

CHARLOTTE GAINSBOURG

A WORLD OF HER OWN.

WORDS *Elle Glass*

LARS VON TRIER MAKES the kind of films that deter. There's not really a better word for it. Yes, you watch them and yes they are good but that doesn't mean by any stretch that they are easy to watch, to sit still in front of. Anyone who has sat part or all of the way through *Antichrist* can vouch for that. His latest effort, *Melancholia*, took us four attempts. That's not to say it wasn't brilliant, that it wasn't so perfect in its execution it was near surreal. It was just, well, hard. The single thing that made it a little easier, though, was Charlotte Gainsbourg.

While the same could be said for *Antichrist*, in this effort she is not being pummelled by – or pummelling – Willem Dafoe. Instead, she brings the relief of the familiar: she is beautiful and articulate; heavy fringed, impeccably polite and delicately graceful – all that we think her to be.

"The shoot was tough, it wasn't some kind of holiday," Gainsbourg tells us of *Melancholia*. Without spoiling anything, it's a film about the end of the world by the hands of a planet called Melancholia; of a not-quite bride (Kirsten Dunst) plagued by a depression so heavy it's like wet wool wrapped around her legs and her older sister (our Gainsbourg) who is charged with Dunst's care. That's vague, yes, but we feel any more would deter – there's that word again – from the astounding painterliness of this film. It's like a carefully-pruned bougainvillea, one so close to out of control it makes you hold your breath and wait for the moment when a single flower will break rank and unleash chaos.

As she slips French words where their English counterparts should fall and then doubles back to correct herself, to make herself clear, you get the feeling Gainsbourg is as far from the character Von Trier coaxed out of her as possible. She is decidedly capable, not easily deterred. She is the kind of woman who seeks out those instances, those circumstances that are hard and fierce – like an intimate audience with a director like Von Trier – deliberately and with precision. When on the *Antichrist* set, she had the man later be declared a Persona Non Grata at Cannes all to herself – this time around she had to share him with "100 extras or so". "It was much harder. Much, much harder."

As the older sister, Gainsbourg's character is the one who has to hold it all together as her world patiently awaits its fate. She's the carer, the mother, the one who isn't suffering from a black cloud holding her to her bed sheets. Here's the catch though: in a pearl necklace and with a voice that barely breaks above a whisper, she simply can't, and as a result, Gainsbourg, frame after frame, has the power to break your heart as her character loses her grip on what she had once so diligently tamed.

"It was as if he was putting all of his insides on the table," she says of Von Trier. Trying to pin its theme down, she says "it's difficult".

At its soul, she tells us, it's about fear – the fear of not being able to

control what you once had a firm grip on; the fear of the inevitability of what is so obviously hurtling towards you, or, worse still, what you are already surrounded by, be it the weight of wet wool or otherwise. When shooting the world's end, Von Trier insisted on a close-up of her own making. She was allowed to request whatever conditions she chose – special music, to hold his hand, whatever – and then to run with it. "He didn't even know what he wanted. He wanted to be surprised by a reaction that would feel truthful to him in those last moments. There is something that's very wild about our own fears."

This instruction, says Gainsbourg, sent her into a panic. "It's awful when someone says, OK go and surprise me. I find it the most difficult thing to do because you're free to do anything ... I like having barriers. I'm not wild at all, I love barriers. I find my own freedom inside when I know that there's a limit, so I'll try and push that limit if I can but I find it's easier to have imagination inside something that's closed. If it's too open, I feel lost."

When playing a scene, she explains, you have the limits of that scene. "You know the start of the scene, the end of the scene, and inside it you find you can do whatever you want ... It may seem like very limited freedom but you can do the whole scene laughing if you want. You can do the opposite way of what you're supposed to do if you want. You can try to push the limits of the thing, try to end it, try to improvise, to change the thing, but you still have those limits, and you're still controlled by the director. He knows what's going to happen in the end."

"Maybe," she muses after a pause, "that's why I have difficulty writing? Starting from scratch on a blank page is completely terrifying."

There is something in being so exposed, so unaided and alone. Gainsbourg, though, has been far from alone. Von Trier's presence aside, she's had the guidance of, among others, her father Serge Gainsbourg and her mother Jane Birkin. "I've learnt from everyone. I take from everything that's around me. Of course my parents, my father at the beginning of my life, but now? I don't know."

It's this "I don't know" that hints at the ingénue, at the unfettered freedom that comes from fixing your eyes on whatever you please, from walking your own path. She has, she says, always treasured "being a little naïve". "It's important for me. I'm happier being naïve rather than having doubts." It's more, she says, about insulation than ignorance. "There's a word in French, I don't know, it's of being too aware ... There's something I enjoy in being naïve about certain things. I think it gets me in a very positive way of looking at things. I can still be in my own world, and not worry about people. It doesn't mean I trust people, it's just that I have my own world."

Deterring anything bar her own world, if you will. **S**



Melancholia hits cinemas nationally, 15 December. For more, see www.melancholiamovie.com.au. Many thanks to Madman Entertainment. Getty Images.