



# The midwife

**Director:** Martin Provost

**Country:** France

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**A interview with Catherine Deneuve from *The Independent* by Kaleem Aftab:**

Catherine Deneuve is asking her entourage to make the hotel room in Berlin as comfortable as possible. In French she states, “Can you lower the temperature, it’s hot.’ It is snowing outside. They quickly appease the iconic French actress. One of the pleasures of interviewing Deneuve is that she is always to the point, sometimes blunt and very astute. She says what she means and is happy to contradict questions if she deems that they are missing the point, or more accurately, her point of view. These are fabulous attributes for an actor, and an interviewee, although they might not be so good if you’re in her employ. In any case, something seems to be bothering Deneuve, who starts off the interview about her new film, *The Midwife*, in a decidedly frosty mood.



*The Midwife* is a story of an unlikely friendship between two women who are connected through the deceased father of the midwife. They are at the opposite ends of the personality spectrum. Béatrice likes gambling in casinos and in her own life. Frot’s Claire is a single mother, who frets about the future and the demise of the small practice where she works.

Behind the main friendship there is a tale of hospital closures and a fear about the direction that health care policy is heading. The story has particular resonance for director Martin Provost whose film *Seraphine* swept the Cesar awards in 2008, as the efforts of a midwife stopped him from dying at birth. The film is even dedicated to that midwife.

But Deneuve, who transfers to perfect English once the interview starts, dismisses any deeper reading of the movie: “Why does the movie have to mean something? It’s just a story of a friendship and quite an unusual encounter of two women. You just have to take the characters as they are, one is trying to accept the other one; the other one is trying to fit in, with a lot of unusual situations.” Deneuve is on top form as Béatrice, who lives life on overdrive and becomes a surrogate mother to the more mundane Claire. But Béatrice is not a character close to her own heart: “I cannot identify with the character, but I do understand her and I do like her.”

It’s no surprise to hear the 73-year-old say this. After all, Béatrice is driven by a sense of nostalgia for a single moment in her life and seems full of regrets. Whereas Deneuve doesn’t like to talk about the past, she lives in the present and as such she doesn’t do regrets. She says that the public image of Catherine Deneuve is a cultivated illusion, another arm to her acting.



“I am not living with Catherine Deneuve anyway. This is not part of my life. It’s part of my actor’s life. But I’m not living as Catherine Deneuve, what do people think, that I take two hours with myself in the morning before I go out, it’s not like that.”

But such an attitude may also be the secret to her career longevity - if Deneuve doesn’t wallow in her own past it’s hard for others to do so. She doesn’t correct or reply to any of the plethora of comments made about her life and career.

She was born Catherine Fabienne Dorléac in Paris in 1943, the daughter of stage actors. She took the name Deneuve, which is her mother's maiden name, to differentiate herself from her sisters, who were also acting. So in this way, it's both metaphorically and literally true that Catherine Deneuve is a construction. Deneuve is a character that the public have been infatuated with ever since she made her debut as a teenager in André Hunebelle's *Les Collégiennes* (1957). The big influence on her early career was director Roger Vadim, with whom she had a son, Christian Vadim, when she was 19.

In 1964, she became an international superstar after appearing in Jacques Demy's seminal *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*. In 1965, she married photographer David Bailey, two weeks after they met on a photo-shoot for *Playboy*. She had an affair with Francois Truffaut who was said to be so depressed after the end of their affair in 1970 that he was on medication for months as he waited for her to call.



Bailey and Deneuve divorced in 1972, just as Deneuve was having her second child, Chiara Mastroianni, with the great Italian acting maestro Marcello Mastroianni. She lived with the man 20 years her senior for four years. But she has said she won't write a memoir, so we'll probably never get to know her perspective on these romances and the years she filled up gossip columns around the globe. But as her personal life became less high profile, it's given Deneuve a freedom to be herself, away from the camera: "I suppose you learn so much through life about what you want and more importantly what you don't want."



She is far happier when talking about cinema. Indeed as the interview progresses, she becomes warmer as the room cools. She says she misses the great Franco-Italian co-productions of the past, many of which she lighted up, including *Belle de Jour* and *Un Flic*. She talks fondly about the films of Luchino Visconti. But the movie business has changed drastically over the last 25 years, not least in the move from analogue to digital. She says that the new technology has, "probably changed the way that actors do their work." This is because "The preparation is not as long, the cameras are smaller, the sound is more easy to take and the camera is much closer. You have to adapt to that. Before there was always a distance between the camera and the crew, now they can be 50 centimetres from your face. So I remember when it started it was difficult to forget about the camera and the technicians, but nowadays to make a film with small camera is cheap."

She isn't a big fan of the crispness of the digital image, "I'm not so in favour of the perfection of the image, which is a little hard. Technically it's too perfect. It's almost too much. I prefer the image of Technicolour. Some people do like that still, such as Quentin Tarantino." She is also clear about what she expects to happen on set. "I like to be directed. But it's also true that I have my own image of the character. I think an actor has their own sensibility, so they know what they are doing most of the time. When you rehearse, you discuss that with the director." She says that sometimes she even concedes to the director's point of view.

Before our time runs out, and the room reaches boiling point, the actress talks about the pay disparity between men and women in film. She says of women being paid less for the same work, "Cinema is the reflection of life. That is a fact of society. It is not just cinema. It's like that in life. Every week we have stories about the salary in industry and they are paid less than men. It's something that is unfair."

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