

## Document Citation

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MONTREAL

BETTY FISHER  
AND OTHER STORIES

(BETTY FISHER ET AUTRES  
HISTOIRES)

(FRANCE-CANADA)

A UFD (in France)/Alliance Atlantis Vivafilm (in Canada) release of a UGC YM, Les Films de la Boissiere (France)/Go Films (Canada) production, in association with France 2 Cinema, with participation of Canal Plus. (International sales: President Films, Paris.) Produced by Annie Miller, Yves Marmion. Executive producer, Miller. Co-producer, Nicole Robert.

Directed, written by Claude Miller, based on the novel "The Tree of Hands" by Ruth Rendell. Camera (color), Christophe Pollock; editor, Veronique Lange; music, Francois Dompierre; art director, Jean-Pierre Kohut Svelko; costume designer, Jacqueline Bouchard; sound (Dolby Digital/DTS Digital), Claude La Haye; assistant director, Laure Prevost; casting, Frederique Moidon. **Reviewed at Montreal Film Festival (competing),** Sept. 1, 2001. Running time: 102 MIN.

Betty Fisher ..... Sandrine Kiberlain  
Margot Fisher ..... Nicole Garcia  
Carole Novaeki ..... Mathilde Seigner  
Francois Diembele ..... Luck Mervil  
Alex Basato ..... Edouard Baer  
Edouard ..... Stephane Freiss  
Dr. Jerome Castang ..... Roschdy Zem  
Jose Novacki ..... Alexis Chatrian  
Joseph Fisher ..... Arthur Setbon  
Rene the Canadian ..... Yves Jacques  
Mme. Barsky ..... Consuelo de Haviland  
Martinaud ..... Clovis Cornillac  
Gallien ..... Yves Verhoeven  
Jacqueline ..... Annie Mercier

By DEREK ELLEY

**S**lowly morphing from the serious to the playful, and with a script that coaxes the viewer into an elaborately spun web of separate narratives, "Betty Fisher and Other Stories" is a delicious, utterly confident *jeu* from one of France's most discreetly maverick directors, Claude Miller. Drawing together a broad range of actors into an off-center but strangely credible universe, pic emerges as an unclassifiable blend of psychological thriller, caper movie, comedy-drama and multicharacter criss-crosser, as the kidnapping of a young boy sets off a train of events. Smartly marketed, film could enjoy a warm reception offshore among upscale auds who groove on well-honed Gallic fare.

Pic was warmly received at its Montreal fest world preem and copped a shared best actress award for stars Sandrine Kiberlain, Nicole Garcia and Mathilde Seigner, as well

as the Fipresci (international critics' association) award.

Much like Bertrand Tavernier, Miller has essayed a range of character-driven material during his career with no apparent common thread. However, helmer's long-term fascination with female protags, young people and the crime genre clearly found fertile ground in Ruth Rendell's "The Tree of Hands," basis for his script.

Miller learned of the British crime novelist (similar to U.S. writer Patricia Highsmith) after seeing Claude Chabrol's adaptation of one of her novels ("La ceremonie"), and being attracted to her combo of character, atmosphere and psychology. Like Chabrol, Miller has left no trace of the book's Brit origins in his totally convincing re-working, set in a comfy Paris suburb.

Opening, shot in blurry, tinted video, immediately establishes a nervy feel as a woman in a train compartment attacks her daughter with a pair of scissors.

Segueing via the scar on the latter's hand, pic smoothly moves forward some years (and into sharp, clear 35mm) as Betty (Kiberlain), with her young son, Joseph (Arthur Setbon), meets her mother, Margot (Garcia), who's arrived on a flight from New York.

Betty is enjoying fame from her first novel, but seems ill-at-ease in her mom's company. The motor-mouthed Margot is a mix of maternal fussing, self-blame and envy.

Scarcely before the movie has begun, Miller throws the viewer for a further loop with the first of many intertitles that pepper the pic — in this case, "The Story of Joseph." In rapid strokes, viewer learns that Betty herself has only been back from the States a few weeks, and that she lives in an outwardly genteel suburb, Vaucresson, following a split with Joseph's father. Then, Joseph falls out a window and is taken unconscious to hospital, where he dies.

As Betty faints in the hospital, a young kid Joseph's age, Jose (Alexis Chatrian), is led away by a black man. Another intertitle announces "Jose's Story."

Like a ball bouncing off another pool table, pic introduces a whole subset of characters centered around a bar in a nearby shopping mall. The black man turns out to be Francois (popular Quebecois singer Luck Mervil), current partner of Carole (Seigner), a strung-out waitress with a young son, Jose. Hovering around the bar is an Armenian gangster who's just bought a hotel in town, and Alex (Edouard Baer), a bum-cum-gigolo who may or may not be Jose's father.

Margot, stricken with guilt at Betty's depression after the death of

her son, casually "borrows" a replacement child for her. The kid is Jose and, even when Betty discovers Margot's crime, she goes along with it.

Thence begins a labyrinthine tale that fans out further to include Russian money-laundering, a property scam, a curious romance between Betty and the hospital doctor and even — over an hour in — the sudden appearance of Betty's ex (Stephane Freiss). The pot is finally brought to the boil in the final section, "The Last Day."

By starting the movie in an edgy, impressionistic manner, Miller preps the viewer for the increasingly bizarre events to come, making them believable at least within the off-center universe he's created. Extremely dense, compact script moves with incredible forward momentum, never giving an iota more info than it wants to at any one time and thoroughly involving the viewer in its rapidly spun web. Though the audience always feels led by the nose, it's a journey worth taking.

Pic's tone and atmosphere are diametrically opposite to Miller's previous theatrical feature, the delicately wrought mood piece, "Class Trip" (1998), but there's the same absolute confidence in leading the audience into a real-looking but totally constructed universe. Performances are such that, even though some characters' paths hardly cross, there's a sense of broad ensemble, from Kiberlain's initially abstracted, later complicit Betty, through Garcia's initially agitated, later caring mother, to the denizens of the mall bar, led by Seigner's hard-ass waitress to Mervil's sympathetic, put-upon lover.

Christophe Pollock's lensing captures the cold, gray hues of the wintry suburb in the weeks leading to Christmas, and brief uses of classical extracts (a Bach prelude, a Chopin ballade) create moments of repose amid the tangled lives unspooling onscreen.



BETTING ON BETTY: Sandrine Kiberlain plays the title role in Claude Miller's "Betty Fisher and Other Stories."