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presents

CÉLINE DION

A STAR IS BORN



Directed by Vincent Gonon & Noël Tortajada
Produced by Padrino Film & Arte GEIE

52'

PITCH

“ I felt like a horse. You can bet on the artist that you want to win.
My husband, who is a gambler, bet on me.
I really needed to win that race. ”

Today, this story sounds completely absurd: how did Céline Dion, a worldwide star who went on to become the world's most famous Quebecker, find herself representing Switzerland at the most memorable edition of the Eurovision Song Contest in the late 80s?

Yet this has nothing to do with chance. In fact, in more ways than one, it reveals the singer's career, and the couple she formed for over 40 years with René Angélil, both her manager and her one true love. It's both romantic and carefully thought through, over-the-top and yet confoundingly sincere.

This adventure, which was an opportunity to conquer new markets as it was a gamble on the part of the producer. It was to reveal to 500 million viewers the transformation of an artist, illustrating how she went from a little girl with a cheesy look and crooked teeth to a young woman ready to seize the moment. Less than 10 years after this victory, Céline Dion was chosen to sing "My Heart Will Go On", the song from Titanic which, like the film, became a worldwide hit. A stunning career!

Through this contest and its breathtaking Grand Final, the portrait of a female competitor emerged. And so it was Switzerland that first gave Céline Dion her champion title and attributes.



THE STORY OF A CONTEST

The Eurovision Song Contest, which was launched in Switzerland in 1956, is part of Europe's television heritage. Today, it's watched as a comedic show for its excesses of kitsch and glitter, but by 1988 it had become a true institution, watched by 500 million viewers. The crowning glory of popular music then spread far beyond Europe's borders. This unique exhibition is a major opportunity for an artist pursuing an international career.

In 1988, Céline Dion was not yet a world star, a diva so famous that she would corner the identity of such a common first name and become the "Queen of Power Ballads". She was just a young singer who was barely 20 years old. The little girl from Quebec, who made her debut at the age of 12, was already a star in her homeland, but since 1986 her career was at a standstill, and people were starting to wonder whether she'd ever be able to shake off the old-fashioned child star image that followed her everywhere. In 1987, Céline Dion and her manager, René Angélil, decided to put her career on hold for almost a year. The strategy was simple: upgrade Céline's image, and prepare her to take on the international market. Céline Dion radically changed her look, her hairstyle and her teeth. She learned to speak English, of which she spoke not a word, in just a few weeks.

The transformation was spectacular, but the gamble was nevertheless risky. They needed to strike hard in order to validate this radical change and breathe new life into Céline's career. It was in this context that the opportunity to enter Céline Dion in the Eurovision Song Contest arose: one of René Angélil's partners, Swiss music producer Urs Peter Keller, was asked to help boost Céline's career in Germany, Europe's biggest recording market. In 1987, Céline recorded 3 songs in German, in order to "sound out the market", and one of them caught the attention of Turkish-Swiss composer Atilla Şereftuğ.

Two years earlier, Atilla had lost the Eurovision Song Contest 1986, taking second position with the appropriately named "Pas pour moi" song, sung by Daniela Simmons. On hearing Céline's voice, he immediately saw her potential to win, and with the help of songwriter Nella Martinetti, he composed a song which was tailor-made for the singer: "Ne partez pas sans moi". But how could a Quebecker represent Switzerland for the Eurovision Song Contest? Familiar with the intricacies of the contest, Atilla was well aware that, while the rules required the song to be written and composed by artists who are nationals of the country represented, there is nothing that says that the performer herself has to be from that country. As René Angélil put it, among the 250 songs that were sent to the Swiss preselections that year, there were 249 Swiss performers, and one Quebecker.

Things were set in motion. Every step she took from then on, brought on an increasing amount of pressure. Céline was victorious but rather timid at the Swiss selections, as she didn't fully accept the idea of taking advantage of a loophole in the contest's rules so she could "take the place" of another Swiss singer. Céline increasingly became self-confident during the rehearsals. She put herself, as she puts it, back in the shoes of a "racehorse". And in fact the young Quebecker impressed. For the Irish bookmakers her odds went from against 1 at the beginning of the week to 3 for 1 on Thursday, to finally reach 6 for 4 on Saturday. Céline was the favorite of a particularly high contest, since we find among others that year Lara Fabian and Gérard Lenormand. Now, the only thing that was left for her to do, was to embrace this new status.

And the contest itself would prove to be epic. Entering the stage with the determination of a boxer who enters the ring, Céline delivered a performance that was full of control and energy. But at the Eurovision Song Contest, the show is as much in the votes as in the performances, and at this game, the Quebecker was lagging behind Scott Fitzgerald, who represented the United Kingdom. The Scottish crooner, who had had his heyday in the 70s before disappearing from the charts to the point where he went back to work in the Glasgow meat market, was finally to make a comeback. Only two judges out of 21 left, and he was leading by 14 points over Céline Dion, who was sitting on the back, demoralized. 133 to 119. The Portuguese judge said: "France 1 point, Germany 2 points, United Kingdom 3 points..." 136-119! The case was complicated, especially as the judge continued to scratch the points, and Switzerland was still out of the game. "Iceland 8 points, Israel 10 points..." last chance... "Switzerland 12 points"! There was a chill in the audience. Saved in extremis, Switzerland caught up to the United Kingdom. It was 5 points away from the UK. On the screen, Céline seems totally unbridled.

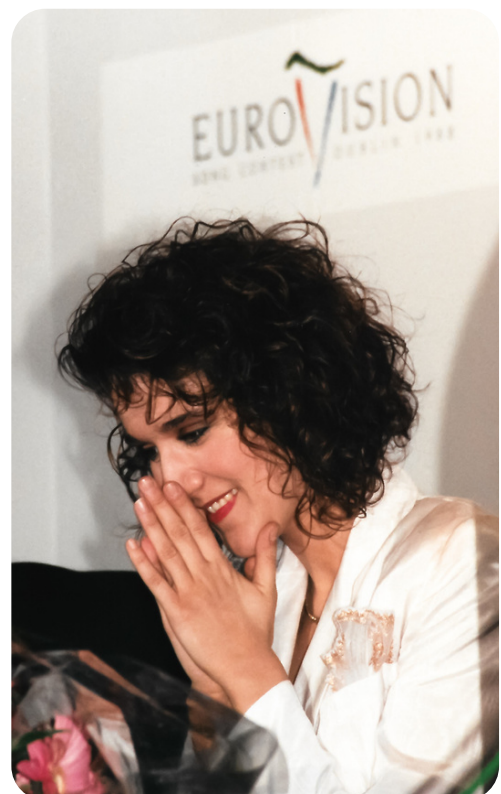
"I have to tell you that we employed Agatha Christie to write the script for tonight!" Pat Kenny, the host of the contest, was gloating. "It all depends on Yugoslavia."

Finally, Yugoslavia awarded 6 points to Switzerland and none to the United Kingdom. 136-137. In an explosion of joy, the Swiss, led by the 20-year-old singer, gave themselves a thrill to match this improbable Grand Final. For Céline Dion, who had never concealed her international ambitions, it was an unhopd-for launch pad.

The 1988 Eurovision Song Contest provides us with the narrative framework for exploring Céline Dion's career. By highlighting the Quebecker's ambition, power of conviction and undeniable qualities as a champion, it paved the way for the boundless ascent that would later be her career. Céline Dion and René Angélil, thanks to their methodical promoting strategy always aimed at conquering new markets, and would undoubtedly win their bet to make Céline one of the greatest international stars. She would fill stadiums on 5 continents, before bringing the world to see her in Las Vegas, for almost 16 years.

Other moments in the contest will allow us to tackle other themes, or evoke other specific events in the singer's career. For example, the fact that Atilla Şereftuğ, the composer of "Ne partez pas sans moi", selected Céline purely on the basis of hearing her voice will provide an opportunity to explore how Céline, in the two years that led up to the Eurovision Song Contest, worked on her natural gift to rid herself of certain flaws, particularly of a tendency she had to sing too much "with her nose". By understanding the work behind it, we can better appreciate why vocal technique has always been a priority for the artist.

In the end, these flashback and flashforward incursions, which were made possible by the contest's solid dramaturgy, paint a complete portrait of Céline Dion, while avoiding the exhaustiveness of a plot that would follow her career chronologically.



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