

OFFICIAL ENTRY – BELGIUM

BEST INTERNATIONAL FEATURE FILM – ACADEMY AWARDS® 2022



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
UN CERTAIN REGARD
SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE 2021

PLAYGROUND

A FILM BY
LAURA WANDEL

MAYA VANDERBEQUE GÜNTER DURET KARIM LEKLOU LAURA VERLINDEN

DRAGONS FILMS PRODUCEUR PRINCIPAL JONATHAN VAN DER BRUGGHE CO-PRODUCEUR PRINCIPAL ASTRID VANDEWYCKEL PRODUCED BY FÉLIXE NOUÏFEMME SES PRODUCTIONS PHILIPPE BERTIN COSTUME DESIGNER VANESSA EYVAERT EDITOR THOMAS GUINA LANGSBOERG EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS PHILIPPE VAN LEEB MATHEU POIX EXECUTIVE PRODUCER JEAN-FRANÇOIS BARACAN
CASTING DIRECTOR FLORE VAN THIRIE PRODUCTION DESIGNER LEAÏSA BARONIA EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS ANDY KALKA-PER PYNSTOCK EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS VINCENT BUREAU EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS IRIANE FLAMAND EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS NICOLAS BOMPE EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS CÉLINE COLONBEVSKI PRODUCED BY IFFA CENTRE DU CINÉMA ET DE L'AUDIOVISUEL DE LA RÉGION WALLONNE - BRUXELLES PRODUCED BY FONDATION ROYALE DE L'ART ET DE L'ARCHITECTURE WALLONNE (LA WALLONNE) EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS YVES DE TV EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS TAX SHELTER DU GOUVERNEMENT FÉDÉRAL DE BELGIQUE PRODUCED BY INVESTISSEURS TAX SHELTER PRODUCED BY STEPHANE LEBEST
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● PRESS CONTACT

CINETIC MARKETING

Courtney Ott | courtney@cineticmedia.com

Julia Luisi | julial@cineticmedia.com

● FILM MOVEMENT BOOKING CONTACT

Maxwell Wolkin | Theatrical & Festivals

(212) 941-7744 x211 | maxwell@filmmovement.com

● **Country** Belgium

● **Duration** 72'

● **Language** French

● **Screen** 1:85

● **Sound** 5.1

● **Premiere** Cannes 2021 - Un Certain Regard

A film by | Laura Wandel

PLAYGROUND

(UN MONDE)







7-year-old Nora and her big brother Abel are back to school. When Nora witnesses Abel being bullied by other kids, she rushes to protect him by warning their father. But Abel forces her to remain silent. Caught in a conflict of loyalty, Nora will ultimately try to find her place, torn between children's and adults' worlds.

● **Director, Screenwriter**

Laura Wandel

● **Producer**

Stéphane Lhoest (Dragons Films)

● **Co-Producer**

Jan de Clercq (Lunanime)

● **Cast**

Maya Vanderbeque (Nora), Günter Duret (Abel), Karim Leklou (the father), Laura Verlinden (the teacher)

● **Photography**

Frédéric Noirhomme

● **Sound**

Thomas Grimm-Landsberg

● **Editing**

Nicolas Rumpl



Laura Wandel

Director and screenwriter

Laura Wandel was born in 1984 in Belgium where she studied filmmaking at the IAD school. Her school film, “Murs”, was selected in many festivals around the world. After her first short film, “O négatif”, she directed in 2014 “Les corps étrangers”, selected in competition at Cannes Film Festival. “Playground” (Un monde) is her first feature.

● **Playground, 2021**

Feature, Belgium - Cannes, Un Certain Regard

● **Foreign Bodies, 2014**

Short, Belgium - Cannes, Short Film Competition

● **O Négatif, 2011**

Short, Belgium

● **Murs, 2007**

Short, Belgium



Why did you choose childhood as your subject and the school as the location for your first film?

I chose the school, and especially the playground, because it is a micro-society. In the school, there is the issue of integration. But I observed playgrounds for several months before making the film and I spotted a notion of territoriality. In a playground, everyone tries to take their place.

Childhood is the time of first discoveries, when life and relationships are lived in a very intense way. It is at this time that our inner landscape is drawn and constructed. The beginning of school influences this landscape, which often determines our view of the world as an adult. In addition to learning to read and write, it is above all the relationship with others that we explore.

Is the playground the first place for social learning?

Yes, it is the first place outside the family where we learn how to relate to others. In the film, Nora enters school and it is the first moment when she is confronted with all the social issues: integration, finding her place in the community... These issues are the basis of humanity, everyone needs to be integrated, recognised, and many of the world's conflicts are linked to this. In Belgium, football pitches mostly take up the majority of the space in a schoolyard, which creates violence because there is little space left for those who do not play football. What happens in a schoolyard reflects what happens at many other levels of society and the world.

Nora is not alone at school, there is her big brother, Abel.

I started from a story of brotherhood because brotherhood defines us. And that's what's going to be undermined. Nora is going to

reject her brother because she feels that this is the only way to integrate into her new community. In the issue of integration, we often have the impression that we have to correspond to the other's view and give up a part of ourselves to correspond to the mass, which answers the vital need to integrate. The issue of friendship as an emancipatory act is central to this story.

Did you want to show that childhood is not always tender and rosy, that it is sometimes a cruel, violent and conflicting world?

Yes, because the beauty of childhood is all poetry but also all cruelty. The border between these two aspects is very porous.

Why is Abel and Nora's mother absent, and why does the film say nothing about this absence?

I wanted to stay in the world of the children and the school, to show the outside world as little as possible. It's difficult for Nora to see her father dealing with all the problems alone. Maybe the mother is at home or maybe not, we don't know and I didn't want to explain it. Because for children, there is the world of school, and almost nothing else exists. Generally, outside the family, this is the only world that the child knows, this is his or her representation of the world. On the other hand, not saying anything about the absence of the mother is to leave the viewer free. It's very important for me that the spectator makes the film his or her own, and in order for him or her to project things from him or her, you have to give them room. You can't give the audience everything on a silver platter, the off-screen is very important.

The mother is absent and the father is unemployed. Does this double situation reinforce a difference for Nora and Abel,



or even a form of shame, an inferiority complex?

I'm talking about Belgium where having an unemployed parent is quite common. But for Nora, it no longer becomes normal as soon as the other children question this situation and this changes her view of her father. On the other hand, she idealises other parents like her friend Victoire's mother who organises birthdays. Nora would like her father to be like this mother. The father is also confronted with a certain social violence, for example when Nora asks him why he doesn't work like the other parents.

Abel is tormented by his friends and does not defend himself. Nora would like to denounce this injustice to their father but Abel refuses. These conflicts of loyalty create all the tension in the film.

Exactly. And Nora's father asks her to react and to keep him informed of how things are going for Abel, which adds even more conflicting pressure on Nora. This film is also about helping each other. How do we

help each other? Sometimes you want to help, but the action you take may end up in the opposite direction. It is complicated. We live in a fast-paced society where there is no time to deal with the root causes of problems. In this schoolyard, there is harassment, but also ignorance, a lack of attention and listening.

I have the impression that violence does not come from nowhere. It usually comes from a wound, from something that is not recognised and listened to, and unfortunately it is transmitted very quickly. There is a will throughout the film not to judge it.

Adults (parents, teachers, school management...) do what they can, but it is not enough?

That's it. My aim was not to condemn anyone. There's a meeting with the headmaster but it's not solved all at once. The supervisor is overwhelmed because she doesn't have time, there are too many children and too many conflicts to solve. I think that kindness is



innate, and then it is lost, but I think it can be re-learned. At the end of the film, Nora has been through a series of things, but thanks to the listening and kindness that her teacher has given her, she manages to stop the violence with a gesture of kindness.

Nora's father is also benevolent but seems powerless to solve his children's problems?

I wanted to show him helpless, lost, trying to act, but what he does turns out to be even worse. For a father, it's unbearable to see his children being abused, it drives him crazy, perhaps it reminds him of things he experienced as a child. I wanted to send the viewer back to difficulties he or she might have felt as a child at school.

At the beginning of the film, Nora is afraid of school and takes refuge behind her brother. Then, little by little, she gains confidence and ends up being stronger than Abel. Did you want to draw Nora's journey as a line of learning, conquest and emancipation?

Yes, I did. At the beginning, she believes that she will be integrated into the community of children at school thanks to Abel. But it is her presence with Abel that triggers the violence of Abel's friends against him. Nora will feel responsible for this. And the fact that her brother rejects her will help her to gain some strength, to become independent and to integrate. Abel's difficulties will influence her relationship with her own friends, who will end up rejecting her. This rejection will lead to aggression. She will turn this aggression against her brother but she will also succeed in stopping this cycle of violence. That's what learning is all about: steps forward, steps back, steps sideways... it's not a straight line.

You film everything from a child's perspective. Was this very strong option present from the beginning of the project?

Yes. Very early on, I had this intuition to film in this way, to adopt this immersive aspect in order to be as close as possible to



what Nora lives and feels, so that the viewer projects himself into this story and projects elements of his own experience into it.

This immersive aspect also creates a huge off-screen.

Everything is at the service of Nora, of her perception. She only perceives snippets of the surrounding world. So, in the film, we only perceive snippets of bodies, of spaces, everything is diffuse, at the height of a child. The school is perceived as a kind of monster that will swallow Nora. It also works with the sound. There is nothing more deafening than a playground: it is also a form of violence. The children externalize their joy, shout, which is a way to conquer their place.

How did your collaboration with the director of photography, Frédéric Noirhomme, go?

I had made my previous short film with him. We have the same vision of things, we like to stick to a character, to work off-camera. He was harnessed with a camera at Nora's height: he had to follow her, adapt to her, whatever was going on. I was next to him with a portable combo and often directed Maya (the actress who plays Nora) live.

Were the other children actors? Did you shoot during a real school year? How much of the film is fiction and how much is documentary, if that question can be answered precisely?

This film is a fiction, I insist, where everything was set up, worked on in advance, where nothing was left to chance. We shot during the holidays, for 25 days, the children are actors and extras, most of them had never acted before.

We imagine that you had a lot of material

to deal with the editor, Nicolas Rumpl?

I met Nicolas during my studies. It's important for me to create my film family because over the years we have created a way of working together. We decided to film in sequence shots, firstly to allow the children to remain in the emotion and action of their scene for as long as possible, and secondly because we only had twenty-five days and it was impossible to cut the scenes due to lack of time. We did at least twenty takes per sequence shot, because there were little accidents, camera glances, we had to redo. So indeed, we had an enormous amount of material to edit, but there was a possible organicity in the material, both in the sequence shots and in the narration, which allowed for a lot of possibilities and interchangeability. I would like to underline the courage of all these children, it is exhausting to do the same thing twenty or thirty times.

The sound of the film is remarkable and does not contain a single note of music.

We didn't use all of the live sound, since most of the time I was directing them live, so we did a lot of post-synchronisation work to add material, to create new dialogues in order to make the off-screen even more alive. David Vranken and Corinne Dubien, the two sound editors, did a huge job, as did the mixer, Mathieu Cox. They went to real playgrounds to get the sounds as close as possible to reality. We had to find the right balance so as not to exhaust the viewer's ears in the first few minutes of the film. We decided to stay as much as possible in the hubbub of the school, but we also wanted to have clear cuts, moments of silence or distant hubbub. The sound of this film is like a very elaborate sound score where everything is meticulous. As for the music, I generally prefer intra-diegetic («in») music. I try to make sure that the image and the sound alone achieve the emotional power of the music.

We come to the actors, starting with the extraordinary Maya Vanderbeque, who carries the whole film on her frail shoulders. How did you find her?

Through a casting session where I saw a hundred children. Nora was seven years old, and I will never forget what she said to me when she arrived at the tests: «I want to give all my strength to this film». That touched me enormously. However, she did not correspond to what I imagined Nora to be. Normally, Maya is blonde with long hair. But she wanted this role, she was so committed that she cut her hair without any problem. At the casting, I simply asked the children to draw their playground and tell me what games they played. That alone was enough to observe their gestures, their speech, what the camera captured of them and I could see that something huge was coming out of Maya. Then, to tame each other, I taught her to swim, which created a strong bond between us. Then I worked with two exceptional coaches, one of whom was a speech therapist, Perrine Bigot. We shot in July but we started working with the children in April: for three months, every weekend, we worked with the children. They never read the script. We created several working groups to build the brother/sister bond, the relationship between the friends, the dynamics within the group of friends, but we also created a group with all the children together. Through games, we got them used to the camera; then we worked on their emotions so that they could express them without being consumed by them, still through games. Then we explained the beginning of a situation and improvised around it. Finally, we had them draw the scene on a cardboard, like a child's storyboard. When it came time to shoot, we brought out the cards and they knew exactly what the scene was about. It was a lot of work beforehand, but I loved this part of the film-making process. Maya is excellent,

I don't know where she got all that, but the result is there.

Günter Duret is also remarkable.

He is an extraordinary boy, very brave, a little wild in the sense of instinctive. This impulsiveness brought out something very strong in his acting, and that's what the film needed. The role was a bit scary for him, but he did really well.

The adults, Karim Leklou and Laura Verlinden are also excellent, even if they are often framed below the belt.

I had wanted to work with Karim and Laura for a long time. Karim has this particularity of appearing rough and at the same time very soft: that's what I was looking for for the father. He was perfect. Moreover, it seems to me that we haven't seen him much in this kind of role of worried father. Karim, Maya and Günter immediately hit it off. Of course, we did several work sessions, always through games. Laura has something very delicate, almost fragile, and I needed these qualities for the teacher who is almost out of this world. Nora becomes attached to her like a substitute mother. Laura Verlinden is Flemish and it was important to me to bring together Flemish and French speakers, a mix that corresponds to the city of Brussels. I also want to emphasize that the acting is the voice. An actor who is right or wrong, you can hear it in his voice. Therefore, framing Karim or Laura at child height, below the belt, was not at all to diminish them, on the contrary, it was to put them even more forward in a certain sense.

The last shot of the film is the same as the first, and not the same because it's loaded with everything that happened during the film.

That's it. *Playground* is about the strength

and resilience of children. At the end, Nora gets her brother back and imparts a kindness. In this last shot, she makes a furtive but essential gesture that, in the moment, stops the violence.

At the end credits, we notice the name of Luc Dardenne, and in fact, we think of the Dardenne's cinema while watching *Playground*. Which filmmakers have marked you? And what was your path to this first feature film?

I went to the IAD, an audiovisual school in Belgium, I worked on shoots where I did everything, sets, costumes, stage manager... I co-directed a short film, *O Négatif*, and directed one on my own, *Foreign Bodies*, which was selected in Cannes in 2014. The Dardenne brothers are very clearly a reference and I learned a lot through their films. But I could also mention Abbas Kiarostami, Bruno Dumont, Michael Haneke, Chantal Akerman... What I find common in all these filmmakers is that they show the human in its worst, but they do it with such love and kindness that they always manage to bring back the human in its most just and beautiful. This is what I tried to do with *Playground*.

