

# Eyes Wide Open: *Henry & June*

Revisiting Philip Kaufman's bold adaptation of Anaïs Nin's literary classic

After the critical and commercial success of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, writer/director Philip Kaufman gained Universal Studios' backing for a project he'd long been contemplating, *Henry & June*, an adaptation of Anaïs Nin's account of her tempestuous relationships with American novelist Henry Miller and his wife June in Paris in 1931. Long interested in the two writers, Kaufman had met Nin when she had visited the University of Chicago in 1962 and had sought out Miller in the 1970s after he'd relocated to San Francisco.

Co-written with his wife, Rose and produced by his son Peter, *Henry & June* was a natural follow-up to *Unbearable Lightness*. Similarly based on a well-regarded literary source, set within an historic milieu, and featuring a love triangle between a "brilliant rakish man, a small and demure woman, and a bombshell," Universal presumably thought the project a safe bet. But when the new film didn't emerge as anticipated the situation changed. Although some critics praised the film for its artistry and ambition, others compared it unfavourably to the earlier film, finding the characters narcissistic, the love triangle less compelling, and the narrative events less consequential. The film also ran afoul of the US ratings board. The sexually frank *Unbearable Lightness* had been passed with the restrictive but still viable R-rating, but the board were notably less comfortable with *Henry & June*. The solution was to create a new ratings category, NC-17, intended to be a non-pornographic adults-only classification it still proved the kiss of death at the domestic box office. Many cinemas chose not to screen it, and the ubiquitous Blockbuster who dominated the US video rental market refused to stock it. The film performed poorly and was considered a failure.

Over three decades since its original release the film is still an anomaly. A thoughtful, artistic adults-only film about desire, love, and sex by a

notable director produced by a Hollywood studio. Sharing these characteristics with possibly only one other film, *Eyes Wide Shut*, it remains virtually unique. But while Kubrick's film has long been available for repeat viewings and reappraisal, *Henry & June* has had no such opportunity.



Rarely shown since its initial release, it's also been conspicuously absent from streaming catalogues and high-definition media platforms, making it difficult to see. This is a tremendous loss because there's much to admire in Kaufman's bold and audacious project. To start, it's gorgeous to look at, arguably one of the most beautifully photographed films ever made. The cinematography by Philippe Rousselot is truly exquisite, and Guy-Claude François' iconic 1931 Paris is a marvel of production design. The attention to detail and sense of time and place are exhilarating, and there's a sensuous dreamlike quality to the film that matches the associative, sometimes meandering prose of the book. The titular characters played by



Fred Ward and Uma Thurman are deliberately stylised, larger-than-life. In contrast Maria de Medeiros (Anaïs) and Richard E. Grant (Hugo) ground the film with characterisations that are subtle and nuanced. There's also a clear feminine voice throughout, undoubtedly the result of co-screenwriter Rose

Kaufman's participation. If there's an underlying problem it's possibly that the screenplay, loyal to the book, also reflects its rambling, episodic structure. This weakens the narrative and strains the film's 136-min running time. It also necessitates two third-act inventions – the carnival sequence, and a love/confrontation scene between Anaïs and June, to resolve the story. These scenes benefit the film, but also highlight the central challenge for the Kaufman's: how to articulate the complexity of Anaïs' relationships in the language of cinema.

*Henry & June* is a project few artists could have attempted and even fewer could have realised. If there are imperfections, they're far outweighed by the numerous pleasures. It's also as fearless as they come. With Hollywood still unwilling to finance adult-themed films, it remains as bold and audacious today as when it was made. What more could we want from our films and filmmakers?

Geoffrey M. Badger  
February 2023  
geoff@lostreeks.co.uk

# Maria de Medeiros remembers *Henry & June*



*LostReels met with actress Maria de Medeiros last month to discuss Henry & June. Here's what she had to say.*

**LR:** Tell me, how did you first get involved with the project?

**MdM:** I'd been studying in Paris for one or two years and there was a very important casting director, Margot Capelier, a very important person in French cinema, who saw me in the theatre. She was working with Phil Kaufman and told him, 'There's this girl, she looks just like Anaïs Nin'. That's how Phil and I met, and it was a very important artistic encounter. Since I knew very little about Anaïs Nin it was also a very quick immersion into her world and her writing. But it was really the physical resemblance that started it. What's very interesting is that in the film they used both her original photos and photos of me, and there was no perceptible difference.

**LR:** Phil Kaufman introduced the film at the Paris Cinémathèque a couple of years ago with Phillippe Rousselot and made the comment that everything fell into place after finding you.

**MdM:** Meeting Phillippe Rousselot was also fantastic. I missed that screening in Paris, but I saw Phil two days later and was so happy to see him and Peter [Kaufman] after so many years. I remember all the department heads for the film, they were really brilliant, they chose all the brilliant people. Of course, Philippe Rousselot has an amazing eye. He's an artist with light and cinematography, and a very sensitive person. Also Guy-Claude François the Production Designer. The clothes were incredible. Most of them were either reproductions, or actual clothes from the thirties, so very precious. Everything was done to the very highest level, so

it was an incredible privilege. And those friendships have stayed over the years, with Philippe Rousselot, with Phil and Peter Kaufman.

**LR:** What are your memories of Fred Ward? There was a huge outpouring of sadness when he passed away last year.

**MdM:** He was such a wonderful partner, it was lovely working with him. He was a very sweet man, and he was passionate about his character. It was his dream to play Henry Miller and he put so much into it. For me as a young European actress it was very interesting. It was my first time working with American actors and their methods, and also British - Richard E. Grant was wonderful - and Uma. It was such a lovely group of actors with different backgrounds, but it all melded very well, because that's also what the film's about. That moment in European history of great open mindedness and the desire to exchange ideas. That cosmopolitan feeling of Paris in those years was reflected in the group of actors and technicians the film brought together.

**LR:** It's an absolutely stunning production and I'm delighted we're screening it in 35mm. I don't think it's been shown in England since it was first released.

**MdM:** I couldn't believe it because after all these years it's left such a mark on so many people. In countries I've never been, even more than *Pulp Fiction*, people bring up *Henry & June*. Women especially. It's a film that's left a very, very strong mark, and even after all these years people are thrilled to talk to me about it. It's

incredible that although it has more or less disappeared from circulation it remains in people's minds. Which is art really.

**LR:** What are your memories of the shoot? You're in almost every scene.

**MdM:** I remember we shot for four months. It was very long, I'd never done such a long shoot, I had only one or two days off. But in my mind, it's very related to youth. I was Anaïs Nin's age - she was also very young when she went out to devour the world - and I was in the same state of mind. I was ready to work like crazy and discover the world in artistic ways. I hope some of that has stayed with me, but what was very clear at the time was the marriage of our youths - the character's and mine.



On the set of *Henry & June* with director, Phil Kaufman

**LR:** Any final thoughts on the legacy of the film?

**MdM:** Someone I'd like to mention is Rose Kaufman. She was Phil Kaufman's partner and Peter Kaufman's mother, and it was beautiful to see how this triangle functioned. The value they gave, and very much Rose, to the literary qualities of cinema. They had just finished *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, which was also a very literary project. I know it was very important for Rose to talk about feminine perspectives on love, desire, on relating to society, and to the world. She was very modern. It was important for her to put a feminine imprint on the work, and sure enough, she's very present in this film.

Special thanks to Maria de Medeiros. The complete transcript for this interview can be found on the [lostreels.co.uk](http://lostreels.co.uk) website.