That's exactly what Amin is," she says: "an angel who lost his wings."

With its plot about an illness that literally dehumanises and objectifies its victims, it was important that *Alpha* maintained a strong humanist core. Ducournau can partly thank her upbringing for that principle. "Yeah, I'm pretty good with needles," she laughs. "Parents being doctors, I'm not too afraid." A standard of care that she learned from her parents – who always told her that "you cannot treat two patients the same way" – informed the film's pragmatic depiction of patients in the grip of a horrific situation. "I wanted it to be matter-of-fact. It's not a circus, right? My movie is about people who are infected by a disease and need care."

"When we were shooting it, we were saying, 'Wow, people are going to be so impressed by the effets spéciaux,'" Farahani says. "But when I saw the movie, I realised that, 'No, actually, they become so banal', and the emotions are the things. It's about the feeling of this brother and sister to each other."

If *Raw* focused on sisterhood and *Titane* on a grotesque (yet oddly wholesome!) father-son relationship, *Alpha* is somewhat more complex – capturing the agonised ties between a brother and sister, an uncle and niece and, most powerfully of all, a desperate mother and daughter.

"When we're talking about a mother figure, we're talking about tearing away from where you came from," Ducournau says. "The symbiotic, original fusion that we've all come from. It's two separations because you're tearing away from yourself as well, and it's really hard."

Farahani and Boros seem deeply moved by this maternal thread of the film – and by its difficult proposition that, sometimes, the only solution may be to let our loved ones go. "It's about respecting the other's decision, and not resisting if you don't agree," Boros says.

As an immigrant from Iran, Farahani arrived at her character's impossible choice from personal experience. "I think the most courageous act is to let something go. Not to do something but to drop something. For someone like me that has almost no fear of jumping because I have been chased all my life – by the geographical, political monsters that were chasing us from the moment we were born – we were in survival mode. We never realised how wounded we are."

The actor celebrates when it's pointed out that there are two Iranian films in the Cannes Film festival, with Jafar Panahi's state-censored *It Was Just an Accident* winning the Palme d'Or.

"It's like madness," Farahani says. "All migrants, when they leave their country, they leave a big part of themselves behind. It's a grief you live for the rest of your life. We are all carrying...one trauma or the other, especially the traumas we pass to our children. Always it's the next generation that are the ones that can come out of this pain, somehow come out of the swamp that we are swimming in." ■

ALPHA SCREENS AT THE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE FILM FESTIVAL UNTIL 26 APRIL.