

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2024/25 SEASON**



**ANATOMY OF A FALL**  
(Language: French, English)

Director: Justine Triet

UK Release: 2023

Running time: 151 minutes

Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 5 March 2025

“To fully understand a marriage, you need to be a part of it. And even then, it can seem as if the two partners are communicating in entirely different languages. This is literally the case in the marriage of successful German-born author Sandra (a phenomenal Sandra Hüller) and her French husband, aspiring writer Samuel (Samuel Theis), a union that is forensically and microscopically examined in Justine Triet’s gripping, sinuous, Cannes Palme d’Or-winning courtroom drama *Anatomy of a Fall*. Language – Sandra prefers to speak in English even though, at her husband’s behest, they live in France – is just one of the flashpoints for tension between the two.

These tensions might have just simmered on privately and indefinitely, within the walls of the couple’s partially renovated alpine chalet, but for the fact that Samuel is found dead, discovered by the couple’s visually impaired 11-year-old son, Daniel (a terrific, painfully conflicted turn from talented young actor Milo Machado Graner), having fallen from the attic window. An inconclusive inquest into the death can’t rule out the possibility that he was pushed. And so Sandra finds herself on trial, with her child called as one of the key witnesses in the case. The flaws and fault lines in her relationship with Samuel are exposed and picked over by a tenacious prosecution lawyer (Antoine Reinartz) and repackaged as evidence for her guilt.

Perhaps more than most genres, the courtroom drama succeeds or fails on the strength of its screenplay. And here, with its layered and rewardingly intricate script co-written by Triet and her husband, Arthur Harari, this solid, unshowy film excels. Nodding to courtroom dramas such as *Kramer vs Kramer* and Otto Preminger’s *Anatomy of a Murder* (an inspiration in more than just title), and to the more recent example of Alice Diop’s compelling *Saint Omer*, it’s a slippery thing, a teasingly complex framework that repeatedly tips the audience off balance and taps into our biases and assumptions.

Triet seeds the film with questions about society’s profound discomfort around a woman who takes what she wants from life. A genre that can be prone to stuffiness and overly waffly dialogue, the courtroom drama here is electric,

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2024/25 SEASON**



restlessly dynamic and compulsively watchable, with only a few rare moments in which the film's throttling hold on the audience loosens. It's a considerable step up for Triet, whose previous work includes the frothy, more overtly comic *In Bed with Victoria* and the uneven character study *Sibyl*.

Marriage, the film suggests, is like a mosaic. One or two highly coloured tiles might catch the eye but they can't, on their own, show the whole picture. The reports we get of Sandra and Samuel's life together (there is only one flashback in the film; most of what we learn comes from the evidence presented in the court) suggest a relationship that gets chillier and spikier by the minute. But then the prosecution's case relies on cherry picking the trauma and the deep-seated unhappiness in the marriage, and foregrounding the character traits in Sandra that might make her capable of murder. A choice of other, sunnier moments, as Sandra reasonably points out, would paint an entirely different picture of her relationship with her husband.

Even with that in mind, however, there's plenty of ammunition for the prosecution. As with *Saint Omer*, it's more than just a woman on trial here. Just as Diop's drama wove into its court case an examination of race, class and the status of the female migrant in French society, so Triet seeds the film with questions about divisions of labour, about the role of the wife within marriage and about society's profound discomfort around a woman who not only takes what she wants from life, but refuses to apologise for it.

The fact that Sandra prioritises her career over her share of the childcare, cannibalises her own life and those of others for her writing (a theme that links back to Triet's previous film, *Sibyl*) and unashamedly admits to having bisexual relationships during her marriage doesn't make her guilty of murder. But neither does it conform to the role of victimhood that the accused woman is expected to play. Triet further supports this perception by frequently placing the camera slightly below Sandra – subliminally suggesting that she is a powerful, dominating, even threatening presence – rather than above her, looking down.

Did she do it? It's worth mentioning that when Hüller asked the director this question, Triet refused to say, claiming that she herself didn't know the answer. Ultimately, one of the key pleasures of the picture is its uncertainty – the niggling doubts that remain, and the sense that a crucial piece of the puzzle is tantalisingly out of reach.”

**Wendy Ide, *Observer*, Sunday 12 November 2023**

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY  
2024/25 SEASON**



\*\*\*\*\*

“French director Justine Triet’s *Anatomy of a Fall* has the shape of a mystery, but it’s an investigation into the dynamics of marriage rather than the whodunnit it resembles. While it’s not adapted from a novel or real-life case, it feels condensed from one. (It’s 2 and ½ hours long.) *Anatomy of a Fall* only makes glancing references to true crime in the form of a short clip of a talk show discussing accused killer Sandra’s (Sandra Hüller) case. Still, the trial-by-media numerous female celebrities have undergone and the rise in amateur sleuths dissecting women’s behavior are on its mind. Sandra’s skill as a novelist and freedom to sleep with both men and women get used against her once she’s on the stand.

After Daniel (Milo Machado-Graner) loses his sight in an accident, his parents’ relationship hangs on by a thread. Pressed to move to her French husband Samuel’s (Samuel Theis) hometown in the Alps, Sandra (Sandra Hüller) feels antsy. She has cheated on him within the past year. “Anatomy of a Fall” begins with her giving an interview to a student while Samuel tries to drown them out by blasting an instrumental version of 50 Cent’s “P.I.M.P.” at full volume on an infinite loop. Facing this aggressive gesture, she gives up on the interview. Hours later, Samuel’s body lies dead in the snow. In a possible suicide, the man fell from their house. A year later, Sandra stands trial, accused of his murder.

The audience doesn’t learn that Sandra is bi till the prosecutor (Antoine Reinartz) brings her sexuality up. He offers a bizarre interpretation of her interview in the opening scene as a seduction attempt. His imagination turns towards the lurid. Similarly, he interprets her novels as if they’re unvarnished recollections of her life rather than art informed by her own experiences. As sexist as he is, *Anatomy of a Fall* both shows how moments removed from a person’s life could look damning and scatters information from Sandra and Samuel’s marriage without giving us the full picture.

When first shown, Sandra’s interview sounds completely banal. Her remark that running makes her feel like she’s high on drugs, followed by the student asking “What do you know about drugs?”, is obviously a flippant throwaway. Yet when she’s later suspected of staging a suicide attempt by poisoning her husband with an overdose, this could be seen to have sinister overtones. In fact, the interview was not an attempt at a seduction or a guarded confession, but it’s possible to take it — or many other moments of Sandra’s life — out of context and try to use it as evidence of villainy.

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY  
2024/25 SEASON**



Triet and Arthur Harari’s script doles out information at regular beats. That’s the film’s weakest element: It feels as though the writers decided that the audience needs certain bits of information at an hour, then a new piece half an hour later, and so on. The decision to interrupt courtroom testimony with a flashback to Sandra and Samuel’s tense argument feels coy when it cuts the image just before a physical fight begins. Their anger is blisteringly raw and believable, creating one of the best scenes in a film you’ll see this year, but the decision to omit any evidence of who struck who is a manipulative conclusion.

The film’s ambiguity comes with the downside of relishing the fact that it knows more than the spectator. Sandra looks like a person with an ordinary set of flaws, while Samuel is completely unsympathetic. The courtroom scenes are stripped down, showing a documentary influence. (The title paraphrases Otto Preminger’s 1959 courtroom drama *Anatomy of a Murder*.) The drama of these scenes emerges in long scenes instead of being forced into *Law and Order* [an American TV drama - **Dorchester Film Society**] - ready shape, although the prosecutor is written as a rather one-dimensional villain.

Triet’s previous film, *Sybil*, explored attraction between women with a scattered tone and less impact, but it was preoccupied with the manipulation inherent in filmmaking. *Anatomy of a Fall* seems more confident, yet less honest than the more lurid impulses of *Sybil*. Her fourth feature, it won the top prize at Cannes last May. Still, both *Sybil* and *Anatomy of a Fall* leave a nagging sensation that Triet is torn between genre and arthouse impulses. Although the plot of *Anatomy of a Fall* is similar to the premise of Paul Verhoeven’s *Basic Instinct*, in which a bisexual female novelist is suspected of murder, its studied ambiguity and careful hints race away from this story’s pulpier connotations despite its lack of subtlety. *Anatomy of a Fall* wants to profit from flirting with the thriller without embracing it, and it almost gets away with it.”

**Steve Erikson, *Gay City News*, October 13, 2023**

\*\*\*\*\*

Justine Triet, director of *Anatomy of a Fall*, talks to Jonathan Romney in a provocative interview about women on trial and working with her husband.

“You see some films, and they’re interesting,” says the French director Justine Triet, “and then there are others that affect you in a very violent way.” It’s fair

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2024/25 SEASON**



to say that Triet's latest film, *Anatomy of a Fall*, has affected viewers, and her own life, intensely. In May, she went from being simply a well-respected rising auteur to a *Cannes Palme d'Or* winner – and a figure of national controversy.

*Anatomy of a Fall* has scored more than a million admissions at the French box office. The film has galvanised audiences with its depiction of the conjugal stresses between a woman and a man, both fiction writers; the drama centres on the courtroom inquiry after the man falls to his death from a window of their home.

“I couldn't have anticipated the response,” says Triet, 45, speaking in French on Zoom. Vaguely resembling Amy Adams in big 80s-style glasses, she talks fast and with an intensity that suggests a Sorbonne academic rushing to make an intervention at a high-pressure convention. “What amazed me was how people would come up and talk to me about themselves. They'd say, ‘That's my life, I've been through that,’ or ‘I'm going through it right now.’”

Courtroom dramas are notoriously prone to be stiff and stagey, but Triet set out to remake the genre. “I wanted to do something très homemade,” she says, slipping into English, “and very French. I wanted to dive deep into the question of the couple, but through the perspective of the justice system.” The hearing in *Anatomy* unpicks the domestic arrangements of writer Sandra (the extraordinary German actor Sandra Hüller, of *Toni Erdmann* fame), her husband (Samuel Theis), and their precociously insightful 11-year-old son (compelling newcomer Milo Machado Graner). The drama becomes an inquiry into gender roles and the demands of the creative life, with Sandra manifestly on trial as a woman, a mother and a partner, as much as a murder suspect.

Triet's lead characters – notably in her 2016 comedy *In Bed with Victoria* and its psychodrama follow-up *Sibyl* – have been intellectually complex women who make no bones about their powerful sexuality. In *Anatomy*, Sandra's bisexuality becomes a key piece of evidence in court. “When they can't find enough evidence against her, they look at her lifestyle. They end up dissecting her as someone who's not afraid to act, let's say, egotistically, as they see it.”

Triet is only the third female film-maker to win the *Palme d'Or*, after Jane Campion for *The Piano* and France's Julia Ducournau for *Titane*. “J” is the key letter, Triet jokes: “Jane, Julia and me – and Jane Fonda, who presented me with my *Palme*.” But in a sense, like her protagonist, Triet found herself on trial after her win. In her acceptance speech at Cannes, she took the opportunity to support protests against the Macron regime and to criticise the French government for a “commercialisation of culture” that threatened its continued support of national

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2024/25 SEASON**



cinema. France's minister of culture, Rima Abdul Malak, responded in a furious tweet that she was "flabbergasted" by Triet's comments, and subsequently called her "ungracious and ungrateful", given the director's own access to state funding. Others piled on Triet, including the mayor of Cannes, who called her a "spoiled child".

Triet doesn't regret speaking out. "I'm quite shy, and when you're shy and you speak up, you have to do it forcefully. I stand behind my words. I've been able to succeed thanks to a system of film finance that's the envy of the world. I wanted to say, let's protect that and think of future film-making generations."

More recently, some have speculated that Triet has been punished for her forthrightness, as *Anatomy* has been passed over as France's entry for the Academy Awards in favour of the more traditional (but still mightily impressive) *The Taste of Things*, (aka *The Pot-au-Feu*), by Vietnamese-born director Tran Anh Hung. Triet shrugs. "I'm not on the committee, I don't know what happened. I don't want to spit on the film they selected, I admire Tran Anh Hung, but it was a huge disappointment."

Even so, on her Instagram feed, Triet reposted someone's criticism of the Oscars decision. "I hadn't read the post before I shared it," she said, with what sounds like an embarrassed laugh. But she adds, "I had nearly 6,000 messages in two days. The number of people in France and abroad who said it was an injustice ..."

Such comments may not be accepted awards-season etiquette, especially from a *Palme d'Or* laureate. But for years, Triet was a marginal figure in French cinema – a struggling documentarist before she turned to fiction. When she started out, she says, "I didn't feel that French cinema particularly wanted me around, I felt all the places were already taken."

She grew up in Paris, one of three children, and spent much of her childhood in a Buddhist community. "There would often be two, three hundred people around, from all over Europe. It was a very unusual upbringing, and very enriching."

Triet originally wanted to be a painter, and enrolled in Paris's *École des Beaux-Arts* while working as a theatre usher. Then she discovered documentary: the great French and American practitioners like Frederick Wiseman, Jean Rouch, Shirley Clarke. She studied editing and taught herself the rudiments of film-making, starting off by buying herself a microphone, because someone told her, "It doesn't matter how rubbish your pictures are, but you need to have good sound."

**DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY**  
**2024/25 SEASON**



She began making documentaries on political themes, including labour protest and a social centre in São Paulo. That practice fed into her fiction debut *La Bataille de Solférino* (*Age of Panic*, 2013), a comedy about a journalist juggling her work and home life; set against the 2012 presidential elections, it used documentary footage that Triet shot on the sly. Her next two films, both starring French box-office regular Virginie Efira, were very different. *In Bed with Victoria* was a sleek, lifestyle sex comedy; *Sibyl* a hothouse comedy-melodrama about a psychotherapist who gets too close to a patient's private life.

Both *Sibyl* and *Anatomy* were co-written with Triet's partner, Arthur Harari, himself a highly praised director who also plays bit parts in her films. They live in Paris with their two daughters. Triet denies that the domestic agonies in *Anatomy* in any way depict her own home life: "We're not so self-obsessed as to think it's about us." I mention that Vanity Fair recently profiled her and Harari as French cinema's new "power couple", and she all but shrieks.

"Aaargh, I hate that idea! The whole idea of the couple is something I can't stand. I don't think it's natural to live as a couple, I'm constantly reinventing the way I live. The whole idea of being with some guy, living together, having children ... We're not into this whole successful story thing," she adds, and slips into English again: "What a nightmare!" In any case, she says, she and Harari don't plan to write together again.

While *Anatomy of a Fall* is certainly a film to be reckoned with, it's not that easy to get a handle on just what kind of director Triet is; her films are so completely different, notwithstanding their consistent feminist themes. *Anatomy* star Sandra Hüller, who also appeared in *Sibyl*, says of Triet: "Her intelligence is overwhelming." But since their last collaboration, Hüller says, "She's let go more. She's more interested in things that happen without planning. The direction she'd give most often was, 'It's too perfect – make it more chaotic.'"

Like *Anatomy*'s heroine, Triet seems destined to perplex those around her – certainly critics inclined to try to pin her down. There is one principle she follows, however. "I like what François Truffaut said: 'Always make each film against your last one.' It doesn't mean you don't like the last one – it's just about discovering something different."

***Observer*, Sunday 22 October 2023**