

Interview of Luc et Jean-Pierre Dardenne

"All migrations tell the same story... When you migrate, you need an Other."

*On the occasion of the release in the Netherlands of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne's latest film **Tori and Lokita**, which won the prize at the 75th Cannes Film Festival, the two brothers granted us an interview in Amsterdam on Saturday October, the 8th. After **Rosetta** (1999), **L'enfant** (2005) and **Le gamin au vélo** (2011), the most awarded directors of the Cannes Film Festival tell the story of two isolated migrants and the fate of unaccompanied minors in Europe.*



Tori and Lokita is the story of a friendship so strong that it outshines the bond of blood. It's a story of unfailing loyalty that transcends the atrocities around them. Where did you get the idea to portray this duo?

Luc Dardenne : It came quite quickly. When we thought of a film with these two children, we thought of their friendship. I think it comes from the fact that when you migrate, you need an Other, a family, someone you trust. When you arrive in a country, or when you are on a boat or a lorry, you are looking for a connection, as you can't stay alone. There is a deep-rooted need for family ties.

So we thought that friendship would be central and, even more importantly, that it would be invincible. Even if one of the characters dies, it is because that character saves the other. It's still an act of friendship. She has not decided to sacrifice herself but is obliged to do so because of the circumstances. It is precisely by having this idea of friendship that we were able to build our film. Without this idea, it was impossible to structure the film. It can be found in many situations: the song that links them, Lokita stuck in the shed and her not being able to handle the solitude; the lie to get her papers. It's a friendship that is a bit naive, but it is strong, it is radiant.

As in your other works, we follow the actors to the body, like a dance. **Tori** doesn't stop for one second. He is constantly in action - running, crawling, cycling... Whereas **Lokita** is a prisoner of her own circumstances but also of her own body. How did you come up with this dynamic?

Jean-Pierre Dardenne : We started writing the script once we found the "couple" **Tori and Lokita**. This pair was very quickly characterised. At the beginning, there were two different bodies in the script. On the one hand, there was **Lokita** - bigger, stronger - and on the other, the kid **Tori** - small and nervous. Then we met **Joely**. She is tall; she was what we were looking for. If she hadn't been, we would have worked differently, but it was a good coincidence. **Tori** had to be small anyway, if only for the coherence of the scene where he hides in the car.

From there, to a point that we didn't imagine when we wrote the script, everything is finally built around these two different body rhythms. There is a choreography that runs through the film. **Lokita** has a body that endures, and takes a lot, while **Tori** is always in action. It is almost as if, from one shot to the next, he is helping her get up when she falls.

We have - without having had any preconceived idea, but simply an intuition from the start - nurtured this difference in bodies as the shooting progressed.

One difference is embodied in their movements: Tori's body goes everywhere, whereas Lokita's is, from the very first scene, trapped in a frame. Tori is constantly coming up with ideas and bouncing around. For example, when he wonders how to get around and has the idea to go and get the bike from the centre, or how to climb the shed, or how to find a wooden board. The actor Pablo was very dynamic himself. He told us that he was told that it would be an action film and that he was sitting down all the time. [laughs]



“ **W**e did what you should never do: show! ”

L.D. : He is not hyperactive in the psychological sense, but he is hyper active. He is very focused at school and he is a great sportsman. He is a Belgian vice-champion in high jump in his category. He is 1m44 tall and he jumps 1m57! [laughs] And now he wants to play basketball to "grow up in size"!

Although there are also experienced actors, you have made two non-professionals work together as main characters. What does this change for you as directors? Does it give you more or less freedom?

LD: It is important to distinguish between working with a non-professional actor - which they become when filming - and playing with a professional actor, as is the case with Thomas Doret and Cécile de France (*Le Gamin au Vélo*, 2011). Here, they are both non-professionals. For us, it was the first time, so it was a bit stressful.

And on top of that, we had cast them separately, so we had to make sure that things would work between them. We spent five weeks rehearsing before shooting. When you work with an actor on a rehearsal, generally what happens is that the actor/actress tries something, shows us how they would have done it. Then, as directors we adapt, and together we find the right shot. Here with them it was quite different because they didn't really dare. So we had to do what you should never do: show! In order to get them to imitate. We thought that would be the only way to start. So we did that for two, three days at most. Then we saw that they were adapting the performance in their own way, and that it wasn't just imitation. That made us feel better and we realised that it would be OK.

In the end, despite the anxiety of the beginning, we ended up working just like with any other actor, using ordinary shooting and directing methods and giving them some technical elements.

I must say that for many scenes, the rhythm came from them. Sometimes Pablo even went too fast! There was a scene where he had to turn around and run to Lokita but it was too fast. We didn't even see that he had turned around. "Did you even turn around?", I asked. And he answered: " Yes, I did!" As he is a sportsman, we asked him to "trot" rather than run, in order to make him go slower. Otherwise, the cameraman would never have been able to catch up with him! But most of the time, we also adapted, because he *is* Tori!

Showing the bond between two characters through a musical moment : we have seen it before in *Deux jours une nuit* (2014) or in *La Promesse* (1996), for instance. What does music represent to you, and more specifically, what does the Italian song represent in *Tori and Lokita*?

J.P.D. : It's a double-edged question! In this film, the song is really symbolic of their friendship. One of them starts, they sing together, then the other one continues, and so on. This Italian song allowed the embodiment of the two. It shows their complicity, as we notice their exchange of looks. A song is an offering. We give of ourselves when we sing. It's beautiful to film people singing. There is also a dramaturgical necessity since the Italian song tells a part of their lives before the film begins. It is a Sicilian song.

“ **A** song is an offering. We give of ourselves when we sing. It's beautiful to film people singing. ”

Although, both Pablo and Joely are very good singers from the beginning, we hired someone to coach them on the singing. This person was Italian, from the third generation of migrant families in Belgium, and he helped us to select this song. We needed a text that could be sung by children and taught to them by a woman. He introduced us to this music that he had learned at school, because it was practical to help children learn the language. He had learned Italian like this because his parents refused to speak the language to him. It's a repetitive song. It actually says things like "the biggest eats the smallest". In a way, it says that everyone is equal in the face of death.

Later, we learned that this song is not Italian but was originally sung by the Jews in Spain during the Inquisition. As they could not celebrate the Jewish Easter with songs, they sang this one. It recounts all the obstacles, all their exiles, and all the defeats that Israel has experienced.

L.D. : The wife of Angelo Branduardi translated it!

J.P.D. : ... But we didn't know that! It was only when we looked up the song on Wikipedia that we learned it.

L.D. : Then we met friends who weren't Italian, and they knew it still. In this song, they (Tori and Lokita) sometimes sing alone and sometimes in a duo. When together, their voices mingle. The voice is something particularly intimate because it comes from very far inside the body. It comes and goes through the ear. There is a great fusion in singing: for instance, when you listen to it or sing together, or when you participate in a choir. The lullaby is a consolation that they give to each other through singing. They do not fall into a question of meaning and content by asking what it means.

Indeed, and that keeps them close despite the separation. There is that scene too, when she is alone, lying on her bed and singing the lullaby. We imagine Tori answering on the other side.

L.D. : Absolutely, and that's what singing is all about, communicating deeply with another person.

Joely told us that she also sang all the time.

J.P.D. et L.D. : Yes, and she sings Sylvie Vartan's songs, just like in the movie!

The children are confronted with the worst of the adult world. Usually the children you portray – whether Igor, Cyril or Ahmed – have the choice to get out of it, and to trust the adults who are kind to them... Here we get the impression that Tori and Lokita are endlessly enduring and coping.



Does this mean that this time, there is no escape from tragedy?

J.P.D.: In this case, no. She doesn't escape. She is a tragic heroine. Her death is a way of pointing out the injustice of it all. And at the same time, she saves Tori anyway. When she runs and tells him to hide: she doesn't know that he's going to kill her but she does know that something bad is going to happen.

“ **S**he is a tragic heroine. Her death is a way of pointing out the injustice of it all. For us, it is a way of showing how far friendship goes, but also a way of denouncing this death as unacceptable.”

For us, it is a way of showing how far friendship goes, but also a way of denouncing this death as unacceptable. It's dark and pessimistic, but we think it's fair compared to the reality of the violent world, which has highly escalated. Nowadays, fourteen and fifteen-year-old drug dealers are killed, shot in the leg, mutilated... The information from the Belgian police has influenced us a lot. We also imagine that it can't be much different elsewhere.

So our choice was to experience the friendship until the end but hoping that the viewer would be revolted by the situation and feel sad to have lost Lokita. We tried something. Although we usually say that it's not appropriate in cinema to kill the main character.

It is true that we were a bit mad at you for this choice!

J.P.D. : A person in the audience did ask us once, "What did your parents do to you?" [laughs]

At the end, Tori gives a speech that is a farewell discourse but also an eminently political one. To what extent is this speech yours? Do you expect a reaction?

J.P.D. : Cinema is like a small voice that can help us stimulate this reaction. It raises awareness and can help to change the laws that govern young minors without parents. We must remain humble in this respect. But the truth is, if the film could help change the law that states that if you don't tick all the boxes at the age of eighteen you are expelled, it would be good.

When the film won the prize in Cannes, we dedicated it to Mr Ravacley for this reason. He is the baker from Besançon, who fought for his apprentice to stay in France, when he was about to be expelled back to his original country. I believe he is right. In fact, many other people think he is right. It would be ideal if there was legislation that would allow these young people to remain as long as they are enrolled in a school or professional training program. It doesn't matter whether they return home or not.

But it would be great if they could stay.

On the supposedly good side, apart from the figures of Nadia and Barbara - who seem to be the only real allies of the children but are not seen at all on screen - there is mainly the character of the judge. The one who should be helping them is in the end no help at all. How do you address this situation?

L.D. : In my opinion, they are simply not wanted. When you are a mandated child (worker, student or insider), either you don't have a paper or it is purely arbitrary. As there is no law that allows them to stay, it becomes arbitrary and we do the best we can. Sometimes we have allowed young people who have worked with us to obtain papers for them. We justified it on the grounds that they had a promising future. So this is where we are today. This is the real problem. In most cases, there is no real help and these young people are extremely lonely. This is why we fell into this representation.

They are surrounded by ogres. There's a bit of a storytelling aspect to it. There is a whole sequence in the movie, when Lokita is in this closed area of the plantations, and the noise of the machine sounds like breathing. This breathing, this rumbling, was intended to resemble that of a monster, in which Lokita is trapped, through the sound editing.

And in the belly of this ogre, Tori and Lokita are all by themselves. How did you research the situation that unaccompanied minors face, their loneliness?



L.D. : There is a French magazine called *La revue de l'enfance et de l'adolescence*, which is no longer published, and that did a special edition – number 96 – on unaccompanied foreign minors ("mineur.es étranger.e non accompagné.es", M.E.N.A. in French). Professionals working with these young people in France, such as psychiatrists and psychologists, have interviewed them. For confidentiality reasons, they sometimes change the names. And one of the things that comes out when you read it is loneliness. This is the first time in European history that children have migrated voluntarily. There have been deportations, of course and exterminations. But in this case, they are voluntarily migrating and coming to Europe.

“ **T**his is the first time in European history that children have migrated voluntarily. ”

Typically, the father, the male member of the family, would come first. It was never a child or a minor. There is a part of the migration that is networked and criminal, especially from Morocco and Senegal, where it is usually done through networks. But otherwise, the majority are not criminals. They are young people who come to work and send money to their families. In this very case, the solitude is extreme. Sometimes this loneliness even causes illnesses, as we can see from Lokita's anxiety attacks, which we also read about in the magazine.



Another case told by the professionals was that of a girl who slept constantly to avoid being present and to isolate herself from the outside world. For her, it was impossible to go to school, her body was sort of closed. Our aim was really to show that without Tori, Lokita is not doing well and falls into this loneliness, which is even felt physically.

In the Netherlands, the dismantling of the Ter Appel refugee camp shook public opinion in August. Ukraine also comes to mind. The European project is a project of peace and inclusion: do you think Europe has failed in its mission?

Together : Yes.

J.P.D. : Yes... But it's not that simple. I think there are people who would like Europe to fight for change, but it is true that they remain a minority. At the moment, we are not meeting our objectives. That doesn't mean that it won't happen or that no one is doing anything, but it seems that the majority is not in favour of changes and improvements. These are tough discussions. There are power struggles between those who are completely closed, like Hungary or Poland. We are also going through difficult times in France and Italy.

L.D. : I personally think that we have failed. Of course, there may be European laws that oblige all states to offer any unaccompanied minor on European territory child protection up to the age of 18, with no possibility of expulsion. But if the law stated that any unaccompanied minor who has begun a school or professional course could continue it *beyond* the age of 18, and having obtained this diploma, could stay in the country if they so wished, we would truly be making progress.

We are not talking about millions of children in France and Belgium. We are talking about hundreds of thousands throughout all of Europe. It's not that difficult to consider.

Mr Ravacley, to whom we dedicated the prize in Cannes, was asked what had become of his apprentice. He said he was with another baker today, and that he hoped to have his own bakery soon. Also, he is getting married here. And we need bakers anyway! From a realistic point of view, it is a profession that is no longer represented in our country. In the same way, if we had 20 to 30 new nurses per year in each European country, it would not be bad! These are people who want to study, but we just have a negative opinion about them, that's all.

J.P.D. : But there's nothing we can do about this negative prejudice, it's there and it has to disappear.

Interview by *Hélène Le Corre*
for Alliance Française d'Amsterdam
Layout by *Pauline Blache*
Photos by *Dorine Lebreton*

Many thanks to Cinéart for the opportunity of this meeting and their work in favour of French-speaking cinema in the Netherlands.

Thanks to **arte** for their support.