

Interview with Joely Mbundu

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*On the occasion of the release of **Tori and Lokita** in the Netherlands at the 75th Cannes Film Festival, lead actress Joely Mbundu gave us an interview in Amsterdam on Saturday 8 October 2022. She tells us about her first film experience, her experience on the set and her collaboration with the most awarded directors of the Cannes Film Festival.*

How was your first experience reading the script? Did it resonate with you straight away or was it more of a gradual path?

At the second casting, I was given an excerpt of the script and the story of the film was already explained to me. But it was only two months after the auditions that I received the full script. I read it in two nights before going to school. I read it as a child might read a book with lots of pictures. I was shocked. I was shocked because everything was really raw, but also real. These kinds of themes were not unknown to me and the script was really well written. I got into the story immediately.

When I finished it, I went straight to my mother and told her to read it too. I was looking forward to starting this story; to get into the cycle of filming; to put the script into action and to create Lokita's life.

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What was it like shooting with the Dardenne brothers? Did you have a lot of preparation time beforehand?

The Dardenne method is known for the many rehearsals before starting the official shooting. There were a lot of closed sets for three or four weeks of rehearsals. At that time, it's just me and the actors. I was working a lot with Pablo (Schils) who is quite young, so he was not there all the time for rehearsals. A child can't stay focused for long. And he needs to move, that one!



During the rehearsals, I was very often alone with the brothers (Dardenne), or sometimes with other actors like Alban Ukaj who plays the chef in the film. The brothers have their camera and they usually really film everything to get an overview and visualise. Then, they would review it on their side to find out what they could change; what they could rearrange; and how to put the scenes in motion. Sometimes, we would just rehearse the gestures and movements. Occasionally with the text, and at other times Luc (Dardenne) would play the other character. He would really “interpret” it in order to help us find our personal rhythm: The rhythm that will bring this story to life.

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We would arrive on set in the morning, already dressed and ready, and we would practice. Then, the crew would come, not to shoot yet but to rehearse with us over and over again. It can go up to 90 times.

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Was there a particularly difficult scene to film, because of its content or the shooting conditions?

It was the scene with Charlotte De Bruyne. It was the longest sequence shot of the brothers' career! I was really knocked out after that! It is the scene in the hangar, where there's a lot of different movements. I go; I come; I fall; I get up; and it's all in a loop. It's very physical!

And then there was the anxiety attack. In everyday life, I do stress a lot. But I had never experienced playing an anxiety attack in this way. I stepped out of my comfort zone. Falling out of the sudden and being in this state of panick, I wanted to do it right, and to make it believable! It was one of the hardest scenes too because I felt like I was being ridiculous. But in fact, I was not because that's really how an anxiety attack happens. I wasn't used to feeling that way at all. Then it would all come together: I would have to go back to the room, talk and then scream, before it would calm down. On the set, you feel a lot of emotions. You feel sadness, anger and then, relief at the end. Besides, from the beginning of the scene you are already thinking about what you have to do next. It was definitely the most complicated scene to do.

And then throughout the shooting? I felt this pressure, this wave of negativity that revolves around the character of Lokita. I *was* Lokita. Sometimes I was giggling nervously because no one ever named or put a word on what happens to her. For example, when Lokita has to get down on her knees in front of the cook, we don't say it but we all know why she gets down. I had a little “stress laugh” at that moment, because of the implications of this scene.

With the exception of Pablo, you were surrounded by professional actors. Did they have a particular way of doing things, of guiding you through their experience?

Working with them is really about learning and taking advice. When I saw them perform, it was really like a "action" clap. They get right into their character.

Seeing them like this in front of me, this “switch” of the person... well that was very impressive. It was sick! [laughs]

There is one scene that really impressed me, the one with Marc Zinga in the car. He really got me into the character of Lokita. He pushed me personally to the limit, so that I would feel certain emotions while we were acting. He did it in such a real way that I was blown away. All I wanted to do was to say "Stop filming! Are you insane? I thought you were going to attack me!" But I knew that it was impossible. The cameras were there, and all of this was just acting. It looked so real and I was so impressed. I had the realization "Marc Zinga, he's somebody!"

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He made me want to learn even more and to be able to give that impression to the audience as well. It's wonderful to work with them. It's a constant help, just like the Dardenne method, because you can always practice. It is like a dance. You rehearse the choreography and the people you're going to dance with are the actors, the protagonists...I think that's wonderful. They are good dancers.

“ **T**he Dardenne method is like a dance. ”

It is a dance and it is also singing! What was it like for you?

I loved it! In everyday life, I sing all the time. I always have music in my head. One will tell me to take off my headphones but I need my music! When I was told at the casting that I had to sing, I was very happy! Especially when singing in another language was in question, because I usually do that too. After the karaoke scene, they had to take the microphone out of my hands. Otherwise I would have kept singing!

I met Pablo during the singing rehearsals. He was already rehearsing with the singing teacher when I first walked in. I was immediately impressed.

What are you listening to at the moment?

I really listen to everything! I don't even have a proper playlist because I would delete and add songs all the time. For instance, I like listening to Brigitte Bardot's, Enrique Iglesias' or Whitney Houston's songs all the time - that's really a must. I also listen to songs from elsewhere like Gustavo Lima who is Portuguese. I even enjoy listening to cartoon songs. It changes all the time. Old or new. Anything that makes me want to sing along will make me want to listen to it.

“ **I**n a marriage, they say 'till death do us part'. But I think even death can't break their friendship. ”

The friendship with Tori is at the heart of the movie. It is transcending. How did the collaboration with Pablo [Schils] go? And how do you see this indestructible friendship in the face of adversity?

Already at the singing rehearsals I was impressed by such a young but talented child. During the filming, he often wanted to play. He was constantly moving and I felt old in front of him. I'm only 17 but I'm already too old to be so active and to move around that much! He has energy to spare. At the same time, when he acts, he's really focused on his performance and it's great to see him evolve as he goes along.

Tori and Lokita's friendship indeed is indestructible. It's great and has a strong meaning. Of course, the audience will be really upset by the end of the story. But above all, I think it is their friendship that should be remembered. Even through death, it persists. In a marriage, we say "till death do us part". But I think that even death cannot break their friendship. They also have this bond through the songs they sing, and he will continue to sing them and think of Lokita. It is beautiful.

You were talking earlier about the work on movement in the Dardenne's set design, how did you work on this dance with Pablo?

From time to time we worked together, but most of the rehearsals were just me, because we weren't going to impose more days of shooting and more days of rehearsal on him. We made sure to create this adaptation game. I had to constantly adapt to his movements. It was like there was a thread connecting me and him. If he moves, I move too. I tried to match his pace.

Besides, he is small and I am tall. It creates this contrast between a "little ball" that jumps all the time and me being slower! He brings joy in his movements and something positive, and Lokita needs that because there are a lot of negative things around her. It creates quite a nice contrast I think.



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The Dardenne brothers' cinematography always gives a voice to the disenfranchised. In this case it concerns exiled minors. Was it difficult to carry this?

Even if the movie deals with fairly social subject, to me it is still the story of this particular duo: Tori and Lokita. This is what I want to remember. We try to bring this story to life. How Tori and Lokita live in today's society and how they are excluded from it. The aim was not to directly denounce this kind of case. However, this film illustrates a social and political situation, so you automatically become the voice of people who are in the same kind of situation.

Sometimes it can be stressful, because now I have become the voice of people who might expect me to do this, or that. But can I even do it? You have to try and honour the role you're interpreting and if it has a positive impact, then great!

You are at the very beginning of your acting career. You've been in front of the camera of those who filmed Marion Cotillard, Adèle Haenel or Cécile de France. What does this opportunity mean to you?

I think I still don't realise. For example, when I look at the pictures of the festivals I've attended, it feels surreal. My whole family asks me if I realise the impact it has, but I don't. I try to live in the moment. When I got home, I had a sort of a backlash and I couldn't believe it! Thinking back to the Telluride Film Festival (U.S) for example, even when I got to the airport, I thought it was impossible. I thought I was going to miss the plane! Once I got in, I thought I was going to miss the next one! [laughs] Then I got there and thought "this is not real, wake up"!

It's so amazing, especially because I am living it with my family by my side. My mum, my brothers and my sisters are very proud. When we talk about it, we all have starry-eyed because this is what I have always wanted to do. I see their pride and when I come home we talk about it for hours and hours. I bring them little magnets to put on the fridge: "Here, I went to Amsterdam!" [laughs] It's great to live this adventure; I never have the feeling that I'm living it alone. I carry them with me.

The only thing that could be a bit negative is to have this succession of crazy stuff and opportunities, and then all of a sudden it stops. It makes you doubt yourself. For example, when I came back from Cannes, it was a brutal *Back to reality*. I asked myself "What should I do now?". It's perfectly fine not to do anything and to let things happen, for a period of time. It has nothing to do with procrastination or laziness. Yet, there is this "what am I doing with my life right now" feeling. It's easy to forget all the things I've accomplished that should make me proud. Luckily I still have my family around me, and saying "Look what you've done! Look at the pictures!". It's really complicated to realise what you're going through. The people around me did, but not me directly. It is a real work on yourself. You always have to remember to get up.

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Leaving the stress behind, do you have any idea what to do next? Are you still studying at university?

And after a film - especially one that is shown at a festival - people expect you to aim higher. Of course it's not compulsory but it can cause stress.





I hope to be able to do more projects, concepts, to be able to interpret and constantly learn. And at the same time, get to know myself. I want to meet people, exchange and make my family proud. And to make the (Dardenne) brothers proud too! They like to take on new actors whom they have seen firsthand, to give them a chance and made them evolve.

For the moment, I'm waiting for offers from an agent so that I can officially make it my job. I'm still at university. But I don't really like sitting for hours listening to the teachers [laughs]. I study languages, English and Spanish. I was able to practice in San Sebastian!

Before Tori and Lokita, what was your relationship with cinema? Did you often go to the movies?

I already liked the arts: I dance a lot and sing all the time. I even recently found videos of me doing Jamel Debbouze-style One Woman Shows for my mother. Such an embarrassment! But that made me realise that I already liked this cinematographic and staged side. I could even make a Jean-Paul Gaultier catalogue out of it. I was five years old then and there is something pleasant about saying to myself "I was like that, and I still am".

In the end, there is perhaps not so much randomness in it, you were preparing for Cannes!

Yes, or maybe even for Jean-Paul Gaultier who was waiting for me there somewhere! [laughs] I took a scarf and put it around me, and frankly I was showing off! I was going for it!

*Interview by H el ene Le Corre
for Alliance Fran aise d'Amsterdam
Layout by Pauline Blache
Photos by Dorine Lebreton*

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

Thanks to arte for their support.