

T & C F I L M A G

# Stille Liebe

Secret Love

Antonia and Mikas see with their eyes,  
and they hear with their eyes too.

Antonia's and Mikas' eyes meet. It becomes the glance of two people in love.  
When you're in love – even if you can hear – listening with your eyes becomes  
one of those precious moments.

*(Christoph Schaub, Director)*

**SECRET LOVE**

# T & C F I L M A G

**A production by** T&C Film, Zurich/ Switzerland

**Producer** Marcel Hoehn

**Crew**

**Director** Christoph Schaub

**Screenplay** Peter Purtschert, Christoph Schaub

**Photography** Thomas Hardmeier

**Music** Antoine Auberson

**Editing** Fee Liechi

**Cast**

**Antonia** Emmanuelle Laborit

**Mikas** Lars Otterstetd

**Verena** Renate Becker

**Fritz** Wolfram Berger

Other roles: Renate Steiger, Roeland Wisnekker, Michael Neuenschwander.

**Location/Duration of shoot** Switzerland and USA/ 33 days

**Sponsored by** Bundesamt für Kultur des Eidgenössischen,  
Departementes des Innern, Stadt und Kanton Zurich,  
Kantone bei der Basel, Kulturfonds Suissimage,  
Succès Cinéma

**In collaboration with** Schweizer Fernsehen DRS and Teleclub

**Original version** German/ sign language, 35mm, colour, 90 min., Dolby SR

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## **Log-line**

Antonia, a deaf nun, falls in love with the deaf pickpocket, Mikas. The story ends in death for Mikas. But for Antonia it is the start of a new life.

## **Short résumé**

In order to be able to do her work in a centre for the homeless, Antonia (27), a deaf nun, has to make the daily journey from her convent to the city by train. She encounters Mikas (30). A new exciting world opens up for Antonia because, like herself, Mikas is also deaf. These two people, so different from each other, are able to converse in their common language – sign language.

Antonia and Mikas fall in love. However, what Antonia is not aware of is that Mikas is only pretending to be a circus artiste and has in fact come to Switzerland to make some ready cash as a pickpocket. A victim of his pickpocketing catches Mikas red-handed. In his attempt to escape, Mikas loses his life. Antonia is confused and disconsolate. What she went through with Mikas has had a deep effect on her and she now has the feeling that the world has once and for all opened up for her too. She resolves to start a new life and goes off to Washington DC to study at the Gallaudet University for the Deaf.

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## **Christoph Schaub** (*Screenplay and Direction*)

Born in 1958 in Zurich (Switzerland).

Joined the Mediengenossenschaft Videoladen Zurich in 1982 (until 1991).

From 1996 freelance mentor lecturer on realisation, field of study Film/Video, at the Higher School of Design, Zurich. 1997/98 Initiator and President of the Executive Committee of Kino RiffRaff, Zurich.

From 1987 a variety of short films and videos.

### **Films (selection)**

2001 STILLE LIEBE (feature), 88 min., 35mm

1999 DIE REISEN DES SANTIAGO CALATRAVA (documentary), 77 min., 35mm

1999 DAS VRIN-PROJEKT (documentary), 48 min., Beta-SP

1997 EINFACH SO (short feature), 13 min., 35mm

1996 LIEU, FUNCZIUN E FURMA - L'ARCHITECTURA DA P. ZUMTHOR E GION CAMINADA (documentary), 24 min., Beta-SP

1995 RENDEZ-VOUS IM ZOO (documentary), 82 min., 16mm und 35mm

1995 IL GIRASOLE - UNA CASA VICINO A VERONA (short documentary), 17 min., 35mm

1992 AM ENDE DER NACHT (feature), 88 min., 35mm

1989 DREISSIG JAHRE (feature), 88 min., 35mm

1987 WENDEL (feature), 58 min., 16mm

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## **Peter Purtschert** (*Script*)

Born 1958 in Lucerne (Switzerland).

Film journalist on: Die Wochenzeitung (Zurich), Jahrbuch CINEMA (Chronos-Verlag, Zurich), DOX (Bern & Kopenhagen).

From 1994: lecture courses at the HGK Zurich on Film & Video (History of Film, mentor on screenplays and projects) and in the field of fashion (History of Film). Representative for the Videothek of the HGK Zurich. Lives and works in Zurich.

## **Screenplays for feature films (selection)**

TATORT: TIME-OUT (TV 2001) Co-author: S. Witschi. Director: Bernhard Giger.

HAPPINESS IS A WARM GUN (2001). Director and Co-author: Thomas Imbach

STILLE LIEBE (2001). Director and Co-author: Christoph Schaub.

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## **Thomas Hardmeier** (*Photography*)

Born 1965 in Zurich (Switzerland).

1987-1990 camera assistant at Turnus Film

1990-1994 freelance camera assistant

Since 1996 freelance camera on a range of advertising commercials, music-videos as well as films, shorts, documentaries and feature films for cinema and TV.

### **Cinema (selection)**

2001 STILLE LIEBE by Christoph Schaub

2000 THELMA by Pierre-Alain Meier-

1999 MONDIALITO by Nicolas Wadimoff-

LES ÉLECTRONS LIBRES (short film) by Frédéric Mermoud

1998 ANGÉLIQUE (short film) by Samir

CONTRECOUP (Dance film) by P. Magnet-

LE CHEVALIER À LA ROSE (short film) by B. Piglet.

1996 TAXI SERVICE (short film) by E. Khalife and A. Monnier

### **TV (selection)**

2001 NEWSMAN by Ivan Butler

2000 15, RUE DES BAINS by Nicolas Wadimoff

1999 CHARMANTS VOISINS by Claudio Tonetti

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## Fee Liechi (*Editing*)

Born 1947 in Zurich (Switzerland).

From 1976 film editor on more than 30 films (documentaries and features).

Lives in Zurich.

### Films (selection)

- 2000/01      STILLE LIEBE by Christoph Schaub
- 1999            EINE REISE NACH GENF (documentary) by Irene Loebell
- 1998/99      DIE REISEN DES SANTIAGO CALATRAVA (documentary)  
by Christoph Schaub
- 1997            EINFACH SO (short film) by Christoph Schaub
- 1996/97      PROPELLERBLUME by Gitta Gsell
- 1995/96      SCHWARZE TAGE (documentary) by Benno Maggi
- 1995            IL GIRASOLE (documentary) by Christoph Schaub & Marcel Meili  
DEVILS DON'T DREAM (documentary) by Andreas Hoessli
- 1994            RENDEZ-VOUS IM ZOO (documentary) by Christoph Schaub
- 1993            DER KONGRESS DER PINGUINE (documentary) by H.-U. Schlumpf
- 1992            BIG BANG (documentary) by Matthias von Gunten
- 1991/92      AM ENDE DER NACHT by Christoph Schaub
- 1991            DER SECHSTE KONTINENT (documentary) by Benno Maggi
- 1990            DAEDALUS by Pepe Danquart
- 1989            DREISSIG JAHRE by Christoph Schaub
- 1987/88      MACAO by Clemens Klopfenstein
- 1985            DER SCHWARZE TANNER by Xavier Koller
- 1984            AKROPOLIS NOW by Hans Liechi
- 1981            DIE LEIDENSCHAFTLICHEN by Thomas Koerfer
- 1979            DAS GEFRORENE HERZ by Xavier Koller
- 1978            DER GALGENSTEIGER by Xavier Koller
- 1976            DAS UNGLÜCK by Georg Radanowicz

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## **Antoine Auberson (Composer)**

Born 1957 in Lausanne (Switzerland).

From 1973: self-taught instrumentalist on alto sax.

1978: First prize for composition at Montreux with Sebastian Santa Maria.

1980-83: studied saxophone at Conservatoire Bâle with Yvan Roth.

1986: concert tour with Carla Bley. Jazz arrangements in „Peter Gynt“ by Grieg for the Grand Théâtre Geneve.

1986: first film-music composition for « Le Rapport du Gendarme» by Claude Goretta.

1997: music arrangement for «A propos de ce temps“ for military fanfare, cordes harpe saxophone ensemble

## **Film music composition for Film s (selection)**

2001 STILLE LIEBE (feature) by Christoph Schaub

1999 A SYNAGUOGUE IN THE HILLS by Rickenbach

1998 FIN DE SIECLE by Champion

1997 FRIBOURG AUX 7 PORTES by Veuve

## **Composition for Theatre (selection)**

1999 ROI LEAR Shakespeare by Michel Grobety (Mézières)

L'AMI RICHE Zschokke by Philippe Mentha (Klebert-Meleau)

1992 LE PUIT DES SAINTS Synge by Bruce Meyers (Klebert-Meleau)

1986 LE MALADE IMAGINAIRE Molière by Philippe Mentha (Klebert-Meleau)

## **Recordings (discs) (selection)**

2000 TRANSBAHUTES by Antoine Auberson et collectif compositeurs

1997 A PROPOS DE CE TEMPS by Antoine Auberson

1995 COMEDY QUARET by Antoine Auberson

LES HERETIQUES by Stephane Blok

SALUS SYPUS by Alexandre Theus

1994 ESPERANZA NICOLAZON by Stephane Blok

1990 SAUTECROCHES by Marie Henchoz

1983 PIANO -DUO by Lindemann, Santa Maria



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## **Emmanuelle Laborit (*Antonia*)**

French Actress.

### **Films (Selection)**

- 2000 STILLE LIEBE by Christoph Schaub
  
- 2000 MARIE-LINE by Mehdi Charef with Muriel Robin
- 1999 RETOUR A LA VIE by Pascal Baeumler with Alain Bashung, Marisa Bereson
- 1996 UN AIR SI PUR by Yves Angelo
- LA VIE SILENCIEUSE DE MARIANNA UCRIA by Roberta Faenza with Philippe Noiret, Bernard Giraudeau, Laura Betti
- 1995 JENSEITS DER STILLE by Carolin Link with Howie Seago, Sylvie Testut
- SOURD A L'IMAGE (Documentary) by Brigitte Lemaine
- 1994 LE TOIT DU MONDE by Felipe Vega

### **TV (Selection)**

- 1996 LE PROPRE DE L'HOMME by Marc Rivière (France 2)
- 1995 L'OEIL ET LA MAIN – animatrice pour le lancement de l'émission (5e)
- 1993 BELLE DU SILENCE by Didier Epelbaum und Sonstant (France 2)
- 1989 LA NUIT MIRAULEUSE by Ariane Mnouchkine (FR3)
- 1982 LE THÉÂTRE DE LA MER by Simone Vannier (TF1)

### **Short films (Selection)**

- 1998 Advertising commercial for TITRA-FILM
- 1996 „1587“ by Yann Lebeaut
- 1995 LA CICALÉ ET LA FOURMI by Jean Dalric
- 1994 I LOVE YOU by Fernand Moszkowicz

### **Theatre (selection)**

- 1980 LE VOYAGE AU BOUT DU MÉTRO (Director: Ralph Robbins; Int. Visual Theater)
- 1992 LES ENFANTS DU SILENCE by Mark Medoff (Director: Jean Dalric and Levent Beskardes; Nouveau Theatre Moufflard)
- 1995 ANTIGONE by Sophocles for Festival d'Avignon (Director: Thierry Roisin)

### **Books**

- 1994 LE CRI DE LA MOUETTE Edition Robert Lafont

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## **Lars Otterstedt (*Mikas*)**

Swedish actor.

Worked as an actor with various international silent theatre groups.

### **Films (selection)**

2000 STILLE LIEBE by Christoph Schaub

### **Theatre (selection)**

1998 NIGHT MOTHER (Silent Theatre)  
Tour with THE BIG ROAD (Silent Theatre)

1997 NOT I FOR DEAF EARS by S. Beckett (Silent Theatre)  
THE TEMPEST (Silent Theatre)

1996 THE COLLECTOR by John Fowles (Silent Theatre)

### **Theatre (as Director and Asst. Director, selection)**

2000 RUT (Director, Silent Theatre)

2000 THE WIZARD OF OZ (Director, Silent Theatre)

1997 ADAM AND MOTHER (screenplay, director, actor. Silent Theatre.)

1996 NOT I FOR DEAF EARS (Silent Theatre)

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## **Renate Becker (*Verena*)**

German actress. Well known for roles on German theatre stages in German language films for cinema and TV.

### **Films (selection)**

- 2001 TATORT-HAVARIE (TV) by Sylvia Hoffman
- 2000 STILLE LIEBE (feature) by Christoph Schaub
- DREHKREUZ AIRPORT (TV) by Dieter Schlotterbeck
- UND D. I. ERST D. ANFANG (feature) Pierre Franckh
- 10 COMMANDMENTS ... (Engl. TV) by Hermann Vaske
- 1997 MAYDAY (Engl. TV) by Chris Bould
- 1995 TATORT-EULENBURG by Sylvia Hoffman
- 1991 ROTE ERDE (TV) Klaus Emmerich

### **Theatre ( selection)**

- 2000 KINDER DER SONNE (Director: Karin Henkel, Schauspielhaus Bochum)
- 1999 EINSAME MENSCHEN (Director: Uwe Dag, Schauspielhaus Bochum)
- 1997 MEISTERKLASSE (Director: Gert Becker Kammerspiele Düsseldorf)

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## Wolfram Berger (*Fritz*)

Austrian actor. Well known for roles in German language films for cinema and TV.

### Cinema (Selection)

- 2000 STILLE LIEBE by Christoph Schaub
- 1999 NICK KNATTERTON by Markus Rosenmüller, Niki List
- 1997 SUZIE WASHINGTON by Florian Flicker
- SCHLOSS by Michael Haneke
- 1995 STILLE WASSER by Max Linder
- 1994 EX by Mark Schlichter
- 1988 GEKAUFTES GLÜCK by Urs Odermatt
- ZABOU by Hajo Gies
- QUICKER THAN THE EYE by Nicolas Gessner
- 1985 AKROPOLIS NOW by Hans Liechi
- ZEITGENOSSEN by Ernst J. Lauscher
- 1981 DER RICHTIGE MANN by Dieter Berner - Leading role
- TRIO by Dominik Graf
- 1974 DER GEHÜLFE by Thomas Koerfer
- 1973 FLUCHTGEFAHR by Markus Imhof

### TV ( Selection )

- 1997 DIE BRÄUTE by Johannes Fabrick
- DIE BEISCHLAFDIEBIN by Christian Petzold
- STRASSE NACH ISTANBÜL by Peter Sämann
- SEXY LISSY by Peter Ily Huemer
- DIE KREUZFAHRT by Julian Pölsler
- 1995 ALLE HABEN GESCHWIEGEN by Norbert Kückelmann
- TOD DER ENGEL by Rainer Wolffhardt
- SCHNELLSCHUSS by Thomas Roth
- CUBA LIBRE by Christian Petzold
- 1994 AUF TEUFEL KOMM RAUS by Wolfgang Murnberger
- GEHEIME MISSION by Hajo Gies
- DIE JAHRE VERGEHEN by Peter Keglevics
- 1977 DER JAGDGAST by Fritz Lehner
- ALPENSAGA by Dieter Berner

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## Features and Documentaries for Cinema:

- 2001 SECRET LOVE (STILLE LIEBE) by Christoph Schaub. With Emmanuelle Laborit, Lars Otterstedt, Wolfram Berger. Release: Sommer 2001
- 1999 BERESINA or THE LAST DAYS OF SWITZERLAND (Beresina oder Die letzten Tage der Schweiz) by Daniel Schmid. CH/D/A. With Elena Panova, Geraldine Chaplin, Martin Benrath, Ulrich Noethen, Stefan Kurt (Official Selection UN CERTAIN REGARD Cannes 1999, Quality Award FDI)
- 1999 SANTIAGO CALATRAVA'S TRAVELS (Die Reisen des Santiago Calatrava) by Christoph Schaub. Documentary.
- 1999 COINCIDENCE IN PARADISE (Ein Zufall im Paradies) by Matthias von Gunten. Documentary. CH/A. (Quality Award FDI).
- 1998 BRAIN CONCERT by Bruno Moll. Documentary.
- 1998 FULL MOON (Vollmond) by Fredi M. Murer. CH/D/F. ('Grandprix' The World Film Festival Montreal 1998, Quality Award FDI)
- 1996 THE KNOWLEDGE OF HEALING (Das Wissen vom Heilen) by Franz Reichle. Documentary. (Quality Award FDI, Film Award Zurich).
- 1995 THE WRITTEN FACE (Das geschriebene Gesicht) by Daniel Schmid. Documentary-fiction. CH/J. (Quality Award FDI, Film Award Zurich).
- 1995 MEKONG by Bruno Moll. With Andrea Zogg, Sinta Tamsjadi.
- 1992 MEN OF THE SEA (Gente di Mare) by Bruno Moll. Documentary. (Quality Award FDI).
- 1992 OFF SEASON (Zwischensaison) by Daniel Schmid. CH/D/F. (Quality Award FDI, Film Award Zurich).
- 1987 THE WAY THINGS GO (Der Lauf der Dinge) by Peter Fischli and David Weiss. Shortfilm. (Study Award FDI).
- 1985 AFTER DARKNESS by Dominique Othenin-Girard and Sergio Guerraz. With John Hurt, Julian Sands, Victoria Abril. (Quality Award FDI, Comp. Berlin 1985).
- 1984 TOSCA'S KISS (Il Bacio di Tosca) by Daniel Schmid. Documentary-fiction. (Winner of several festival Awards, Quality Award FDI).
- 1983 THE RIGHT WAY (Der rechte Weg) by Peter Fischli and David Weiss. Short feature film. (Study Award FDI).
- 1982 HECATE by Daniel Schmid. CH/F. With Lauren Hutton, Bernard Giraudeau. (Quality Award FDI, Competition Berlin 1983).

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1981 LONELY HEARTS CALL VIDEO (Kassettenliebe) by Rolf Lyssy.  
With Emil Steinberger.

1978 THE SWISSMAKERS (Die Schweizermacher) by Rolf Lyssy.  
With Emil Steinberger and Walo Lüönd.  
One million spectators only in Switzerland. (Quality Award FDI).

## **Coproductions:**

2001 THE MARBLE ROAD (La Strada del Marmo) by Michael Trabitzsch.  
Documentary. D/CH.

1998 SECRET DEFENSE by Jacques Rivette. F/CH/I.

1997 THE TRUCE (La Tregua) by Francesco Rosi. I/F/CH/D. With John Turturro.  
In competition Cannes 97.

1996 THE CRY OF SILK (Le Cri de la Soie) by Yvon Marciano. F/CH/B.  
With Sergio Castellitto, Marie Trintignant, Anémone. (Quality Award FDI).

1993 BARNABO OF THE MOUNTAINS (Barnabo delle Montagne) by  
Mario Brenta. I/CH/F. (Competition Cannes 1994, Quality Award FDI).

## **Coproductions with TV (among others):**

1999 KLANGKÖRPER – The Swiss pavillon on the EXPO 2000 in Hannover  
by Bruno Moll. TV-Doc.

1999 DAS FEST DER HIRTEN by Bruno Moll. TV-Doc.

## **In production (selection):**

MOSTLY MARTHA (working title) by Sandra Nettelbeck. D/CH/A.  
with Martina Gedeck, Sergio Castellitto, Sybille Canonica. Release: 2001

MOTHER(working title) by Miklos Gimes. CH Documentary

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## Excerpts from a conversation with Christoph Schaub

*How did the idea for the story come about?*

Peter Purtschert, the scriptwriter, and I had two interests that we were able to combine – that of a dramatically intense love story, as well as an interest in the sign language. I've always been terribly interested in sign language, seeing it as a visual language in space. The sign language can be used to explain Einstein's Theory of Relativity just as well as it can be used to make a sophisticated declaration of love. It does just the same thing as an oral language. Moreover, sign language is international. Even though there may be over 50 different idioms, deaf people from all over the world can very quickly understand each other with the help of the 'International Sign Language'. So why not tell of a love story between two deaf people? A story that could happen to anyone – except that the main characters don't speak German, Chinese or French. They speak in sign language.

*What was behind the idea of a love film?*

Antonia yearns for one thing. She wants to lead the sort of life that she hasn't been allowed to up until now, or a life she hasn't allowed herself to lead. She's in the wrong place, wearing 'the wrong clothes'... . Love arouses this interest in her and gives her the courage to make a complete break in her life. Although Antonia's love for Mikas ends in tragedy, even that cannot stop her from taking her life into her own hands. You can perhaps say that true love is really only true if it becomes the cause of something and when things happen as a result ... .

*How long did it take to find the right cast for the film?*

As soon as I saw Emmanuelle Laborit acting, I knew immediately that she was right for the role of Antonia. Then, when I first met her personally in Paris, I was convinced that she was a stroke of luck as lead in the film. And her deportment is so beautiful – almost musical. As far as the part of Mikas was concerned, I also had very fixed ideas about what he should radiate. Apart from anything else, the script is relatively precise about his appearance. I searched throughout all European theatres for the deaf, but there was no actor who fit the outward appearance of the character of Mikas. It was finally the deaf director, Shan Mow of Santa Fe (USA), who tipped me off about Lars Otterstedt. I met Lars in Sunne in Central Sweden. After coffee together and a walk around a tiny lake, as well as a couple of camera tests, I knew that Lars was right for Mikas.

*Was there anything special about preproduction arrangements?*

Both leading actors, Emmanuelle Laborit and Lars Otterstedt, are deaf. They come from France and Sweden and use relatively diverse sign languages. So we needed two interpreters. For Emmanuelle we managed to find Christelle Feig of Strasbourg, who can speak German and French and has mastered the French sign language. For Lars we found Michel Dominick, a Swedish translator who also speaks English.

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We'd managed to arrange things so that I and all the others could communicate with the actors precisely and with no difficulty. Though it should be said that 'Secret Love' is a German language film. So Antonia also has to speak in the German sign language. During shoot preparations Emmanuelle Laborit worked with a deaf person from Berlin and learned the German sign language and how to shape certain German words on her lips.

Renate Becker plays Mother Superior Verena in the film. Since she's supposed to have accompanied Antonia for quite a number of years, she needs to know bits of sign language that she can use to help out in conversations with Antonia. So she took lessons in the German sign language.

Whenever Antonia and Mikas meet they use the International Sign Language (ISL).

This is the language deaf people use when they come from different countries. ISL can be easily learned by deaf people and they can very soon communicate with each other in it.

During two weeks of rehearsals in the run-up to the shoot Emmanuelle and Lars worked on their dialogue together in the International Sign Language (ISL).

*What was it like to work with deaf actors?*

Before the shoot I had two weeks of intensive rehearsals with Emmanuelle and Lars and very soon realised that I was dealing with two highly professional actors. The only noticeable difference was the presence of the two interpreters who made communication possible. The rehearsals removed any feelings of anxiety I'd had that there might be some sort of a 'Communication MCA', because we were able to converse and understand each other fast and efficiently in a precise manner. Emmanuelle and Lars were used to working with interpreters, and both were very quick to adapt to circumstances.

During rehearsals it only took me a few days to realise what an advantage it is to work with deaf actors. Emmanuelle and Lars concentrated on each other and their gentle manner also had a considerable effect on the set in general. Both of them had no difficulties in keeping calm and being concentrated despite all the hustle and bustle going on at times.

I was also full of admiration for the way they dealt with even the most complicated communicative situations on the set and, above all, coped with things so well. Even though there was a continual cacophony of German, French, English and sign languages, there was hardly any free-wheeling.

Usually the interpreters stood next to me and watched what was going on closely. Whenever I wanted to say something to the actors they would try to get eye contact with them. After that, arms, hands and fingers moved around translating what was asked for. That resulted in the gratifying feeling that we weren't just working in words but on a 'hands-on' basis!!

In the course of the shoot Emmanuelle, Lars and I found a direct means of communication. We worked out a wordless system of gestures, touches, movements and facial expressions that resulted in great understanding.

Another interesting thing was that Thomas Hardmeier, the camera man, and I often discussed cuts when we were setting up a scene. When two people talk in sign language, what is being said moves in space. So in no way do you have the opportunity of having parts of or even whole sentences in 'off'. Sign language that can't be seen can't be heard either! So we also used rehearsals to work out frames and dissolves that would give us maximum freedom in editing and so create an interesting rhythm.

When we were shooting close-ups of Lars and Emmanuelle we had to find a way of reducing the spatial scale of their sign language with each other.

This was especially strange for Lars because it was the first time he'd ever acted in film.



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Using sign language in a confined space, close in to a face, gave Emmanuelle and Lars the feeling that they always had to speak quietly and intimately with each other. It's the same process that a stage actor has to go through, who's standing right next to a camera speaking, and no longer on a stage where he has to project his voice so that the people in the back row can hear.

*Is 'Secret Love' the first film in which sign language is used?*

There are a few other films in which someone with the power of hearing meets a deaf person and a story develops out of it.

But, as Emmanuelle Laborit told me after reading the script, 'Secret Love' is the only feature film that actually tells the story of two deaf people and where sign language gets to be used as a matter-of-fact way of communicating in daily life.

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## The History of Sign Language

In the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century the Abbot of l'Epée had been observing deaf-mute beggars in Paris, who spoke to each other on the streets in gestures and signs.

To begin with, he believed he had come across a "universal language". It soon became clear to him that this language of deaf beggars could be a basis for educating deaf children.

In 1755 the Abbot of l'Epée founded the first school for the deaf.

There, under his supervision, they developed a language made up of the 'sign language of the gutters' as used by deaf beggars, and French grammar.

This sign language was to become very popular and soon spread quickly throughout Europe.

The Abbot of l'Epée died in 1789. By that time there were 21 schools for the deaf.

In 1816 Laurent Clerc, a deaf teacher of sign language, met the American, Edward Gallaudet – also a man of the cloth. And in order to do some research into sign language he, in turn, travelled across Europe.

Laurent Clerc resolved to travel to America with Edward Gallaudet and work for the deaf there.

In 1817 Laurent Clerc and Thomas Gallaudet founded the 'American Asylum for the Deaf' in Hartford. The American Sign Language' (ASL) was developed. The sign language and education for the deaf that went along with it became very popular.

In 1864 the American Congress issued a decree that bestowed the status of National College on the 'Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Blind'. The first university for the deaf had been established. This institution would later become known as the 'Gallaudet University'. Its first Rector was Thomas Gallaudet, son of Edward Gallaudet. (further details on: [www.gallaudet.edu](http://www.gallaudet.edu)).

From 1870 onwards it became the overwhelming opinion that the deaf should be taught how to speak. The so-called 'oralists' – all of them with hearing – fought with all their might against sign language. It was considered to be the language of the apes and unworthy for humans.

In 1880 a congress was held in Milan. Devotees of sign language were defeated by the 'oralists' thanks to the influence of their greatest supporter, Alexander Graham Bell. The deaf were prevented from taking part in the final decisive vote. As a result of this congress use of sign language was forbidden in various countries.

Even today sign language still does not enjoy that same degree of acceptance as it did in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. In France, for example, the law preventing the teaching of, and speaking in, sign language was first lifted in 1991.

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**Excerpts from the book THE CRY OF THE GULL by Emmanuelle Laborit  
(© 1998 by Gallaudet University, originally published as LE CRI DE LA  
MOUETTE © 1994 by Editions Robert Laffont, S.A., Paris France)**

## *Chapter 1, Secrets*

Words have struck me as odd ever since I was a child. I use the term odd because of the strangeness I initially saw in them. What did all those funny expressions on the faces of people around me mean? Their mouths were rounded or stretched in all sorts of grimaces. Their lips were twisted in weird shapes. I could feel something different when people were angry, sad, or happy, but an invisible barrier separated me from the sounds that corresponded to their facial expressions. It seemed like both a transparent sheet of glass and a concrete wall. My movements were confined to one side and theirs to the other. And when I tried to ape their expressions, I could only form letters, never words. Sometimes they taught me one-syllable words or words made up of two identical syllables like papa and mama.

The simplest of concepts were even more mysterious. Yesterday, tomorrow, today. My mind worked in the present. What did past and future mean?

I took a giant leap forward when, with the help of sign language, I understood that yesterday was behind me and tomorrow in front of me. That was huge progress. Hearing people can hardly imagine what it's like because they're used to having words and concepts endlessly repeated to them from infancy. They come to understand them without even being aware of it.

Later, I realized that other words referred to people. Emmanuelle was me. Papa was him. Mama was her. Marie was my sister. I was Emmanuelle, an individual. I had a name, therefore I existed.

[...]

## *Chapter 9, City of the Deaf*

I was just beginning to learn sign language when we left for Washington, D.C., the fantastic "city of the deaf."...

Going to Washington meant taking a plane. I had never flown before, and didn't know where I was headed. I knew it was on the other side of the ocean. But where? Who could explain Washington, D.C. to me? Actually, no one could when we were getting ready to go, but later, once we were there, it all became crystal clear.

The trip was arranged by Bernard Mottez, a French sociologist, and Harry Markowicz, an American linguist. With us were Bill Moody, Alfredo Corrado's interpreter with the IVT, Dominique Hof, a speech therapist, and deaf adults working with deaf children. The purpose of the trip was to learn how deaf Americans lived, to get to know their university, Gallaudet, and to see how they coped on a daily basis.

Claire was the only child my age in the group. She was a little blond girl, deaf like me, who became my closest friend. She was as lively as I was shy and reserved. I'll never forget the first time I saw her face. When our eyes met, the attraction was instantaneous. We were setting off together on an extraordinary adventure, both of us still unaware of the joys of discovery it held.

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The take-off frightened me. The ground rumbled as the wheels jolted along. I felt the plane shake and then a kind of air pocket, like an elevator going too fast. I felt crushed against the back of my seat.

Once we were in the air, I was okay. Claire and I sat quietly reading a Mickey Mouse book; then we slept until the plane began to land. That's when my ears started to hurt so much I wanted to bite the seat cushion. It was really painful and took me by complete surprise. I felt like I was going to explode. They told me to chew gum. I chewed and chewed, but the pain didn't subside. Claire didn't feel a thing, so she was wild with excitement.

Once we were on the ground, I started to feel better and the pain slowly went away. We were in New York. I can't remember much about it except for the skyscrapers.

Then we left for Washington, by bus this time. It was sunny and humid. We arrived at what seemed like a huge residence hall where my parents and Claire's had rooms.

Outside, I was amazed at what I saw. It was more than surprising; it was revolutionary! And then it hit me: I was in a city of deaf people. They were signing everywhere - on the sidewalks, in the stores, all over the Gallaudet University campus. Deaf people were all over the place. A store owner was signing to a customer, people were saying hello to each other and conversing in sign. I was really in a deaf city. I imagined that everyone in Washington was deaf. It was like landing on another planet where everyone was like me.

"Mommy, Daddy, look! Deaf people talking!"

There were two, three, four of them talking together, then five, six... I couldn't believe my eyes! I stared at them with my mouth wide open in disbelief. I was bowled over. It was mind-boggling. Groups of deaf people engaged in real conversation. That was something I had never seen before.

I tried to understand where I was and what was happening, but couldn't. Actually, there wasn't anything to understand except that I had been catapulted into a deaf world at the age of seven.

We took our first stroll around the Gallaudet campus. Alfredo Corrado explained that not everyone was deaf. It only seemed that way because, although many of the professors were hearing, they knew sign language. They weren't wearing labels on their foreheads. How could I recognize them? It didn't really seem to matter. They all looked so happy and relaxed. There wasn't the same reluctance I detected elsewhere, even at the school in Vincennes. In France, people were unconsciously embarrassed about using sign language, and I sensed that embarrassment. They would rather hide, as if it were something to be ashamed of. I know of deaf people who were tormented throughout their childhood by feelings of humiliation, and who even to this day haven't fully adjusted to their language. You can tell things haven't been easy for them, perhaps because sign language was prohibited in France until 1976. It was considered an indecent, provocative, sensual form of communication because it involved using the body.

But there was none of that feeling in Washington. No problems. Everyone was so wonderfully at ease. The people there used sign language in a natural way without being self-conscious about it. No one hid or felt ashamed. In fact, deaf people there had a certain pride. They had their culture and their language, like anyone else.

Bill Moody took us around the city and translated in French, English, ASL (American Sign Language), and LSF (Langue des Signes Française / French Sign Language) all at the same time. It was a fascinating display of gymnastics. I never figured out how he did it. Every country has its own sign language, as it does its own culture. But two deaf foreigners usually manage to understand each other fairly quickly. We have a sort of basic international code that allows us to catch on relatively easily. For example, people obviously eat with their

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mouths, not with their ears. So when you have a sign that involves opening your mouth and pointing to it with your finger, it's pretty clear what that means. The same is true for house. I didn't understand the first time someone said *home* to me in English. But as soon as they made the sign for "house," in the shape of a roof, I got it. As for abstract concepts and nuances, every sign language requires some getting used to, just like any foreign language.

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