



QUINZAINÉ
DIRECTORS' FORTNIGHT
CANNES 2010

MINDS MEET PRESENTS

LITTLE BABY JESUS OF FLANDR

A FILM BY GUST VAN DEN BERGHE



Look a star,
our star that lights up the sky.
An endless spark, a pin-prick.
In the deep of the night that separates heaven from earth.
Great, so grand.
As grand as faith in man.
Faith in God.
Faith in faith.
For centuries extinct, quite like the truth.

LITTLE BABY JESUS OF FLANDR

The three beggars Suskewiet, Pitje Vogel and Schrobberbeeck are tired of being poor and hungry, so go out singing Epiphany on Christmas Eve. Money, food and drink are thrust upon them, but on their way home they get lost in the woods and witness the birth of Little Baby Jesus. Dazzled by this miracle, they give away all their gains. When Christmas next comes around, they decide to sing again. But puzzled about last year's experience, they start to quarrel over their gifts. Eventually they fall out and go their own way.

PITJE VOGEL Paul Mertens

SUSKEWIET Jelle Palmaerts

SCHROBBERBEECK Peter Janssens

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY Gust Van den Berghe

BASED ON WORK OF Felix Timmermans

PRODUCER Tomas Leyers

PHOTOGRAPHY Hans Bruch Jr.

SOUND Matthias Hillegeer

ART DIRECTION Jørgen Hopmans

COSTUME DESIGN Mellisa Fellahi & Liesbeth de Smet

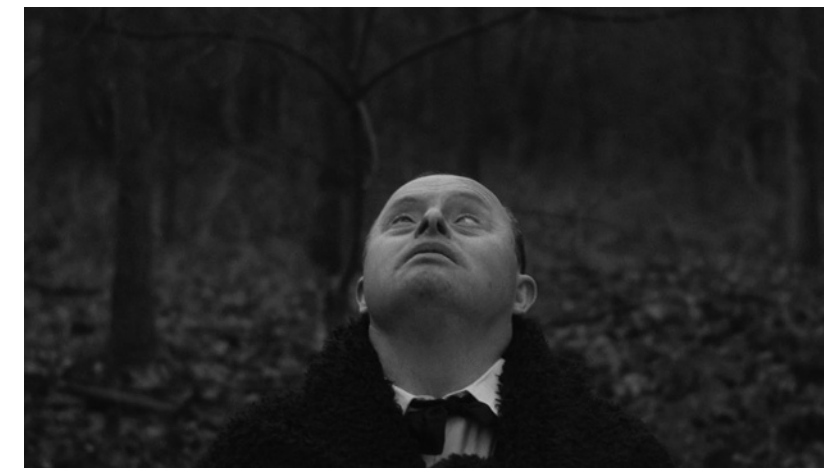
EDITING David Verdurme

MUSIC Va Fan Fahre

SUPPORTED BY Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds, Flanders Image,

Theater Stap, Erasmus Hogeschool Rits, Gemeente Kasterlee

BELGIUM 2010 · 74' · DCP · DOLBY SRD · 1:1.85 · BLACK AND WHITE





DIRECTOR'S NOTE

JESUS' PREACHING HAS REPLACED THE FAITH IN A TRULY EXISTING GOD BY THE MEANING OF LIFE (LEV TOLSTOI)

In my opinion, the reinterpreting of faith is one of the biggest human challenges of today's society. It feels like there's something missing, like we don't believe what is happening to us anymore. The strength of modern film lies in the fact that it can neutralise this feeling and give us back our faith. Faith in the ground we walk on and the sky above us, in ourselves and in the other. Sincere faith has become almost a taboo and can be seen apart from a certain God. Whether we are Christians, Jews or atheists, we all need reasons to believe in this world, and not in another one. We all need earthness.

The story

'Little Baby Jesus Of Flandr' is based on Felix Timmermans' work. A big part of it comes from the theatre play 'En waar de sterre bleef stille staan'. It's a part of his 'Driekoningentriptiek' (1925) and has been performed all over Flanders and The Netherlands. Particularly in the Christmas period, both small and big theatre companies in the Flemish villages bring this very popular play back to life. I saw one of these plays as a child and I've never forgotten about it.

The story is set on local ground which makes it easier for the Flemish people to rely to. At the same time, it is a very universal story with the theme being the contrast between faith as a way of life, some kind of people's devotion and losing this faith due to the craving for material wealth. These three timeless elements are shown through three main characters, each with its own qualities.

The characters

These are indeed actors. I wanted to put the focus on the innocence of the characters, in the good and in the bad. Each character in the story is a clear, non-complex figure. This creates outspoken caricatures which remain true to themselves during the entire film. From this point of view, it seemed a logical choice to work with mentally disabled actors. Because they own this non-complex earthly quality and at the same time have an angelic mind. This is why they play real characters and still remain true to themselves. Baby Jesus and the devil on the other hand, are played by 'normal' actors and do not own these human, earthly qualities.

PURE AIR

SOME CHRISTMAS STORIES ARE OFF-SEASON.

‘LITTLE BABY JESUS OF FLANDR’, THE FIRST

FILM OF GUST VAN DEN BERGHE, IS A WINTRY

FABLE THAT IS COUPLED WITH A PRESENT:

THE REVELATION OF A DIRECTOR.

“Everything comes from a great love for life and humanity.” This is how Gust Van den Berghe resumes with only one sentence the flood of emotions that overwhelm you at the end of the film ‘Little Baby Jesus of Flandr’, so many emotions that you can’t even name them immediately. We don’t discover every day a first film that is top-class. This film is first-rate from all aspects: the originality of the story (three inhabitants of a rural village meet the baby Jesus), the casting that consists mainly of mentally handicapped and his starting point: a text by Felix Timmermans, a famous Flemish author. “I have read the book by chance, when I was working on the script of another film. I was touched by the love that came out of it: real, honest and pure. In Flanders, Timmermans has the reputation of being right-wing and very nationalistic, with all the associations that these terms bring with them. There are people who hate his books and there are others who love them for the wrong reasons. Such feelings didn’t come up in me when I was reading this text. I just found it incredibly modern. I started from an objective point of view. I don’t have nationalistic interests and I didn’t really get a Flemish, catholic education. That is why I can appreciate the beauty of the text.”



When Van den Berghe discovered this striking book, he was a film student at a school where it was difficult to impose 'Little Baby Jesus of Flandr'. "It's the kind of project that scares a film school... I went to that school by chance. At the beginning, I was busy with theatre, dance and music. I was 18 years old and I wanted to combine these disciplines. I thought that the best I could do was to concentrate on visual art, without knowing that I would fall in love with cinematography. I gave myself an education by watching a maximum of films, like I was talking with them. At school I learned the technique, but I am sure that finding your own artistic identity is something you have to do alone. I listened to my inner voice, telling me to make this film, which I made in secret. My teachers thought I was working on another script. I disappeared for over a year and came back with 'Little Baby Jesus of Flandr'".

The advantage of a handicap

Van den Berghe didn't take the easy way: he decided to shoot a black and white film and he wanted Down's syndrome actors to play in it. "I think that a black and white film has got a reassuring and very binary side. It clearly expresses the idea of a film about good and evil. As for the actors, they appeared to me like a logical choice: with "normal" actors, the film would have been an outdated story. Thanks to the Down's syndrome actors, the film achieved its desired modernity. I did a casting call and quickly I found some people who seemed to correspond to the different roles. After that, I spent some time with them so I could be sure that they would be capable to play a role. The real difficulty was to know how to look at them when we were filming. The first version gave a very good look at how they really are. They were true to life: some of them were talking, another one was playing with his dentures. But we didn't want the spectators to laugh at them. I showed this version to the artistic director of the Stap Theatre (the troupe understood most of the actors of 'Little Baby Jesus of Flandr', editor's note), who advised me to show them like I would have showed



other actors, which is also ethical. I just needed to adapt myself, I needed to use their language to achieve the desired result. The script was reduced from 150 pages to almost half the script. Sometimes, when we were filming, a sentence was turned into only three words. Sometimes the whole text was replaced by a simple gesture. It was a hard but a fascinating work: sometimes they could almost not follow my indications, but by being so graceful and sincere at the time they fulfilled certain gestures - giving a hand, taking somebody into their arms - they reached an absolute purity. I just needed to ask them to translate the dialogues I had written into gestures. If other actors would have done that, it would have looked artificial and it would have been dangerous for the film."

Little Baby Jesus of Cannes

At first, 'Little Baby Jesus of Flandr' was a play. Given the education of Van den Berghe, he could have contented himself with making a new version of the play. So why did he make a film? "This is the perfect story to become a film, because it brings celestial and terrestrial ele-



ments together in the content and in the form. As a director, I always had to use my own experiences in the text, but without adopting a moralistic point of view."

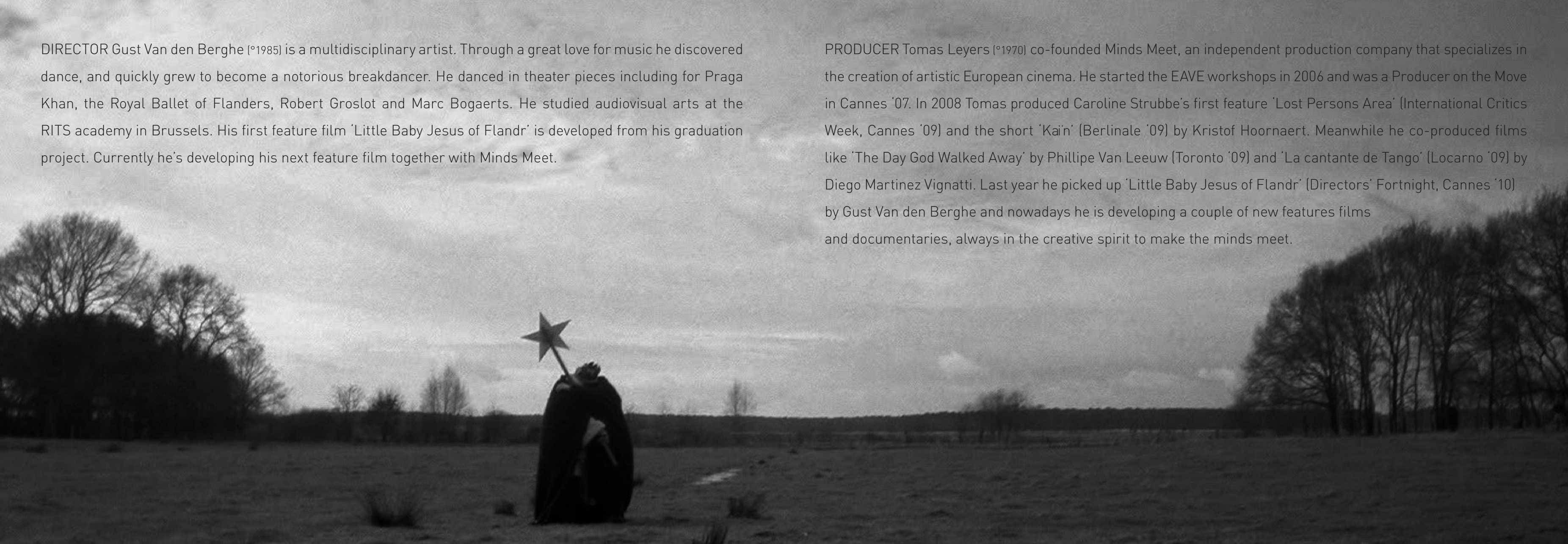
'Little Baby Jesus of Flandr' will play in the big league when the film will be presented at the Directors' Fortnight in Cannes. Van den Berghe is preparing himself but stays calm. "This experience is new to me. For the moment, I am very glad that the film will be shown there. This is the right place for people to tell honestly what they are thinking, what they love and what they don't love. I have noticed that 'Little Baby Jesus of Flandr' can frighten off: this is a black and white film that is made with handicapped people. That is why people don't want to give their opinion. However, all you have to do is open the door of this film to enter it or you have to know that you won't enter it. That's what the first shot is for; it explains the rhythm, the time and the universe of the film. I think that 'Little Baby Jesus of Flandr' is very simple, very classic and certainly not elitist. People can also find different reading levels or different symbolics, if they want. I am a film maker, so I want to show my film to the biggest amount of people. Cannes is the best place for that."

Whether or not the film will be a success in Cannes, the festival will be a springboard for the 24 year old director. He is already planning a continuation. "'Little Baby Jesus of Flandr' makes part of a triptych. The theme of this triptych is one of the biggest problems in our society: the lack of faith. I think that the modern cinematography has got the power to make a person believe, not necessarily in a God, but in something that unites people with the world they live in. I am writing the other two films of the triptych now. The form and the story of these two films will be very different. They will have something in common that seems to me the most important thing in the world: humanity."

(Subject researched by Alex Masson, *flanders i* magazine # 1)

DIRECTOR Gust Van den Berghe (°1985) is a multidisciplinary artist. Through a great love for music he discovered dance, and quickly grew to become a notorious breakdancer. He danced in theater pieces including for Praga Khan, the Royal Ballet of Flanders, Robert Groslot and Marc Bogaerts. He studied audiovisual arts at the RITS academy in Brussels. His first feature film 'Little Baby Jesus of Flandr' is developed from his graduation project. Currently he's developing his next feature film together with Minds Meet.

PRODUCER Tomas Leyers (°1970) co-founded Minds Meet, an independent production company that specializes in the creation of artistic European cinema. He started the EAVE workshops in 2006 and was a Producer on the Move in Cannes '07. In 2008 Tomas produced Caroline Strubbe's first feature 'Lost Persons Area' (International Critics Week, Cannes '09) and the short 'Kai'n' (Berlinale '09) by Kristof Hoornaert. Meanwhile he co-produced films like 'The Day God Walked Away' by Phillipe Van Leeuw (Toronto '09) and 'La cantante de Tango' (Locarno '09) by Diego Martinez Vignatti. Last year he picked up 'Little Baby Jesus of Flandr' (Directors' Fortnight, Cannes '10) by Gust Van den Berghe and nowadays he is developing a couple of new features films and documentaries, always in the creative spirit to make the minds meet.



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