

Film Notes

by Claire Bowman

Slalom

When inexperienced 15-year-old Lyz (Noée Abita) is accepted onto a prestigious ski-training programme for future competitive athletes, she is pushed to her physical and emotional limits by her ex-champion coach, Fred (Jérémy Renier). This debut feature film by director Charlène Favier centres on the relationship between a motivated teenage athlete and her trainer, and echoes many recent stories of sexual exploitation from young women in the international sporting community.

Favier began writing the screenplay with Marie Talon in 2014. *Slalom* is not autobiographical, but it was shot in Favier's birthplace — Les Arcs in the Savoie region of France — and Favier herself trained in high performance sports as a teenager. In an interview with *Cineuropa*, she spoke of being 'subjected to certain forms of violence and certain kinds of grips in my teenage years, so I really needed to talk about that.' By the time the #MeToo movement began, the script was almost complete.

Many sporting sexual abuse scandals have come to light in recent years, especially in France. Favier was careful to avoid telling a 'manichean and caricatural story because I wasn't simply trying to

France, Belgium | 2021 | 92m | 18 | subtitles

Director: Charlène Favier

Starring: Noée Abita, Jérémy Renier, Marie Denarnaud

paint the portrait of a victim and her tormentor,' she told *Cineuropa*. 'It was very important to be in a nuanced discourse and to show all the kinds of ambivalences and ambiguities that could enrich the characters.' At the same time, she was acutely aware of the difficulties of the subject matter, and so interviewed many victims, determined to tell their story.

In line with this, director of photography Yann Maritaud shot *Slalom* almost entirely from Lyz's perspective. Whether it's warm red moments of intimacy, or harsh mountain blues of racing through ice-cold wind, we remain tied to her experience. For the skiing scenes, Favier hired a specialist cameraman to follow the skiers at professional pace, to heighten the heady sensorial focus on Lyz.

20-year-old Noée Abita first made an impact on French cinema in 2017 when she starred in *Ava*, which won awards at the Cannes Film Festival. In 2018, Favier cast her in the short film *Odol Gorri*, and offered her the part of Lyz



Excellent

Fair

Poor

What did you think of the film? Please mark or tear the number.

Please add any further comments here:

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at the wrap party. To prepare physically for the athleticism of the part, Abita trained with skiing coach Emilie Socha. 'It allowed me to get a feel for the day-to-day of these kids who do an enormous amount of exercise and whose bodies change,' she said. Psychologically, she and Favier were united: 'Charlène and I talked so much about this subject ... that we were in total harmony. We didn't even need to practice the scenes.'

Starring opposite Abita is established 39-year-old Belgian actor Jérémie Renier (*Brotherhood of the Wolf* (2001), *In Bruges* (2008)). Renier was Favier's first choice for the part, because 'he physically inhabits all the characters he plays and completely transforms himself.' Like Abita, Renier undertook strenuous physical training to prepare himself, but

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it was the psychological aspects of the character that were the real challenge. 'I sometimes needed to vent, to understand, to talk and ask how someone could reach that point,' he said. 'I had some major wake-up calls, and then sometimes, I set my conscience aside in order to play the role.'

Slalom has been unanimously praised for its exceptionally convincing performances, and for telling a familiar story in a singularly gripping way — *IndieWire*'s David Ehrlich said that it 'snaps across your face like a blast of cold mountain air'. Writing in *Variety*, Jessica Kiang noted that 'it's a difficult but necessary watch' — hopefully one that will yet be seen by a much wider audience.

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