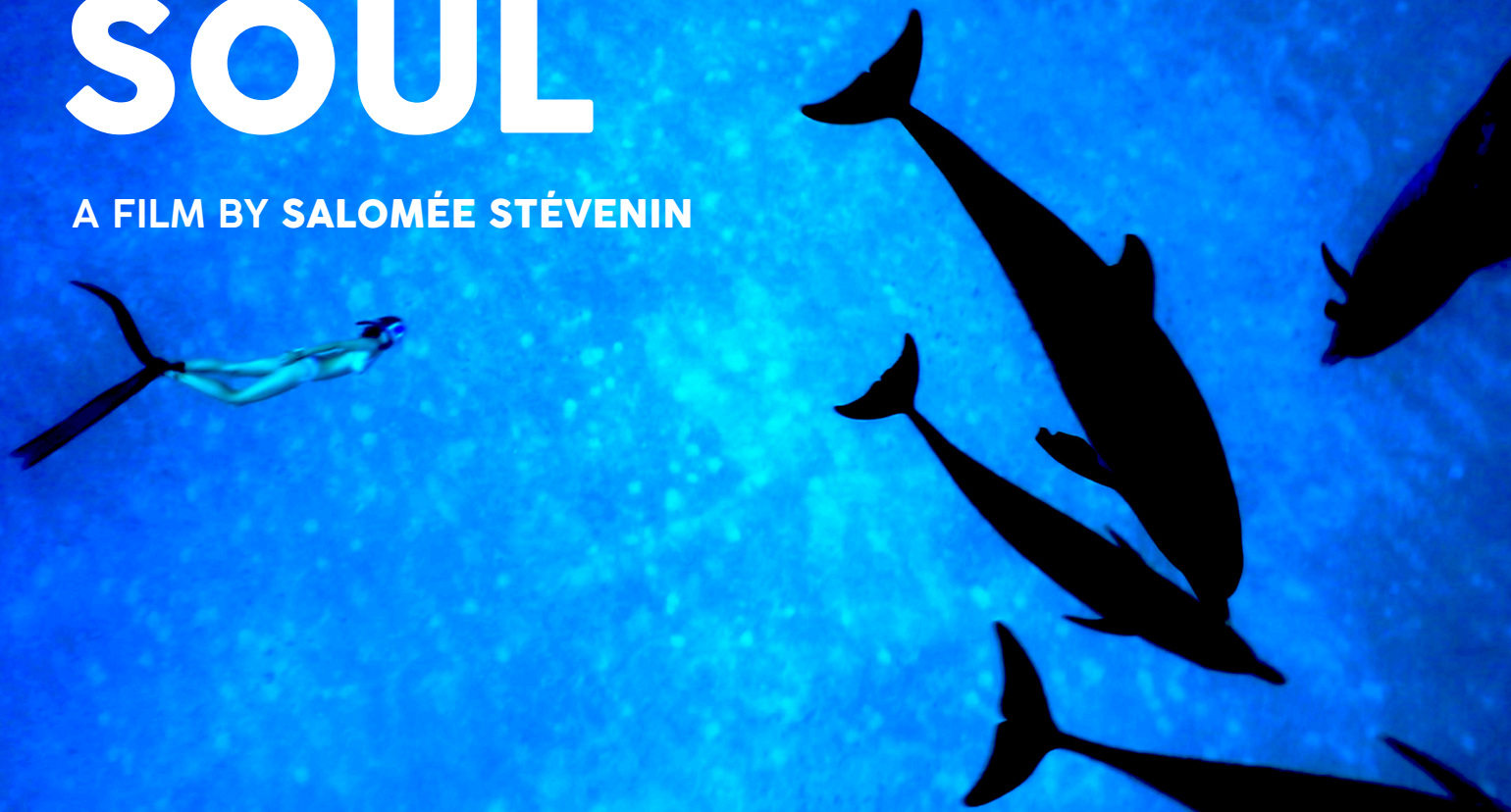


THE WILD SOUL

A FILM BY SALOMÉE STÉVENIN



Le Bureau & ATLANTIQUE Films present

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A person is swimming in a river, with their head and arms visible above the water. They are holding a black cylindrical object, possibly a camera or a container, in their right hand. The background features a steep, rocky mountain covered in lush green vegetation. The sky is overcast with grey clouds.

SYNOPSIS

The film offers an odyssey towards the self, an invitation to rediscover sensitivity. It is a journey through time, countries, and elements – water, earth, mountains, form – an expedition that intimately explores, without judgment or taboo, the relationship human maintain with other species, as well as the awareness we have of ourselves and of our planet.

INTERVIEW WITH SALOMÉE STÉVENIN

You've been filming for a long time. But when exactly did the idea really take shape to turn all those images you'd accumulated over the years into this documentary?

Salomé Stévenin: In 2010, I wanted to free dolphins from marine parks. I wanted to make a film that would expose the workings of the captivity industry and put an end to the exploitation of sentient beings. When I was filming, twenty years ago, a part of me was thinking: 'One day, this might become a film.' I approached it as though it were a professional film, even though I was alone with my dream. Setting off with a camera gave me the time to find my own perspective, to look deeply and to explore the subjects that fascinated me. I returned to Réunion several times to meet dolphins and whales. I documented this journey while delving deeper into my subject, because I wanted to be certain of my motivations. Reading, and meeting scientists, bioacousticians and divers, was wonderful. I didn't want to make a film simply for the sake of making one. I needed to challenge myself in this way, to be certain that making films was truly what I wanted to do.

This urge to film doesn't come out of nowhere...

I grew up in a family where everything is photographed and filmed. It's tiring, but I've come to realise that's also a way of showing love. I've inherited this from my family. But above all, I've wanted to film what cannot be put into words. This desire to say to the person I'm filming: I see you, I understand you, you're not alone. I love that feeling. That connection with another person. In a film by René Féret, my character said, 'We have too much love

for one another. It can't be pointless.' I feel immense compassion and a great deal of love for all beings, whether they're animals, humans or non-humans. When I went to film men whose job is to kill, in a slaughterhouse, that capacity for empathy became useful. I had to make use of it

Perhaps I sometimes have too much love for people, but I tell myself that this love is never pointless. I found myself filming people who were supposed to be 'the bad guys', but I felt their humanity deeply. And I think I owe that partly to my childhood and to my career as an actress. Because you learn to put yourself in other people's shoes. To imagine their stories, their pasts, their wounds. This desire to film stems from those years spent in the film industry, but also, indeed, from having grown up in a family where you have to find love and security amidst the chaos.

Is that also why nothing feels intrusive in what you film?

Yes, none of the footage feels forced. Everyone accepts the camera's presence; sometimes they become part of the shot or simply forget it's there. It captures their presence, their modesty, their concentration. If I make them feel uncomfortable, I don't film. I've always been honest with the people I've filmed. I explained to the workers and the slaughterhouse manager: 'I no longer eat meat; I'm concerned about animal welfare, but what I want to do here is portray human beings and these animals.' Of course, I could have gone online to find videos of slaughterhouses, but that wasn't my approach at all. These people had the courage to trust me. They agreed to be filmed and offered me interviews, cups of coffee and smiles; they moved me deeply and were incredibly generous.

Were they easy to convince?

The word 'convince' contains the word 'conquer', and that's not the kind of relationship I like to have with the people I want to film. I'd sent an email to the slaughterhouse manager after years of thinking about the need to film inside the premises. I started writing one morning, almost as a rush. That was the case for many of the people I filmed. Years of preparation, and then one day I finally dared! He replied, we spoke, and I went to meet him. 5 am, before dawn, in the Jura, at the abattoir. The workers weren't aware of it; I had to explain it to them, overcome their initial mistrust, reassure them, treat them with respect, and they were completely on board. One of them had been a pupil of my grandmother, a former village schoolteacher. It was very touching for me.

Georges Franju's *Blood of the Beasts* had moved me deeply. But here, I felt as though I were meeting men and women who could have been my brothers and sisters. I grew up in Paris, but there were lots of cows in the field by my father's house in the Jura. Their beauty and kindness have impressed me ever since I was a child. Such peaceful animals. I am so ashamed of what we put them through. I wanted to face reality with an open heart. Without judging the work of this man and his team. And I think he was sensitive to that.

Let's go back to the origins of your film itself. When did this project really start to take shape in your mind?

In 2010, I encountered captive dolphins on an island in the Bahamas. Then there were a thousand steps forward, a thousand setbacks, a thousand hopes, it's been a journey. Of course, meeting the producer Bertrand Faivre was a turning point, and we began editing at Le Bureau in November 2023. I felt as though the film existed even

before we'd shot it. Like a dream so concrete and precise that you dare to approach an actor and ask if he'd be willing to join the adventure. There was a particular moment in 2016, in Mexico. After two years of longing to hear the song of a Mexican healer again, I found myself in the same house as him, living next door. A miracle. I'd been dreaming of filming him, but how could I bring it up? Eventually, I plucked up the courage. He agreed. For several days, I filmed him as he crafted his handicrafts. He placed multicoloured beads onto a cow's skull covered in wax... step by step, in silence, we watched one another. I focused on a bead, on his eye, on his eyebrow

What sort of relationship do you have with your camera?

My camera has become my best friend! When I was trying to decide which camera to use, I asked Claire Mathon for advice, she'd been the lighting director on my short film *Baines* in 2006. And she told me: 'The camera must become your best friend. It doesn't matter which one you choose.' And that's exactly what happened. I was on my own, often in countries where I didn't speak the language — in Japan, in Mexico... The camera became my confidante. Before *The Wild Soul*, I made a short documentary called *Sensations*. It was a way of practising filming. I told myself, 'Here you're free. If you want to film, film. If it's rubbish, it'll be nobody's fault but your own. No production company, no broadcaster, no boss, no excuses, just you.'

I travelled alone to Nepal, Thailand and India. I wanted to learn how to film hands, faces, voices... Then I edited this footage with a brilliant young editor as if it were already a proper film.

I remember saying to my dad on the phone: 'I feel like I'm asking too much, that I'm splitting hairs,' and he replied straight away, 'But it's great to split hairs, it's even necessary!'



Was that also when you first met your producer, Bertrand Faivre?

We first met in 2020. I'd been searching for years for the right format for this film and a producer to create it with. The first was Denis Poncet, from Maha Production. He was interested in the story of an actress who prefers to set off with the dolphins, whilst I was fascinated by the extraordinary, almost telepathic intelligence of cetaceans and the mystery of their sensitivity. And I wanted to set them free. Then Denis died... Some producers liked the idea, but I didn't feel I was in the right place. Others thought the project was too eclectic. I was constantly told I had to choose: either an environmental film, a family film, or an adventure film. But I specifically wanted to mix it all up! To tell a story that's alive, one that connects things rather than compartmentalising them. A film that inspires, that smells of sea water, salt and wind, an adventure both on land and underwater! One that carries the energy of the dolphins! One day I mentioned it to my friend Sophie Quiedeville, whom I'd met on the set of Laetitia Masson's *Love Me*. A brilliant coordinator, networker and problem-solver who grasps everything instantly, she said to me, 'You should talk to Bertrand Faivre about it!'

Talking about your family was something you'd thought of right from the start?

Yes, but I didn't know to what proportion, and I didn't want to hurt them. Certain films have influenced me, such as *Forgive Me* by Maiwenn and *Other Worlds* by Jan Kounen. Not as role models, but as valuable examples of what I like to see in an intimate film dealing with these subjects.

And how do you go about talking about it?

At first, I hoped the editors would come up with the solutions for me. They led the way, but they all told me to write the voice-over myself. With my back against the wall, I had to take the plunge! I wrote a large part of the voice-over during editing breaks. I conducted dozens of interviews with marine biologists, scientists and divers, but above all I had to dare to express what I was feeling, and that was the hardest part. Finding the legitimacy to speak out. I wanted this film to be just as I had experienced it: sensory, vibrant, intimate. But all that takes time and a process of growth before you can come to terms with your own story and recognise that it has a right to exist. I learnt to embrace my desire. It's even a duty. Otherwise, I'd be betraying my film and what I've been through. Bertrand and my team helped me with that, and I'll be eternally grateful to them.

How did you construct this monologue that accompanies the narrative?

I've loved writing since I was a child; I've always carried notebooks with me wherever I went. Writing helps me make sense of what I'm going through. It calms me and helps me find my centre. Yet, at first, telling others about it through a voice-over felt like an admission of failure. I was afraid to speak. I wanted the audience to feel everything and be fully immersed, without any explanation of the text. I feared that words would become a label and negate the complexity of reality.

The first teasers from 2017 did, however, already feature a voice-over, and my phone was full of recordings. But this time I had to speak out loud for the final version, and that's very different. For the editing, I dug out all those notebooks. Sometimes it was just a restaurant napkin with a few words scribbled on it; sometimes a feeling after a



dive, jotted down on a sweet wrapper...

I'd take my daughter to school, and on the way to the editing session, I knew I had 20 or 30 minutes before meeting up with Marie-Pierre to write down in a few sentences the feeling I wanted to share. Extracting the essence. In a rush. Not saying too much. I'd record it on my phone, we'd try it out during the editing process, decide whether to keep it or not, and we carried on like that. Some phrases have stayed with me for a very long time. 'I come from elsewhere, but I'm here', for example.

As with images, I need to gather a huge amount of material. To know it by heart... To try everything. To say everything, only to take it all away again. Then I had all this text on my computer, like a collection of sensations and thoughts... I loved working solely on the text.

When you talk about your father, it's clear that you're not trying to settle any scores... Does your family's opinion of your work hang over you throughout this process?

Yes. Not just the shadow! And it takes effort to silence those voices. This film is an inner journey towards oneself, an attempt to understand where one comes from and one's own story. You have to make room for yourself.

For a long time, I carried on imagining what my father was thinking. Today I think he would have liked to see me set myself free through my work. There comes a moment when you're just tinkering away. You're like a child in their bedroom at their editing desk. And you break free. You draw, you paint, you put on some music, you're carried away. For a long time, I felt ashamed because I was pursuing my dream on my own; they all thought I was a bit mad: 'So, how's it going?!'

My father had a standard that terrified me but which seemed fair to me.

When I say to him, 'I wish I could have saved you from it all', that realisation came to me whilst watching my footage and writing the voice-over. And that takes a real journey. Over twenty years of therapy! (laughs).

There have been far more violent versions of the film. I wanted to strike that balance so as to also convey the wonder of childhood, the ocean and the cinema. We had to be willing to explore the contradictions within these worlds. When you truly want to heal certain wounds, you have to embrace what was painful as well. It's like giving birth: you let it pass through you without resistance; you can do nothing but accept it and... it brings life into the world. Just like in freediving: patience and acceptance.

The film could have become a film 'against' something: against your father, against the film industry...

Why against? I needed to face up to my own story, through the eyes of the whales. Growing up in the world of cinema is part of that, with all its wonders and terrors.

I recently came across some emails I wrote to my parents 15 years ago during those trips. I told them about my encounters with the indigenous peoples of Chiapas and Jalisco. I loved writing to them. I loved writing to my father. We had our own language; he understood my shorthand, the details, the nuances, the realisations. I'm lucky to have truly felt understood by him during that period of my life. Cinema has allowed me to resume that dialogue in a different way and to speak to my mother as I would to my ancestors.



My film is not intended solely for a microcosm of film buffs or environmental activists. It is the story of a human being trying to understand: 'What have I been doing since the beginning of my life? Where am I going?!' Two phrases guide me as I attempt to answer these questions: the words of Thich Nhat Hanh, 'If we want to heal the planet, we must first heal ourselves,' and those of Mā Ananda Mōyi, 'Man should set out in search of his own Self with fierce energy.'

Music plays an important role in your documentary. How did you choose it?

Most of the music in the film has been with me for decades. Mozart, Henri Salvador, La Llorona, Shigeru Umebayashi for Wong Kar-wai's *2046*, Édith Piaf... They were there right from the start. I loved this patchwork, and at the same time I was looking for a sound that would tie everything together and touch my heart. I wrote to composers, searched... then there were those notes from *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* by Nick Cave and Warren Ellis that came back to me. When it came to the sound, Olivier Goinard, the sound editor and mixer, played a vital role. I met him when I was fifteen. He was working on my father's *Mischka*, at home with his colleague Nicolas Moreau. Olivier mixed my short film *Baines*, and I've always had the feeling that he understood me. That he saw what others didn't. I've always found that he had a way of listening and a perspective that decoded reality with beauty and intelligence.

And where does your passion for dolphins come from?

I don't have a particular passion for dolphins. There were a few key

moments: on a sailing boat, when I was 13, during a crossing to Corsica. That was the first time I'd seen them up close. I was filming our holiday with my little camera and I nearly fell overboard because I'd got so close to them. But the real encounter happened in the Bahamas when I went to see dolphins in a wildlife park. A prison. At that time, I was still completely blind. Awakening never comes about through force. It comes from a much more intimate place. In my case, it was a dolphin that swam up to me, stared at me for a few seconds that felt like an eternity, and then swam away. The following year, I went back to the same place. And there, I began to see the reality: the dolphins locked up, pumped full of antibiotics to prevent them from catching human diseases, the money made off their backs, the workings of the captivity industry... But this realisation came without overwhelming guilt; it was a quiet, steady trickle that brought down a wall. I simply heard myself say to the dolphin: 'I promise I'll do everything I can to set you free.' I didn't yet know what that meant. That's why, right at the start, my film was called *The Promise*, then *The Dolphin Film*...

And I had to remember that promise right to the very end. Right through to the editing. Right through to the sound mixing. I'm not here to talk about myself or simply tell my family's story. This ode to freedom was born out of the pain I felt at the horror of captivity. I wanted to make a film to free the dolphins, and they showed me my own cage.

SALOMÉE STÉVENIN



At the age of three, Salomé Stévenin appeared alongside her father Jean-François and Sandrine Bonnaire in *Thick Skinned*.

She followed in the footsteps of her older brother Robinson by acting alongside him in an episode of *L'instit*. Philippe de Broca launched her career with her first leading role in *The Greenhouse*, in which she played Claude Rich's mischievous granddaughter.

On the big screen, she went on to appear in *Visit to a Green Planet* by Coline Serreau, *The Sun in the Heart* by Roger Hanin as Sophia Loren's daughter, *Love Me* by Laetitia Masson, in which she played the teenage Sandrine Kiberlain, and *Mischka* by Jean-François Stévenin.

At the age of seventeen, Salomé went to study drama at a school in England, where she discovered Shakespeare and Stanislavski.

Her performance in Antony Cordier's *Cold Showers* earned her a César nomination for Most Promising Actress in 2006. This marked the beginning of a collaboration with René Féret: *But Once Mom Had Gone*, *Like a Star Shining in the Night*, *Mozart's Sister* and *Madame Solaris*.

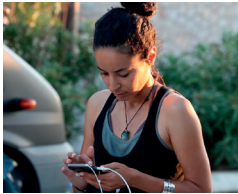
In 2007, she directed and starred in *Baines*, a short film exploring the sibling bond between a young girl and her Japanese half-brother (broadcast on ARTE and screened at several festivals).

Then she appeared in *Omar Killed Me*, *The Chef*, *Lili Rose*... Her love for travel, nature and the ocean led her to work on documentary films. Starting out as a scuba diver, she learnt to freedive so she could spend more time with dolphins and whales.

In 2015, she founded the charity Les merveilles du monde to promote 'peace, joy, love, childhood, spiritual development and care'.

The Wild Soul is her first feature film as a director.

KEY CONTRIBUTORS



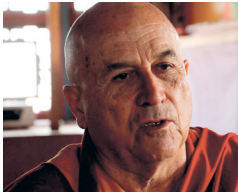
LAMYA ESSEMLALI

Lamya Essemlali, President of Sea Shepherd France and author, welcomes Salomé Stévenin to various campaigns organised by the organisation. Lamya guides her through the heart of the action in the defence of the oceans. Her commitment makes her a key ally in the protection of marine life.



PAUL WATSON

Paul Watson, who founded Sea Shepherd in 1977, is one of the leading figures in the fight to protect the oceans. Salomé Stévenin first met him on aboard the Brigitte Bardot in 2015, and then again during several campaigns carried out in France. Ten years later, they met again for a filmed interview.



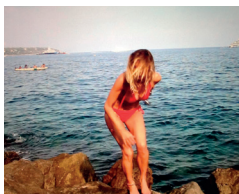
MATTHIEU RICARD

Author, photographer, essayist, Buddhist monk, and founder of the humanitarian organisation Karuna-Shechen, Matthieu Ricard has dedicated his life to meditation, teaching and charitable work. His organisation now supports more than 250,000 people through education, health and development programmes.



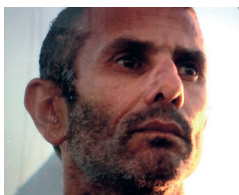
JAIME CARRILLO LOPEZ

Jaime Carrillo, a scholar of Wixárika culture in Mexico, is the son of a traditional healer. With humility, he describes himself as a man who is still learning. For millennia, the Wixárika people have preserved their spiritual practices, their sacred relationship with all living things, and their knowledge of maize, medicinal plants and natural cycles. Every year, he undertakes a pilgrimage to the sacred Wirikuta desert, which is now under serious threat from mining. In the face of this destruction, the Wixaritari continue their struggle to protect their territory, their traditions and the ancestral knowledge that is so closely linked to them.



FRANCINE KREISS

Explorer, author, photographer and guide, Francine Kreiss is a woman with deep ties to the ocean. She was the first freediver Salomé Stévenin met in Réunion; at the time, she was filming with Pierre Frolla, who invited the director to join them on set. A deep friendship blossomed from this encounter. Francine then introduced Salomé to Stéphane Mifsud, with whom she would train for a year and discover deep-diving.



STÉPHANE MIFSUD

A multiple record-holder and world champion in freediving, Stéphane Mifsud holds, amongst other records, the record for static apnea of 11 minutes and 35 seconds. As the founder of Odyssée Bleue, a freediving school, he also leads initiatives to preserve the marine environment, clean up the coastline and the seabed, and raise public awareness of ocean conservation. It was under his guidance that Salomé Stévenin learnt to freedive.



GUILLAUME NÉRY

Guillaume Néry, the world champion in deep-diving, is famous for his dives to depths of up to 126 metres on a single breath, using a monofin. An author and founder of the Blue Nery Academy, he shares his passion for the ocean through his teaching and his films. Together with Salomé Stévenin, he dives in Japan to encounter free-roaming, wild dolphins on an island where they are now protected after having long been hunted.



ROGER KNOBELSPIESS

A writer, actor and former robber, Roger Knobelspiess spent more than twenty-six years in prison, fifteen of which were for a robbery he did not commit. His life story, shaped by time spent in high-security wings, has fuelled a powerful body of literary work that denounces prison violence and the abuses of the penal system.

'The bites of my bars, my chains, the concrete cube into which I am cast alive, a supremacy of the hideous, demonstrate the unjustifiable nature of a society. I am the struggle of an alarmist voice, at the heart of a world where my cry, amplified by fifteen years of captivity, remains unheard by those in charge who hold me captive.'
L'Acharnement

TECHNICAL CREDITS

Director **Salomé Stévenin**
Written by **Salomé Stévenin**
Produced by **Bertrand Faivre**
Associate Producer **Philippe Graton**
Director of Photography **Claire Mathon, Mathilde Clément**
Director of Photography **Alexandre Cambron**
Editing **Marie-Pierre Renaud, Isabelle Manquillet**
Sound editing **Olivier Touche, Romain Cadilhac, Olivier Goinard**
Sound editing assistant **Margot Bultel**
Sound mixing **Olivier Goinard**
Sound effects **Nicolas Fioraso**
Colour grader **Julien Blanche**
Post-production coordinator **Ambre Guillou**
Production assistant **Anouk Bouvet**
Production company **LE BUREAU**
Co-produced with **ATLANTIQUE FILMS**
In association with **TV5 MONDE SOFITVCINE 11**



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