



## Belgium Erik Martens

Steven Spielberg's *The Adventures of Tintin: The Secret of the Unicorn* is not a Belgian film, but thousands of Belgians seemed eager to adopt it as such. They gave the film a 'warm welcome home' at its world premiere in Brussels, in October. The cartoons of Tintin are a key element in the Belgian collective consciousness, alongside René Magritte's bowler hats, Marcel Broothaers' mussels, French fries, and of course, the inevitable Belgian beer and chocolates.



Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's **The Kid with a Bike**

On a second, slightly less mythological level, are Belgian filmmakers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, who completed their latest feature. There is always a sense of occasion with their films. Over the last two decades, every three years the Dardennes make a film that always wins prizes at Cannes. 2011 could have seen them win their third Palme d'Or. Instead, **The Kid with a Bike** (*Le gamin au vélo*) walked away with the Grand Prix (shared with Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*).

*The Kid with a Bike* is an interesting new step in the brother's career. Whereas in previous films the grim social backcloth of the drama drew a lot attention to itself, the Dardennes set their latest story within a much lighter context.

Belgian star Cécile De France plays light-hearted hairdresser Samatha, who decides, without really understanding why, to take care of Cyril, a teenager who has been deserted by his father. But trouble seems to follow the boy, making Samantha's life much more difficult. The film was rapturously received by local critics, more unanimously so than the brother's previous film, *The Silence of Lorna*.

After the 'Famous Belgians' there are a number of films made by reasonably established filmmakers, whose output is still relatively modest. Filmmakers such as Bouli Lanners, who directed **The Giants**, and Dominique Abel, Fiona Gordon and Bruno Romy, who made **The Fairy** (*La fée*).

*The Kid with a Bike*, *The Giants* and *The Fairy* were all selected for Cannes. Bouli Lanners' first entry at the competition (in the 'Directors' Fortnight') confirms his talent for creating mysterious landscapes and gloomy characters. Black humour goes hand-in-hand with the sad and the sinister. The film's main characters are three teenagers who, once again, are left to fend for themselves by their parents. They decide to stick together in order to survive in a hostile environment. The universe that Lanners draws us into is fascinating, but this time both



Bouli Lanners' **The Giants**

plot and characters lack the precision of his previous two films.

*The Fairy* is something completely different. It's main character is a fairy, but a very down-to-earth variation, one who takes care of the needy. The fairy is played by Fiona Gordon, with Dominique Abel as her charge, a night porter at a hotel. The two become literally intertwined and experience the strangest events. As with the directors' previous films (*Rumba* and *The Iceberg*), it's all about pantomime, slapstick and playful choreography, much like their influences, Jacques Tati and Buster Keaton.



Dominique Abel, Fiona Gordon and Bruno Romy's **The Fairy**

Gust Van Den Berghe was the fourth Belgian in Cannes. In 2010 he was selected with *Little Baby Jesus of Flandr*, an interesting student short that was turned into a feature. **Blue Bird** is based on Maurice Maeterlinck's symbolist stage play, which Van Den Berghe relocates to a small African village. A child makes a magical trip, involving a bird, his deceased grandparents, children with white caps 'that are waiting to be born' and spirits that live in the forest. The narrative is not always cogent, but the direct style of the performances and the strong visual style makes for an attractive film, particularly the use of blue and the cinemascope format.

A similar observation could be made of the equally experimental **Portable Life** by Dutch photographer-turned-filmmaker Fleur Boonman. In it, a young woman, played by Ella-June Henrard travels around the world. The journey may also a spiritual one, but



Fleur Boonman's **Portable Life**

psychology and narration take a back seat to a photographer's experience of these sumptuous, often exotic, locations.

Of the new filmmakers, Nicolas Provost made the biggest impression. **The Invader** (*L'invahisseur*) tells the straightforward story of an illegal immigrant who washes up, barely alive, on a nudist beach. For the rest of the film, Amadou, impressively played by Issaka Sawadogo, attempts to find his way around Brussels. He does what he can to find his way in the city's underbelly, working as a cheap, illegal labourer on a construction site. With its lush images and accompanying soundtrack, drawing on the director's experience in experimental video, the film clearly highlights the double standards of modern society, between the haves and have-nots.



Nicolas Provost's **The Invader**

Issaka Sawadogo also appears in Kaat Beel's feature debut **Swooni**, once again playing a character called Amadou. Here too the character ends up in Brussels, this time accompanied by his son Joyeux. However, they are separated by an incident involving the police. Theirs is just one story in a tapestry of

contemporary life that also features a Belgian couple dealing with their marital problems and a dying mother trying to make peace with her daughter. It is atmospherically shot by Frank Van Den Eeden, who also shot *The Invader*, although the film would have profited from more control of its emotional engagement.

Belgium's Dutch-speaking cinema, which is more geared towards popular fare, produced two comedies that reached a broader public than was intended. Guy Goosens' **Frits & Freddy** is a grotesque comedy about two eccentrics who become crooks. They stage a kidnapping but soon find themselves in trouble. The film was privately financed, with no support from the Flemish Film Fund. It is also interesting to note that the film's dialogue uses the Antwerp dialect, which is not standard Dutch. This appears to have become a trend with recent Dutch-speaking productions.

Geoffrey Enthoven's **Hasta la vista** featured a number of social issues, but remained a broad comedy about three physically disabled youngsters who hire a bus and a driver for a holiday to Spain, where they hope to have sex for the first time. Like *Frits & Freddy*, this is hardly the most subtle or sophisticated form of comedy.

As a whole, local cinema has performed well over the last year. Even with financial, economic and political crises rocking this small country, more films are being made. Thanks to the tax shelter scheme more money is drawn into the industry and audience attendance for domestic product is increasing year-on-year. One of the stranger particularities is that this sizeable – and growing – audience is mainly Dutch-speaking (Flemish). So last year's box-office success, Michael Roskam's *Bullhead*, sold more tickets than the whole of French-speaking Belgian cinema combined.

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**ERIK MARTENS** is editor of DVD releases at the Royal Belgian Film Archive and a freelance film critic for different media.

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### The year's best films

**The Kid with a Bike** (Jean-Pierre & Luc Dardenne)

**The Invader** (Nicolas Provost)

**The Fairy** (Dominique Abel, Fiona Gordon and Bruno Romy)

**Blue Bird** (Gust Van Den Berghe)

**The Giants** (Bouli Lanners)



Gust Van Den Berghe's *Blue Bird*

### Directory

All Tel/Fax numbers begin (32)

**Royal Belgian Film Archive**, 3 rue Ravenstein, 1000 Brussels. Tel: (2) 551 19 00. Fax: (2) 551 19. info@cinematek.be. www.cinematek.be

**Communauté Française de Belgique. Le Centre du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel**, Boulevard Léopold II 44, 1080 Bruxelles. Tel: (2) 413 35 01. Fax: (2) 413 20 68. www.cfwb.be/av

**Wallonie Bruxelles Images (WBI)**, Place Flagey 18, 1050 Bruxelles. Tel: (2) 223 23 04. Fax: (2) 218 34 24. info@wbimages.be. www.wbimages.be

**Wallimage**, Rue du Onze Novembre 6, 7000 Mons. Tel: (6) 540 40 33. Fax: (6) 540 40 39. info@wallimage.be. www.wallimage.be.

**Ministry of the Flemish Community. Media & Film**, Arenbergstraat 9, 1000 Brussels. Tel: (2) 553 45 50. Fax: (2) 553 45 79. film@vlaanderen.be. www.flanders.be

**Flemish Audiovisual Fund (VAF)**, Bischoffsheimlaan 38, 1000 Brussel. Tel: (2) 226 06 30. Fax: (2) 219 19 36. info@vaf.be. www.vaf.be

**Flanders Image**, Bischoffsheimlaan 38, 1000 Brussels. Tel: (2) 226 06 30. Fax: (2) 219 19 36. flandersimage@vaf.be. www.flandersimage.com