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Friday September 16th, 2016

The Brand New Testament (15)

dir: Jaco Van Dormael

starring: Benoît Poelvoorde, Pili Groyne, Yolande Moreau

sponsors: Paul and Helen Hancock

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If Belgian director Jaco Van Dormael's fourth feature in 24 years - and first since 2009's *Mr Nobody* - feels familiar, it's because those who subsequently adopted his brand of whimsical fable achieved greater popular success than his own work ever did: think Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (2001) or the DIY surrealism of Michel Gondry. Evidently reinvigorated, Van Dormael returns with a sharper focus and broader comic appeal in this religious satire, which should reassert his rightful prominence in Francophone fantasy cinema.

One could envisage his gleefully, gently blasphemous conceit - God as a capricious boor, undone by his own feckless cruelty, his rebellious daughter Ea and a human race forced to reckon with its mortality - played as apocalyptic Bergmanesque tragedy or ferocious takedown of sacred cows. Instead, Van Dormael opts for something lighter, more allusive: global catastrophe as individual, spiritual reckonings. And, as with his acclaimed 1991 debut *Toto the Hero* and *Mr Nobody*, he explores ideas of reconstructing identity in the wake of personal, often familial trauma.

The Brand New Testament's Creator is decidedly 'Old Testament' (and Benoît Poelvoorde's haranguing fire-and-brimstone performance certainly demands Job-like endurance from viewers). From a dingy Brussels office with walls of towering filing cabinets, God torments mankind with tyrannies petty (toast always falls jam side up) and severe (plane crashes). In effect, He is antagonistic not only to young heroine Ea (a winning Pili Groyne, Marion Cotillard's daughter in *Two Days, One Night* - shown by LFS last season) but also to Van Dormael's whole film-making ethos: rather than bureaucratic, autocratic directives from on high, this is free-floating creative expression imbued with diversity and generosity.

Instead of trying to nail down the specific new doctrine suggested by the film's title, Van Dormael and co-writer Thomas Gunzig delight in comic meanderings and visual flights of fancy. Giraffes strut through deserted streets, a disembodied hand pirouettes to Handel, and random daredevil Kevin defies his distant death date (the predestined dates of everyone's demise having been leaked from God's computer) with increasingly outlandish stunts. However, Van Dormael's mutability gradually reveals his *idée fixe*. The film's exploratory energy is explicitly guided by the female perspective at its centre; that of Ea and, latterly, her mother. It's the film-maker's corrective to centuries of oppressive patriarchal dogma - God no longer has mankind 'by the balls' - and it's thus fitting that his own patchwork gospel remains a fluid feminine text.



Synopsis: Brussels, present day. God is a slovenly sadist, living in an apartment where he abuses the world's population via his personal computer and oppresses his captive wife and 10-year old daughter Ea. Ea finally rebels against her father's tyranny and, after briefly consulting with her brother 'J.C.', sneaks into God's office and hijacks his computer, releasing the date of death of every single person in the world. Ea then escapes into Brussels through a secret chute in the apartment's washing machine, and sets out to find 6 new apostles to write a new and more spiritually uplifting Testament.

Enlisting the homeless Victor to document her efforts, Ea tracks down her 6 targets, who include Aurélie, a love-lorn one armed young woman, Marc, a middle-aged sex addict, Martine, an older woman trapped in a loveless marriage and Willy, a young boy with days to live, whose dying wish is to become a girl. By reawakening their inner lives - Marc finds the girl of his teenage fantasies now working as a voiceover artist for pornographic films, Martine starts an affair with a virile gorilla - Ea shapes the new gospel. Meanwhile, vengeful, belligerent God, hunting for Ea in Brussels, finds himself powerless, constantly abused and eventually deported as an illegal immigrant.

Eventually God's wife takes control of mankind's destiny, cancelling the death dates and ushering in a kinder, more benevolent world. Victor turns *The Brand New Testament* into a best seller. God is last seen trapped in an Uzbekistan factory, forlornly searching washing machines for the tunnel back home.

Credits

Pili Groyne	Ea, God's daughter
Benoît Poelvoorde	God
Catherine Deneuve	Martine
François Damiens	François
Yolande Moreau	God's wife
Laura Verlinden	Aurélie
Serge Larivière	Marc
Didier de Neck	Jean-Claude 'J.C.'
Romain Gelin	Willy
Marco Lorenzini	Victor
Director	Jaco Van Dormael
Screenplay	Thomas Gunzig, Jaco Van Dormael
DoP	Christophe Beaucarne
Editing	Hervé de Luze
Art Direction	Sylvie Olivé
Original Music	An Pierlé
Sound	Dominique Warnier, François Dumont, Michel Schillings
Costume	Caroline Koerner
Belgium/France/Luxembourg	
2015.	114 mins

In pure story terms, this can frustrate. When Ea decides to write her 'brand new testament' she goes in search of six apostles, and their sequential tales engender a stop-start approach that occasionally interrupts the film's overall trajectory. And the incessant quirkiness sometimes jars with bleaker issues such as sex addiction or domestic abuse, particularly in scenes underlined by composer An Pierlé's unsubtle brass flourishes. Overall, though, in an age dominated by religious appropriated intolerance and violence, Van Dormael's inquisitive playful optimism might just offer audiences attuned to his wavelength something quietly and genuinely radical.

Another View

No one can accuse cowriter (with Thomas Gunzig)/director Jaco Van Dormael ("Toto the Hero", "Mr. Nobody") of not having a vivid imagination. This sly religious satire will delight anyone who's ever wondered how God can allow such misery in the world with its 'All you need is love' feminist coup. From the time that Ea's older brother 'JC' (David Murgia, "Bullhead") advises her to get six more apostles because dad thought there should be enough for a hockey game whereas mom (Yolande Moreau, "Séraphine") thinks there should be enough for a baseball team, to the washing machine portal to Earth that opens into a laundromat, Van Dormael finds laughs and ingenious visuals in every aspect of his film.

In the opening section titled 'Genesis,' we learn that God not only instigated war on Earth, but amuses himself by creating disasters like airplane crashes and instituting rules like always being in the slowest checkout line. JC, who's been relegated to life as a statue atop a wardrobe (presumably for going against dad's wishes), admires Ea's pluck - 'To give man awareness of his own death - awesome!' Meanwhile on earth, as people see their clocks tick down, many try to test its inevitability. Kevin (Gaspard Pauwels, "Mr. Nobody") reappearing throughout, his daredevil stunts becoming more and more extreme. After Ea's 'Exodus,' the next six chapters are given to her apostle search.

Aurélie (Laura Verlinden, Oscar nominated short "Death of a Shadow") is a beautiful woman who's given up on love because of a missing limb. Jean-Claude (Didier De Neck, "Toto the Hero") is a lonely office drone, Marc (Serge Larivière, "Séraphine") a sex maniac, François (François Damiens, "OSS 117: Cairo, Nest of Spies") a serial killer who gets in on testing mortality. Martine (Catherine Deneuve) is an abandoned wife and the last is a little boy, Willy (Romain Gelin), who wants to be a girl. Ea not only listens to each to find their signature music, but each finds wondrous fulfillment because of her intervention. One falls in love with Xenia, a German (Anna Tenta) who mangles trite sayings into sweet reinventions, another follows a bird to the Arctic Circle. Martine finds love with a gorilla. But Ea's plan doesn't come into full fruition until the inadvertent action of her mother, who, realizing what she's done, makes beautiful music of it.

Van Dormael's despicable God is played with impish, cranky glee by Poelvoorde, while Moreau projects naivety as a shield against his oppressiveness. Young Pili Groyne is preternaturally confident and enlightened. Each of the new apostles, seen in an updated version of da Vinci's Last Supper, progress from

downtrodden or unfeeling to fully, joyously alive.

Belgium's submission for the 2016 Foreign Language Film Academy Award is a marvel, where a woman sees her disembodied hand dance on a table like the Addams's Thing free of his box or nature astonishes with starling murmuration. "The Brand New Testament" is cheeky, wonderful and wise.

Laura Clifford: Reeling Reviews

Lincoln Film Society - AGM 2016

The AGM will take place on October 14th at The Venue. It will follow the showing of Rams. The annual report will be made available on the Society's website and emailed to members before the meeting, along with the agenda.

Our next film - Friday September 23rd, 7.30pm **Mustang (Turkey/France 2015. Cert 15)**

Mustang, our next film, is a coming-of-age film, set in contemporary Turkey. 5 teenage sisters face a crisis in their lives when some carefree behaviour at the end of term is spotted by neighbours, who report their antics back to their uncle and legal guardian. In a part of the country where social attitudes are conservative and traditional, disapproval - and sanctions - soon follow, and are severe: and instead of the weeks of summer fun they had imagined, the sisters find themselves confined to the house and told they must prepare for marriage, their childhood innocence increasingly wrenched apart and replaced with the harsher realities of becoming a grown-up.

The film has been universally praised for its depiction of the challenges facing so many young women today, especially in Muslim countries. The performances are wholly believable, as is the scenario, though sadly it will confirm the prejudices many hold of such conservative societies. It's an assured piece of story-telling by a woman (first-time director Deniz Gamze Ergüven) about women, has justly garnered worldwide praise and numerous awards, including Oscar and Golden Globe nominations and you can certainly expect it to feature at next year's BAFTAs.