

arte
SALES

THE WARS OF COCO CHANEL 52'

PITCH

ARTE SALES AND SLOW PRODUCTION PRESENT
A DOCUMENTARY WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY
JEAN LAURITANO

PROVISIONAL DELIVERY: OCTOBER 2018

War against social order, against conventions, against men, against bankers, against her contemporaries. A war against the entire world. Coco Chanel had to fight many wars to go from the little orphan maid to the famous tailor celebrated worldwide.

By borrowing from men their money and their style, she lived a relentless battle, a merciless fight to exist on her own and to go down in history.

Socialite, fashion designer, spy, and rebellious old lady, Chanel constantly reinvented herself throughout her existence, creating her own legend. A Broadway musical was even dedicated to her while she was alive.

Coco was also a witness of times that had disappeared, the Belle Époque and the Roaring Twenties, leaving her alone and bitter at the twilight of her life.

A portrait of one of the most iconic figures of the 20th century that was greater than life itself.



SYNOPSIS

PROLOGUE

Broadway, January 1970

The Mark Helinger Broadway Theater's glowing scroll announces the Coco musical. Hollywood star, Katharine Hepburn, plays the starring role of world's most famous seamstress, Coco Chanel.

The movie recounts Chanel's return to the world of haute couture in 1954 after 15 years of absence. A failed comeback that will eventually turn into a triumph.

Although the show uses the standard cliches of the Chanel legend, tweed jackets, choker necklaces, the mirror staircase of the rue Cambon, the movie remains a novelty insofar as it is the first musical featuring a French heroine who is merely a seamstress.

But Chanel does not attend the premiere. Is she snubbing the event?

A few days later, in Paris, under the gaze of the ORTF cameras, one can see the real Coco Chanel attending her new haute couture fashion show presentation. Seated in her favorite spot, on the step of the stairs, she remembers her famous comeback in 1954 her first collection since 1939 was greeted with a chilling silence.

How naive were those who believed that she had lost... She might have lost a battle, but certainly not the war!

As the first jackets of her 1970 Spring-Summer collection start parading around, she reminisces. Happy days with Boy Capel, her young aunt who pranced around the streets of Deauville wearing her first collection pieces, her sisters Antoinette and Julia who both disappeared far too quickly ... Her poor mother and her dreaded father... And all these wars...



A WAR AGAINST PREDESTINATION

Since her childhood, Chanel has been at war. Her mother is a sickly linen sales woman. Her father, a salesman too, who soon abandon them: she and her four brothers and sisters. Very early on, Gabrielle Chanel is convinced that she will have to fight to emancipate herself from this environment, if she ever wants to become one day independent.

Serving as a nursery maid, committed to a marriage she does not want, she runs away at age sixteen. Records show that in 1900 she was employed in a garrison town in a women's clothes shop before trying her luck as a singer in a second-class café-concert, but she doesn't have the vocal skills to succeed.

Regardless, the cavalrymen of the 10th Dragon Moulins are infatuated by this uncommon, tall brunette, especially one well-born young boy who is on military service in Moulin. His name is Etienne de Balsan. He will become her lover and protector.

A WAR AGAINST CONVENTIONS

With Balsan, Chanel rids herself of traditional conventions; she learns to ride a horse like a man.

Although she is well taken care of, she is different from other "courtesans". She prefers the stables to the salons and the boudoirs. To extravagant frills, she favours the equestrian outfits of the lads.

Her androgynous silhouette is at odds with that of the "horizontal" plump blondes.

She fixes her hairstyle with a simple boater hat, adjusted to cover half of her forehead. She is greatly admired by her protector's group of friends, and especially by Boy Capel, an English aristocrat, who encourages her to pursue a career in fashion.

1910, Paris : with the help of Boy Capel, who has become her lover, Chanel sets up her own business and starts selling hats.

But Coco is not a savvy businesswoman. Her economic survival relies solely on Boy Capel, who lends her money.

THE WAR AS A LAUNCHING PAD

It is not until the First World War that Chanel's career begins. In the autumn of 1914, the German army forces the ladies in the East of France and the Parisians to retreat to their summer residences. In Deauville, Gabrielle has just opened a new clothing store on Capel's advice.

These ladies who had to leave everything in a rush will dress in the only store that remains open: Chanel's store. She is innovative, using jersey, a material that was until then used only for men's hosiery... It is a success! Ladies fight for her dresses and make her fortune.

By 1916, Chanel is at the head of an army of three hundred workers. She can pay back her debts. She becomes a figure of women's emancipation, free to live and love whomever she wants, capable of earning her own money at age 33. Chanel now drives in a Rolls Royce, driven by a chauffeur. She offers herself a beautiful villa in Biarritz.

After the Armistice, she will become the idol and role model of the, soon to be called, "boys", who will adopt her square haircut and her short-sleeved dresses, rolling their stockings up below the knee.



AN INTIMATE WAR

But despite all this wealth, Chanel is confronted with strong social conventions: her lover Boy Capel cannot marry an “irregular” woman. He marries the daughter of an English Lord. Although she continues to see Boy, this abandonment will become a source of bitterness that will never leave her.

Betrayal reoccurs when she gets involved with the Duke of Westminster who will not marry her either. Winston Churchill thus reminds the Duke that “Chanel will never be accepted at the Court of England”.

Having become rich and famous, Chanel decides to switch roles. From now on, she will become the benefactor and the heart breaker. She becomes a benefactor for her friends Cocteau and Diaghilev of whom she funds stage productions, but also for her lovers, the poet Paul Reverdy and composer Igor Stravinsky, who figure in Chanel’s long list of “irregulars”.

THE N°5 WAR

The longest and most bitter of the Chanel wars.

With Ernest Beaux's help, she creates in 1921 her first perfume called N°5. Its success is immediate and will never falter.

To move up in gear, she joins forces with Pierre Wertheimer, a Jewish Alsatian industrialist and owner of Bourgeois cosmetics. Together, they create the Chanel perfume company which she will preside over. Averse to paperwork, Chanel signs a contract that grants him only ten percent of the shares.

But she feels cheated by this agreement and engages in hostilities against her partner. Their relationship deteriorates. From then on, they will only communicate through their respective lawyers.

With the advent of the Second World War, Wertheimer must leave France. Chanel uses her high-level contacts to assist Nazi dignitaries. She even becomes a spy, uses anti-Jewish laws to "aryanize" the Chanel perfumes company and dispossesses Wertheimer of his own assets. But Wertheimer has anticipated this manoeuvre and has placed a trustworthy man at the head of the company. He is considered an Aryan and, as an arms dealer, provides the Nazis with aircrafts and ammunition.

Chanel recognizes her defeat but she will re-instigate hostilities after the Liberation. Exiled in Switzerland to escape the investigations of the French justice department, she starts to produce her own perfumes under her own name which she gives to her friends for free. Wertheimer immediately sees the danger.

After long legal negotiations, Chanel finally wins the battle over the perfume. She receives \$326,000 in royalties from past sales and an annual percentage of 2% on global sales of the fragrances, approximately \$1 million a year.

"I'm rich, finally," she confides to her lawyer. She may be rich but that won't stop her from waging a new war. This time it will be a war for posterity.



THE SETBACK

In July 1953, the French Parliament votes a final law of amnesty for actions linked to the collaboration.

Chanel can finally return to France. She is dying to challenge the post-war couturiers. Christian Dior is the trailblazer. He has modernised femininity which she loathes. "Do you like those ladies wearing brocade and who once seated, look like old armchairs?!"

At age 71, Chanel presents her first collection in 15 years, on February 5, 1954. The classic Chanel suit is a fiasco. Chanel loses a lot of money and finally agrees to sell her fashion house to Wertheimer while continuing to respond to orders.

A TEMPORARY DEFEAT

Despite her failed comeback, Chanel persists. Three fashion shows later, she creates her ultimate masterpiece: the tweed jacket and knee-length skirt. A model of comfort: the fitted jacket doesn't move when one lifts one's arms and the skirt reveals nothing when one bends down.

Chanel, will make a personal demonstration of this in a series of photos for Life magazine.

It is a triumph, especially among American customers for whom the Chanel suit is the epitome of the Parisienne uniform. The tailor is sold by the thousands, adopted by the stars (Romy Schneider, Jeanne Moreau or even Françoise Sagan) and the first ladies (Jackie Kennedy in particular) and massively copied by the clothing stores on 7th Avenue in New York.



A PYRRHIC VICTORY

In the early 1960s, Coco Chanel is at her peak.

At age 77, she has won. Except for Balenciaga, “the ultimate fashion designer”, her only rival is now a 25 year old man, Yves Saint Laurent, for whom she has little sympathy: “He is right to copy me. It proves that he doesn’t value his own work and that he would rather be like me. The more he copies Chanel, the more successful he will be.”

But it’s a Pyrrhic victory.

Chanel is now alone on the battlefield. All her close friends are dead. She no longer has any lovers to inspire her. She simply reiterates from season to season her tweed suit, the ideal uniform, whatever the circumstances.

Progressively, her living space is reduced to her couture house on the Rue Cambon, which she only has only to cross in order to reach her room at the Ritz.

She turns into an old bitter lady, often making television appearances, where during interviews she denigrates her contemporaries during interview, as the only survivor of world that has vanished.

And she who embodied independence and emancipation, ended up even denying this free-dom to other women: “By aspiring to being equal to men, women have lost everything. There are no two women in the world who can be worth a man.”

To escape her loneliness, she takes refuge in her memories and her work, constantly delaying the hour at which she returns to her room, where she can only fall asleep after a Sedol injection, an morphine-based anesthetic on which she has gradually become dependent.

On January 10, 1971, Gabrielle Chanel eventually surrenders. After so many battles, some won, others lost, she utters her last words: “That’s how one dies.”



Céline Payot-Lehmann

Head of International Distribution

c-payot-lehmann@arteFrance.fr

Isabelle Monteil

Sales Manager

Territories: Asia, Greece
Oceania, Africa,
Language versions

i-monteil@arteFrance.fr

Sophie Soghomonian

Sales Manager

Territories: Eastern Europe,
Israel, Russia,
Worldwide Non-Theatrical Rights

s-soghomonian@arteFrance.fr

Audrey Kamga

Sales Manager

Territories: Canada, Ireland, MENA region,
Portugal, South America, Spain, UK and USA
Worldwide Inflight

a-kamga@arteFrance.fr

Franka Schwabe

Sales Manager

Territories: Austria, Belgium, France,
Germany, Scandinavia, Iceland,
Switzerland, Netherlands

f-schwabe@arteFrance.fr

Florent Rocchi

Sales Assistant

f-rocchi@arteFrance.fr