

The Dardenne brothers interviewed by Perry Ogden for Film Ireland

If you want to see the purest and most distilled cinema being made today then look no further than the Dardenne Brothers. Well versed in the films of Rossellini, Fassbinder, Loach, Kieslowski, Oshima, Cassavetes and early Scorsese, they are in the company of Francis Ford Coppola and Emir Kusturica as the only directors to have won the Palm D'Or twice. Initially based in the French speaking Belgian city of Liege, they started out in the mid-seventies working with Armand Gatti, the socially committed Belgian playwright and filmmaker, before making their own videos and documentaries on local social issues. They came to Derry in 1981 with Gatti (Jean-Pierre as first assistant cameraman and Luc as first assistant director) to work on the feature 'The Writing on the Wall' and made their own first feature 'Falsch' three years later. But it was no easy route into feature films as they struggled to establish their own personal vision. It wasn't until 'La Promesse' (The Promise) in 1996, which was filmed in Seraing – a post industrial town south west of Liege where they have made all their films since - that they found their own gritty, yet poetic, realist style and finally broke through onto the world stage. Since then they have made 'Rosetta' which won the Palm D'Or and Best actress for Emilie Dequeenne at Cannes in 1999, 'Le Fils' (The Son) which won best actor at Cannes for Olivier Gourmet in 2002 and 'L'Enfant' (The Child) which won the Palm D'or at Cannes last year. There is a strong moral core to their films, but with a twist - a certain ambiguity - because they know that life is never that simple. In L'Enfant, eighteen year old Sonia has just given birth to a son, Jimmy, but Jimmy's father, Bruno, is immersed in a life of small time crime and is more interested in money than his new born son - until he realises that there is a way of making money from his son.

PO; Before the screening of 'L'Enfant' in Toronto you gave a brief introduction saying that there was a day during the shooting of your previous film, 'Le Fils' when you saw a young girl, at different times of the day, pushing a baby in a pram, and that she was being quite physical, even violent, with the pram, and that this was the starting point for 'L'Enfant'. Can you tell me how you developed the idea further?

LD; When we start to work on a film we meet up everyday to talk and in the early days of developing 'L'Enfant' we kept coming back to this girl in our discussions. We were thinking, what is this girl, of sixteen or seventeen, doing? And we came up with the idea that she might be looking for a father for the child, not the real father, just a man who would live with her and the child. We were talking and talking and then we thought what if she has a man, the real father, but he isn't capable of being a father. And then we were thinking how can we show that he is not capable. There had been some stories in the newspapers about people selling their children, so we thought he could sell his own child. At the same time we wanted to tell a love story between Sonia and Bruno, a story about a boy who finally succeeds in becoming a real father.

PO; Many of your films deal with the father, either the absence of the father, or the responsibility - or lack of responsibility - of the father. In 'L'Enfant' the father appears to be totally disengaged. Is this a representation of a wider malaise?

J-PD; Bruno doesn't belong. He doesn't belong any longer to a class - the working class - because it doesn't exist anymore. Seraign is a town where the working class was very important. It was a centre for mining and heavy industry. There was a tradition, a solidarity, and a strong working class culture which disappeared with the end of this form of industry. And we saw a lot of lonely people appearing - like Bruno, like Rossetta - that don't have a context anymore in which they can live their lives, in which they can find themselves.

LD; If there had still been this context then in Bruno's case his mother would have taken care of his child, a bit like the solidarity between Italian families, as a lot of the mining people in this area were originally Italian immigrants. The social security for the working class was the family.

PO; When you are developing these ideas into a script how much is scripted and how much is left to improvisation?

LD; We work for a long time on the script, writing as many as ten versions in a year before we show it to other people. Then we start looking for the sets and the script starts changing again. For example, when we saw the shack by the river we decided to use this instead of the shack we had scripted for Bruno that would have been built out of pallets.

PO; And do you have a long rehearsal period?

LD; Normally we start rehearsals a month and a half before we start shooting, not only with the dialogue but also looking at the way the characters would hold an object, how they would move from one place to another. And the actors might also make suggestions. We shoot the script chronologically which gives the possibility for the characters to evolve and we feel out what works and what doesn't. But we don't improvise, because we have so much preparation time, we don't say this is more or less what we want to tell in this scene so just improvise.

PO; And do you make the rehearsals in the same locations you plan to film in?

LD; Yes, and we tape the rehearsals on a video camera so we already have an idea where we are going to position the camera.

PO; So when you come to shoot the film how do you "direct" together?

J-P; Well, generally speaking, we always arrive on set before anybody else and we go to the first set-up of the day. We go over the things we already did during rehearsals and then call the actors in. We go through the scene with them without the dialogue, just the movements, and when we think we've got the right tension and pace we call in the technical crew, then everybody tries to resolve their own technical problems and then one of us goes and sits by the video assist monitor and the other one stays on the set next to the camera. After a few takes we will meet up at the monitor. Nine times out of ten we will agree on the take but if one of us says we would like to try it differently then we go ahead, but most of the time we agree and...(they burst out laughing)

LD; The big advantage of being with the monitor is that you can smoke, but I've quit smoking since the last film so I'm not sure what will happen on the next one.

PO: You've created a team who you work with very closely, in particular Alain Marcoen your director of photography. How did that come about?

J-PD; Most of the crew - sound, art department, costumes - are people we have been working with since 'La Promesse'. Many of them were already friends or they had worked as directors or technicians on the documentaries we were producing. Before we start shooting we spend a lot of time with Alain on the sets. He would have already read the script and we would just be talking, reminiscing even. He knows our way of working, so he is aware he needs to be inventive. And he knows that we might well use the whole 360° of a set so he can't put lightstands in.

PO; The girl who plays Sonia, Déborah François, gives an incredibly natural performance? Where did you find her? Had she acted before?

LD; Deborah was a young girl in the last grade of highschool who had at one point taken some diction classes. When we start casting we put advertisements on the radio and in magazines, asking for people to send their name, address and a recent picture. For Sonia we received six hundred replies. Based on the pictures we picked out about two hundred candidates and they had to come over for a test. We tried every girl for ten or fifteen minutes, made them do really simple things just to see the chemistry. Then we narrowed it down to ten girls and then two. When there were two girls left we gave them both all the scenes that they would be in and we made them play every scene we planned with them for the film. It really helps us because we play the other characters in the scene and the assistant cameraman films on video, so it helps us to work out the characters and get into the film. We are not very good actors but...

PO; Had you always envisaged that Jérémie Renier (from 'La Promesse') would play the part of Bruno?

J-PD; We knew from the beginning that we would do a casting for Sonia but we never really discussed Bruno's part. But in the scene we had written where the little boy is waiting on the back of the moped and Bruno laughs we realised that this laugh reminded us of Jeremie, the way he used to laugh around with us on the set of 'La Promesse' and that made us think of him. Though we were concerned that Jérémie might be too old for the part, because we hadn't seen him for a couple of years. So we called him and asked how he was, but we didn't want to say he had the part, we just asked him to come and have a drink with us in Brussels or in Paris. So he said he was coming to Brussels the following week and would call us. But he never called. A bit like Bruno. He didn't understand we were offering him the part so we had to tell him.

PO; Had he acted before you gave him the part in 'La Promesse'?

LD; No, he was only fourteen when we found him and I think fifteen when we were filming.

PO; There was quite a transformation in your work between the first two films - 'Falsche' and 'Je Pense a Vous' - and 'La Promesse'. Was there a conscious decision to change direction?

J-PD; 'Falsche' which is the first feature we made was a play, so we were trying to film a text. We had three weeks to shoot and we tried, without preconceived ideas, to add something to it. It was all shot at one location - Ostend airport - and

each night, we were shooting nights, we tried to find an interesting approach. With 'Je Pense a Vous' we were surrounded by a very professional crew that told us what to do and we were shy and didn't really know what to do. So we listened and thought why not, why not. We didn't want to put music on the film but they told us we had to. We had the feeling that this movie that we had made wasn't ours. With 'La Promesse' we wanted to work with friends, friends who were professionals and who were open to our approach, and listened to what we wanted. For most people, except for the sound recordist and the costume designer, it was their first feature film and because we gave them our confidence and trust they were happy and they really followed our way of work. So this felt like our first movie, our movie from start to finish, in the preparation as well as in the editing. We felt free, though we still had to put our foot down. There's a scene in 'La Promesse' where the father and son sing a Joe Dassin (the popular French American singer who died in 1982) song in a bar and we only wanted to shoot a master shot of the two of them and still people were questioning this, afraid it might not work, saying that we needed to do cover shots.

PO; At that time were there other filmmakers whose work you admired?

J-PD: Yes, but all the people that influenced us and that we admired we already knew, we had already seen their movies long before this transition. But what did we like so much about Rossellini's movies and how come what we did was so far away from our intention? The fact that 'Je Pense a vous' was so badly reviewed and such a public failure made it easier for us to say that we would have to do it our own way in future. And then we saw the films that had already impressed us in a different light, by knowing the mistakes we had made and enriched by our failure. And maybe, I can say this today, we wanted to take revenge because everybody had buried us. We had our backs against the wall, we thought we would give it one more try and if it didn't work out we wouldn't have been making films anymore. We were frightened of our own fear and we put our material in preconceived forms so it would be more comfortable and less confrontational. We had to confront our fears. and enter into a tension and working pace where you can feel things happen and get new insights. Yes, we had our role models, Rossellini and Pialat, we all saw them, but we didn't know what really appealed to us in these movies. It's not because you've seen them that you can make them. It's not because you read Dickens that you can write.

LD; We started again from scratch. We did everything ourselves. We looked for actors that didn't have any acting experience. Fine, no problem. We followed our instincts. We trusted ourselves. We didn't ask anybody's opinion. We didn't want complicated camera movement, we wanted the camera close on the actor, close on the emotions. We are empiric cinematographers. We need the material, the sets, the props, to feel where we are going, to work with. When we are looking at how to handle a scene we just try stuff and see if it works. We need to see it. We have to see it grow organically it's not preconceived in our minds.

JPD: I read a transcript of a Bresson speech for film students where he says "to make a movie you have to be against something...against professional actors, against a certain way of treating a scene... against whatever" before we made 'Je

Pense a Vous' we just wanted to make a film, we weren't against anything. And afterwards we were against a lot of things (laughing).

LD; Against ourselves for one thing!

PO; After making 'La Promesse' did you feel you had achieved what you had set out to do?

LD; Yes, it was the film we wanted to make, though we didn't know if it would be successful.

PO; And it was. Did that make it easier to find the money for 'Rosetta'?

LD; Yes, it was much easier. It was very hard to find the money for 'La Promesse' which was a cheap movie, about 1.25 million euros. We shot for eight weeks with everyone agreeing to work twelve hour days for low wages. We couldn't ask for the same sacrifice twice so by 'Rosetta' everybody got better pay – including us.

PO; And how long did you have to shoot 'L'Enfant'?

LD; Twelve weeks with a budget of three million euros.

PO; 'La Promesse' was also the first time you worked with Olivier Gourmet, who has been in every film since. How did you find him?

J-PD :Olivier and I were on a jury together evaluating students at the Liege drama school. We were still looking for the character Roger in 'La Promesse' and during the evaluation of the students I was observing Olivier

and there was something in the way he spoke and moved that I thought was right for Roger. I also really liked the fact that he didn't at all strike me like an actor. He didn't look like an actor. We saw a lot of possible people for Roger, but nobody struck us quite like Olivier. We did a test with him. We really liked him and he added a lot, he enriched the character.

LD: There is something I'd like to explain about French speaking Belgian movies. It is a very small industry and they have the habit of using French actors for the leading roles and have the small, less interesting parts, played by Belgian actors. We decided not to work with a known French actor but found it very hard to find an actor in the age bracket of thirty to forty. We had doubts. Maybe we were wrong. There's not really a tradition in the French speaking part of Belgium, because we lack the tradition of working with our own people. We've only started the last ten years to make our own people work, contrary to Italian or English films. Now there are only two well know French speaking Belgian actors – Olivier Gourmet and Benoit Van Poelvoorde. It's very important to have an identity as a filmmaker. You need to work with the landscapes and the people and really, without wanting to be nationalistic, you have to work with your own people so you have your own identity. If you put a well known Parisian actor in a Belgian movie it feels like an alien, it doesn't fit in.

PO; Do you plan to continue making films in Seraign in the same style that you have developed so successfully?

LD;We will see... It's a good question, an important question. It is something we are thinking about because the danger is that you find a system, even if it is your own system and a good system, it's still a system and you have to look out, but if we feel that we still have something to say in that context then we would love to do it.

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