

# NCOLEKDMAN eye wide open

A 52' Film directed by Patrick BOUDET Produced by LITTLE BIG STORY

# Logline

Nicole Kidman has drawn upon her experiences and apprehensions to build a body of work that mirrors her personal life, which is more political than it might seem. Her aim was to free herself from her fears and construct the portrait of a woman fighting domestic, social, or perhaps ideological confinement.

# **Synopsis**

Emerging as the latest Hollywood icon thanks to *Days of Thunder* and her marriage to Tom Cruise, Nicole Kidman soon began taking more significant roles, working with Gus Van Sant, Jane Campion, and Stanley Kubrick in the space of four years on movies that were as important for her as they were for her directors.

With To Die For, Portrait of a Lady, and Eyes Wide Shut, Nicole Kidman was also laying down the foundations for an issue she would increasingly explore over more than 30 years and 70 films – the place of women in society. By questioning family, social, and professional structures, Nicole Kidman has hunted down forms of subjugation either imposed or desired, the traps of habit and silence, and the imprint of patriarchy.

Film after film, Nicole Kidman has also revealed her own personal demons by exploring all those dramas that are so frightening in real life: Grief, infertility, submission, rape, betrayal, abandonment, the rejection of one's children, and ageing, ensuring her films function as a mirror on her own life.



This confrontation with her personal issues and these "political" standpoints are clearly affirmed in her auteur films and are always detectable in her mainstream movies. They set Nicole Kidman apart in world cinema. Navigating through ages and continents, she has defined her universe of choice, constructed a flexible yet unique body, and defined an original dramatic identity to serve a committed and liberating discourse.

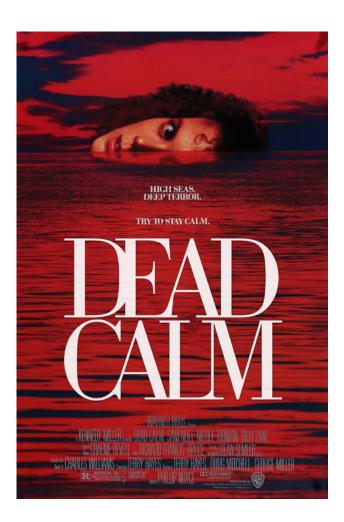
To tell this story, we will use previously unpublished material in the form of Nicole Kidman's own words from a long interview with Michel Ciment, film critic from Positif, and an eminent specialist on Kubrick and Campion. This interview, exploring her career, offers some exceptional material for our documentary. It will be used in the form of a voiceover and will provide the guiding thread for the narration. We will also draw upon archive footage from sources including films, TV shows, and making-of films, along with interviews that are listed in the Director's Note.

#### **Overture**

In Dead Calm, Kidman plays Rae, a woman held hostage on her yacht by a psychopath who has left her husband behind on a sinking ship. The film follows her fight for survival in the middle of the ocean. After a final fight with her violent captor and rapist, Rae finally manages to neutralize him and takes control of the boat. She sails alone through stormy seas, scanning the horizon through her binoculars, desperately looking for her husband. This scene is a perfect metaphor for Kidman's life and career: Learning and fighting for freedom; total freedom to choose her films, her causes, but also her life as an artist and a woman.

Dead Calm established Kidman's talents on the international stage, introducing a new individual; that of a slim woman with curly red hair and a porcelain complexion, but also a dynamic and sober character whose intense gaze often took precedence over speech. She also laid the foundation of one of those reference characters – that of the manipulator – and defined a kind of captive woman that she would return to again in many different ways.

At 22, Nicole Kidman had made 13 films and appeared in three TV series in Australia, where she had begun shaping her talent since the age of 14: "I went to drama school for eight years, then I worked in theater. I established relationships with Australian filmmakers through a range of different projects. All I wanted was to work and explore." And exploring is something she has never stopped doing, in film, theater, and her personal life. She compares herself to Katharine Hepburn, with her "free spirit, refusal to conform, fierce will, passion, loyalty to herself, and her inner fire." This definition could equally be applied to Kidman.



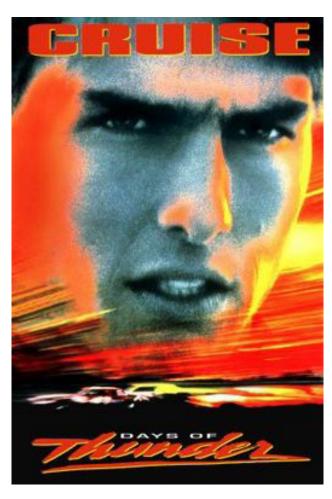
# An insular captive

Nicole Kidman hails from Scottish and Irish stock and was born in Honolulu on 20 June 1967. She grew up in Australia in a protected and cultivated world, receiving a Catholic yet progressive education thanks to her mother, a committed feminist. Over-conscious of her curly red hair and height, Kidman had to keep out of the sun and couldn't enjoy the beach because of her pale, fragile skin. So instead, she kept to her room and her books: "I immersed myself in reading. And one never emerges unscathed from George Eliot's Middlemarch or War and Peace by Tolstoy. I don't think anyone could have identified with Natasha more than I did." And that confinement along with the feeling of insularity fed directly into her curiosity and desire to explore other places, while also marking her out as different.

Kidman was tempted by dance and blossomed in her drama classes. "I didn't want to be myself. I wanted to lose myself in other people." And at the age of 14, Jane Campion offered her a role in Campion's graduation short. But Kidman turned it down: "I would have had to wear a shower cap and kiss another girl! I was young and I said no. I was in a high-school drama class, and I saw myself with my long locks in Gone with the Wind! Today, I'd have taken it." Despite that, Kidman went on to find her way; one that allowed her to escape through an exploration of the souls of others, and perhaps allowed her to love herself.

Kidman was kept busy with TV movies, commercials, and films, before landing a leading role in Phillip Noyce's *Dead Calm* in 1989, an Australian film with international ambitions.

#### In the Shadow of Tom Cruise



On the other side of the Pacific Ocean, Tom Cruise, the new darling of Hollywood, was looking for his leading lady to star in *Days of Thunder*. He saw *Dead Calm* and immediately succumbed to Kidman's performance and charm. It was love at first sight for both of them during testing, and romance blossomed on set. "As soon as I laid eyes on him, he took my breath away." They married on 24 December 1990 in the Church of Scientology and soon adopted two children.

Her marriage protected Kidman and propelled her into the Hollywood elite. **But she soon felt cramped as she was repeatedly cast as the support act for male starring roles** in films like *Far and Away, Billy Bathgate*, and *Batman Returns*. Kidman wanted to break away from this sanitized image of Hollywood beauty and play characters with more meaning in auteur movies.

## An Existence To Die For

Nicole approached Laura Ziskin, who was producing Gus Van Sant's *To Die For*, because she felt the films would be an ideal steppingstone into more complex roles. But Van Sant couldn't see Kidman in the leading role, explaining that: "None of her previous films suggested she'd be right for the part. But then she called me directly and, in the end, her determination convinced me." Kidman transformed her Australian accent into a Californian one and ingested hours of weather shows: "I spent my nights watching TV. It was a new thing for me, and I stole it all from the TV. There's plenty of nastiness on offer in that universe."

In To Die For, Kidman returned to the role of bewitching manipulator of lost teens searching for love and fulfilment. But here, she also brought a more political touch that incriminated this TV society devoted to self-celebration as a means for personal success.

Kidman is a good reader and as such, fully grasped how this modern-day Bovary character was a prisoner in a patriarchal universe that cast her as a subservient wife and mother, chained to her old-school husband with limited ambitions played by Matt Dillon. She constantly puts him in his place with comments like, "If you wanted a nanny, you should have married Mary Poppins!" when he suggests starting a family.

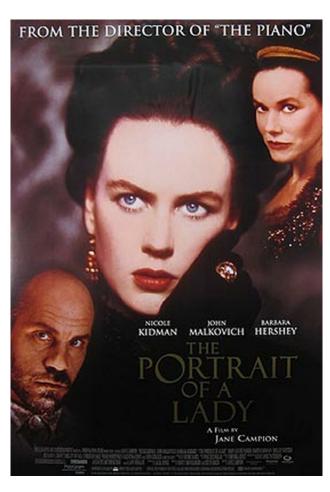
In the movie, Suzanne's "mediabolical" cynicism is intended as a response to predatory masculine behavior in the TV industry, long before the #MeToo generation. In particular, there is a scene when Suzanne meets a TV producer who strokes her thigh as he explains that she will need to sleep her way to the top. Unsure whether to appear shocked or to feign acceptance of this inevitability, Kidman portrays both embarrassment and complacency, thus encapsulating the stranglehold in which ambitious women are often caught.

The role of Suzanne Stone was a significant step in her career: "I want to exist in my own right and not just through Tom's fame. I knew that Gus Van Sant's sharp talent would help me change my image and escape from being typecast." Indeed, the role won Kidman her first Golden Globe: "To Die For is a film that changed my career. From that moment on, they began to take me seriously on the international stage."

# The Portrait of an Ambitious Lady

Kidman finally got to work with Jane Campion 15 years later, playing Isabel Archer in The Portrait of a Lady based on the novel by Henry James. This complex, intellectual, and sophisticated character lived up to Kidman's ambitions. Like her, Isabel Archer is obsessed by the idea of escaping her fate in a male-dominated world. This role of sophisticated prisoner allowed Kidman to express the will of an independent woman seeking to break the chains of a patriarchal society that locks women into their relationships with men.

The film was challenging for Kidman, both physically and emotionally, particularly the scenes where she confronts her manipulative husband played by John Malkovich. Of Campion's rigor, Kidman says, "An actor must be capable of laying themselves bare on demand. Some days, they might not feel like doing that, and I did argue with Jane about it. She forced me to give, even when my heart wasn't in it, when I felt nothing, when I felt like I was being emptied." These

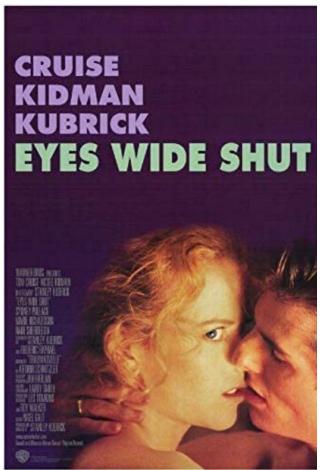


feelings may have been related to the fact that at that time, Kidman was on her own, very intense quest for freedom, facing many questions about her own relationship and life in general.

Indeed, Kidman increasingly began to feel a sense of confinement within her husband's embrace, and all the more so as she felt the influence of scientology on her relationship. The Church of Scientology did not appreciate Nicole's reluctance to convert, and her keeping the couple's children away from meetings. Feeling like an exile – like Isabel – it was perhaps time to assert herself in her marriage. And that was when Stanley Kubrick contacted the couple about making Eyes Wide Shut.

# **Contemporary Domestic Confinement**

Tom and Nicole committed themselves to Kubrick for an unlimited time. He suggested they bring their personal items to their on-set apartment. They even started sleeping there, gradually blurring



the line between fiction and real life. This disturbing choice had an impact on their personal life when their fictional characters Alice and Bill's issues collided with their own existential questions. The question of freedom was at the heart of the conflict: Freedom to think but above all, freedom to be and to exist outside of the limiting gaze of the spouse.

And gradually, Kubrick's film became their own.

But Eyes Wide Shut also had an impact on Kidman's relationship with cinema: "Eyes Wide Shut changed the way I thought about movies. It gave me faith in the purity of cinema and the art of making movies. Even if it takes a long time, whatever you have to go through, you're in the creative process. The whole point is getting lost in the universe. And when that happens, it's truly wonderful." Indeed, Kidman was very aware that very few directors have the kind of freedom Kubrick had.

But for the time being, Kidman needed to exist; not artistically, because that had already been achieved, but morally. She needed to maintain her independence without it impacting her love. That is Alice's message in the last scene of Eyes Wide Shut in the store, surrounded by Christmas decorations: "The important thing is we're awake now." This line resonates with the questions she may have had about her own marriage.

Kidman's next choice would be about what kind of life to lead, informed by the next character she was to play; namely Satine in Moulin Rouge!, and thus continuing the questions raised by Isabel in The Portrait of a Lady about how to escape one's destiny.

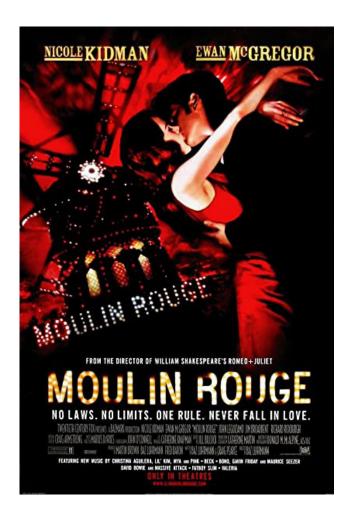
# Affirming One's Feelings

Kidman was won over by Baz Luhrmann's ambitious project for Moulin Rouge! in which she plays a courtesan in an imaginary turn-of-the-century Paris: "I was doing a play in New York, and Baz sent me two dozen red roses with a note saying, 'I have a wonderful role for you – she sings, she dances, she loves, and she dies. Call me!' But he didn't just hand me the role like that. I did a six-hour audition and had to wait a week to find out the part was mine." This challenge involved a total investment on Kidman's part that helped her forget the impending break-up of her marriage.

Kidman returned to the role of a captive woman who had to choose between financial security through a relationship with the Duke of Monroth and her true love for an impoverished writer, Christian. In the end, her character reveals her preference during the final scene of the show. It is a perfect metaphor for Kidman's work; her roles as fragments of her own truth and her work as an actress revealing her own torments and desires.

Thanks to Moulin Rouge!, Kidman was shown to be an internationally bankable actor with the film grossing three times its budget. "This was the moment when Nicole Kidman took control over her career and from then on, was able to change her role", said Peter Debruge, Chief Film Critic at Variety.

At the Festival de Cannes, where she attended without her husband, Kidman confessed to feeling safe on stage. "It's not like that in real life – there's nobody there to hold your hand. You're alone." She no longer hid her fragility as loneliness inaugurated a new stage in her life.

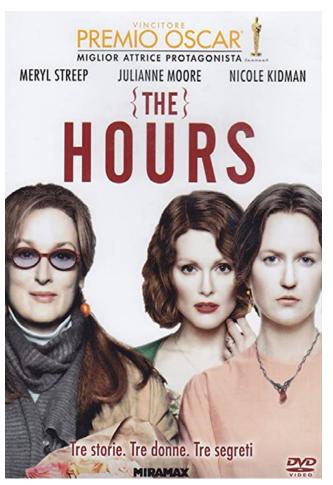


### A Rebel in Search of Freedom

"I was very depressed and entertaining thoughts of suicide," said Kidman, about taking on the role of Virginia Woolf in Stephen Daldry's *The Hours*, a complex character trapped in a suffocating life.

Kidman invested herself as she had rarely done before for this role. She read the author's complete works, learned to write with her right hand, changed the way she spoke and walked, and wore a false nose making her all but unrecognizable. In Woolf's house, which was used for the set, Kidman allowed herself to be fully inhabited by the character, physically, psychologically, and spiritually: "The rehearsals took place in the house. We stayed there for a very long time. It's always much better than rehearsing in a studio because it's a source of inspiration that feeds into your performance. An actor needs to use everything. You never know where the inspiration will come from."

Her scrupulous preparation work combined with her own personal wounds and dark ideas from both past and present.



#### Kidman saw Virginia Woolf as a kindred spirit.

Her character bluntly announces to her distraught husband in the train station scene that: "My life has been stolen from me. I'm living in a town I have no wish to live in. I'm living a life I have no wish to live." This dialog resonates like a political declaration that would echo with any woman oppressed by her husband and society. But it also found an unusual echo in Kidman herself.

The Hours was a moment of liberation for her: "In a strange way, Virginia burst into my life just at the moment when I needed her, at a time when I was struggling. She played a cathartic role." It also represented a visible shift in her artistic work, winning her an Oscar for Best Actress. Now a Hollywood superstar, Kidman had become an intense and mature actress for high-powered roles. Her status had changed.

# A Foreign Body in Hollywood

Thrown to the press wolves during her divorce from Cruise, Kidman used this vulnerability in the character of Grace Margaret Mulligan in Dogville by Lars von Trier. Grace turns up in the blue-collar town of Dogville wearing a fur coat. She is on the run from local gangsters, the townspeople agree to protect her until the police report they are looking for her and Grace finds herself at the town's mercy, being hunted down like an animal.

With this new take on the character of imprisoned female, this time at the mercy of a local population, her character echoes the militant commitments of Kidman's parents and her mother's feminism in **particular**. But it also plays on her own otherness; that of an actress with artistic aspirations different from those of a Hollywood star.



Dogville was about her desire to continue exploring other working methods that began with Kubrick and Eyes Wide Shut: "It was a real challenge because there were no walls and very few props. I found it very liberating." It was also about her choice to regularly take on independent or first films: "It's complicated because you're constantly told you have to stay 'bankable'. It's a minefield!"

# Becoming the Master of her Movies

Her personal life took a new turn with her marriage to American country music star Keith Urban, and the birth of their two daughters. Empowered by this new stability, Kidman had to relaunch her career after a few films that had enjoyed little public and critical acclaim.

She chose Rabbit Hole, where once again her character had to deal with the loss of a child as in Dead Calm and The Others, amongst others. But in order to have this not-so-bankable movie made with director John Cameron Mitchell, Kidman created her own production company Blossom Films, thus firmly underscoring her commitment of independent movie making: "I wanted Rabbit Hole to exist as a film. And I really did produce it; I bought the gear, I developed it, I begged people to let me film in certain outdoor locations, got down on bended knee to beg the crew to shoot for an extra hour in order to get the shots we needed..." From then on, her aesthetic choices were in line with her existential and personal approaches.



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To convey her character's overwhelming grief, Kidman gave herself without artifice, setting aside her porcelain beauty of which she is said to be somewhat obsessed, and laying herself bare wit-

hout makeup and without cheating on her age. "Playing a mother who loses a child is the most terrifying thing I've ever done. From a creative perspective, I try to go for things that scare me." For some of the more dramatic scenes, John Cameron Mitchell remembers: "Nicole was in a trance-like state. I also felt like I was feeling all the emotions that were going through her. For some of the scenes, we

did only one take." This drama, neither maudlin nor austere, fully shows off the Kidman Method: Cinema as a form of therapy to prepare for one's own past, present, or future dramas.

# Aging & Passing On: Resilient Filmmaking

Kidman has gradually abandoned the figure of manipulator or enchantress from her early career to move towards roles featuring women who confront their obstacles more directly, who seek to be themselves, **freed of their representation**. This is all the more difficult when one is an actress who is permanently on show, in both public and private. As such, Grace of Monaco was like a mirror for a Hollywood actress married to a movie superstar, and then a music superstar, scrutinized at every turn, and conveying a glamorous and attractive image for the paparazzi: "Like her, I know what it means to live in a golden cage and try to please everyone to the point of forgetting oneself."

But this role also marked the limits of her performance capabilities because Kidman, approaching 50, was playing a princess in her 30s. Her use of plastic surgery and Botox in particular has often been discussed in the press, reproaching her for her line-free forehead and wondering if this actress will ever age. A helpless prisoner of the passage of time, **Kidman knows the importance of appea**rance for actresses over 50 in Hollywood where roles on offer become few and far between.

As time rolls on, Kidman has been exploring the notion of handing down through family. Over the space of four roles, she has tackled the connection with adopted children (Lion, Top of the Lake: China Girl, and The Goldfinch) and biological ones (Destroyer and Big Little Lies). These subjects have an echo in her personal life and how her relationship with her and Cruise's children, Isabella and Conor, has become strained due to her refusal to join the Church of Scientology. Now both members, her children did not invite her to their respective weddings and are said to no longer call her "Mum".



And Kidman is not yet done with violent relationships. In *Big Little Lies* and *The Undoing*, her characters confront violent and criminal husbands, underscoring a huge problem for certain women. The social impact of these series strikes a chord with her work for **UNIFEM**, **for whom Kidman has been an ambassador since 2006**.

This fight found a logical continuation in *Bombshell* in which Kidman plays Gretchen Carlson, the journalist who brought down Fox New Chairman Roger Ailes for sexual harassment. **This film explicitly showcases the social significance of its various characters comprising women imprisoned and constrained in their relationships in business and society.** As such, Bombshell is like an echo of To Die For.

At the height of her career and unstoppable for four decades, Nicole Kidman has gone beyond her physical beauty in which she might otherwise have been imprisoned by continually refreshing her portfolio of roles. She has authored a unique style and chosen powerful and international roles in both mainstream and independent productions. She has painted a portrait of a woman who fights to survive and exist in a world that is at once masculine and violent, dogmatic and cruel, grasping and soulless. And across these many personal, social, or political battles, she has carved out a quest and a balancing point: Namely, wisdom. A wisdom that has allowed her to live through the recurrent chaos that hides behind her professional and personal fairytale.



#### **Director's Note**

Redhead, blonde, or brunette, with long, short, curly, or straight hair, with a false nose or even a false chin, Nicole Kidman has never hesitated to step outside of her Hollywood beauty or career path in order to fulfil her personal and professional desires. Very early on, she became aware of her profound artistic ambitions by ensuring she had Eyes Wide Open on her career and her life. And this lucidity allowed her to select the directors, subjects, and roles that interest her in order to carve out a universe in her own image without breaking with Hollywood.

Kidman was a reclusive teen and knew that she could transcend her discomfort through acting and could do this in order to rebuild herself and to survive. As an adult and a professional actor, she continued her quest to chase away the darkness. As such, the overall sense of this documentary as well as its narrative arc will carry a **dramatic tension** from disturbance and darkness to peace and light. This journey will reflect her work as an actress, experienced as a catharsis and strewn with existential and social questions through projects including *Eyes Wide Shut*, *Rabbit Hole*, *Big Little Lies*, and *Nine Perfect Strangers*. It will be a journey that intersects and intertwines with that of her personal life, guided by a search for balance and serenity.

The story will be anchored around pivotal films in her career and certain **key scenes** from the most emblematic of them. As such, *Dead Calm*, *To Die For*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, *Eyes Wide Shut*, *Moulin Rouge!*, *The Hours*, and *Dogville* will mark the main chapters in this documentary like the keystones in an edifice. To these will be added more intimate scenes from films like *Birth*, *Margot at the Wedding*, *Rabbit Hole*, *Lion*, and *Boy Erased* and series such as *Big Little Lies* and *Top of the Lake*. They will help illustrate an extension of her more introspective work and also her attachment to auteur cinema and her desire to not be only part of an American identity, rather an international one, with extracts from *Lion*, *Grace of Monaco*, and *How to Talk to Girls at Parties*.

These clips will allow us to show how Nicole Kidman constructed and then gradually laid out her image as a prisoner. How she abandoned her roles as manipulator to become a woman fighting such alienation. They will also underscore how her recurring themes are complementary to her life experiences: The need to exist, freedom within a relationship, solidarity in relationships in the face of drama, grief, ageing, handing down to future generations, and the role of women in society. All of these questions are part of specific moments in her acting career as in her personal journey through life.

This documentary will follow Kidman's career in chronological terms through a logic closely connected to her personal timeline, but it will also address different themes at each stage of her filmography and her life.

Some key scenes will also allow us to highlight her approach to acting, such as her choice to not bring self-deprecation to her character in *To Die For* making for a more caustic composition and her provocative submission in *Eyes Wide Shut*, along with her work on the interiority of confinement in *Portrait of a Lady*, despair in *The Hours*, and anger in *Rabbit Hole*.

Because of her relationship with Tom Cruise, Nicole Kidman's life has always been scrutinized, pho-

tographed, filmed, and commented on by the media. We will use these sources as counterpoints to the unfolding of her artistic life, without forgetting her extensive charitable work with organizations like UNIFEM and UN Women.

To understand her choice of films, directors, and career shifts, to shed light on her performances, and to understand different periods in her life, Michel Ciment has given us permission to use his long interview with Kidman from Cannes 2012. This exclusive interview will serve as a guiding thread for the narrative. Nicole Kidman's voice will mingle with archive footage, and extracts from film and other shoots. This will highlight the coherence of her work, her research and various quests, and will unify the documentary.

In addition to these audiovisual and sound archives, I will be conducting interviews with the most important directors, playwrights, and authors to have worked with Kidman. They will bring a complementary viewpoint, shedding light on the archive material and Kidman's life. These interviews will be filmed against a black background to better isolate their words and to not interfere with the unfolding of the narrative.

Gus Van Sant (To Die For, 1995) - confirmed John Cameron Mitchell (Rabbit Hole, 2010; How to Talk to Girls at Parties, 2017) - confirmed Michel Ciment (writer, critic) - confirmed Peter Debruge (Chief Film Critic at Variety) - confirmed Phillip Noyce (Dead Calm, 1989) – agreement in principle

#### Voiceover

The voiceover will structure the narrative and will mainly underline the construction of Kidman's oeuvre in her films and in the comings and goings between fiction and real life. It will bridge the different chapters in the documentary and will also ensure coherence between Kidman's own voice and her interviews in order to ensure an organic whole. It will avoid any didactic or journalistic tone, favoring a more literary feel, spoken in a woman's voice. We are considering using Suliane Brahim, member of La Comédie Française, for her dramatic density and sober tones.

#### **Director Patrick BOUDET's Bio**

Patrick Boudet started out teaching philosophy in high school before going on to explore a range of jobs, mainly in the digital universe, before stepping into TV and journalism a decade ago, with a preference for culture and society subjects.

He has made two documentary films, including *La Vie de Brian Jones* about the creator of the Rolling Stones, which was broadcast on Arte in January 2021. He has also made around 20 radio documentaries for France Culture, including *Paroles de Mineurs en Prison* (52'), *Une révolution douce*, *l'économie sociale et solidaire* (4 x 52'), *La Résurrection de Piero Della Francesca* (52'), *Zep* (5 x 28'), and *Il était une fois la Pop Française* (52'). He is the author of screenplays for several series screened on French TV, including *Chérif* (France 2), *Dos au mur* (Chérie HD), and *Léa Parker* (M6), and for the past four years has written a monthly column in *Rock & Folk* magazine.



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