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# BROTHERS IN ARMS

Dimitri and Nicolas Karakatsanis aren't the types to sit around and mope just because no-one will give them the money to make their films. Who needs funding when you've got energy and attitude? The brothers have just completed their first feature, *Small Gods*. Largely self-financed, the moody and poetic drama has already caught the eye of Benelux distributors A-Film and of Paris-based sales agents, Insomnia.

By Geoffrey Macnab

‘Working with Dimitri often comes out in arguing and little fights, but we know those fights are necessary if we are going to get a certain result’ – NICOLAS KARAKATSANIS

‘We don’t take the middle way. There is no middle way’ – DIMITRI KARAKATSANIS

It would be pushing it to say that there is a new wave of Flemish filmmakers who have rejected the old models of storytelling and film financing. Nonetheless, it is apparent that the Karakatsanis brothers have the same irreverence and energy as Koen Mortier, director of the highly provocative drama *Ex Drummer*. ‘They didn’t have money, we didn’t have money,’ Nicolas says of the links between *Ex Drummer* and *Small Gods*. ‘The spirit is like, OK, let’s push the boundaries of what we know in Flemish cinema to other limits. Let’s go further.’

Too often, the brothers believe, filmmakers in Flanders will abandon projects or sit around grumbling if they don’t get the funding for their films. Either that or they will change their scripts to please potential financiers.

‘If you don’t have money, start looking somewhere else and don’t be waiting for the perfect moment, the perfect time to shoot your film. Waiting for the perfect moment is ridiculous. There is no perfect moment. There will always be something in the way,’ Nicolas declares in what sounds like a mission statement for the brothers’ guerilla-like approach to their chosen profession. ‘The only moment to shoot a film is now. If you want to make the film, make the film. Don’t be wasting 10 years of your life searching for money for one film because you could have made four other films in that time. If you really want to make a film, you will do it.’ Fittingly enough, the equally resourceful and outspoken Mortier is one of the co-producers on the brothers’ debut feature *Small Gods*. ‘We know him (Mortier) because we have worked for years on the commercials side,’ explains Dimitri, who directed *Small Gods*. ‘They (Mortier’s team) made *Ex Drummer* in an obscure way and they knew we made our film in an obscure way too.’

At the very moment that the Flanders Audiovisual Fund (VAF) turned *Small Gods* down, Mortier’s CCCP came on board as partners. ‘Koen said he wanted to put some money into it just to help us finish it,’ Dimitri recalls.

#### TWISTED ROAD MOVIE

This is not a cosy Flemish drama with conventional characters and settings. It is offbeat and sometimes confrontational. It might best be described as a twisted road movie. A woman in hospital after a car crash in which she lost her son is kidnapped by a stranger. Together, they travel across country. The story is narrated

in flashback as the woman tells her lawyer what happened to her and why.

Most of the action takes place away from cities, in scrublands, fields or woods. The journey is random. The kidnapper doesn’t seem to know where he is going. The lilting, hypnotic music from Aldo Struyf of pop band Millionaire adds to the dream/nightmare-like quality. (Struyf also has a cameo in the film as one of the killers in the woods.)

‘I didn’t want just to make a dramatic film but to make a film about atmosphere and poetry,’ Dimitri recalls. It was always his intention to recruit his brother Nicolas to shoot the movie. ‘I was the only fool who would want to do it,’ Nicolas volunteers.

‘I understand how he works. He understands how I work. We can go quite far in our visual style,’ Dimitri elaborates.

#### GRUELLING FILM

The brothers began shooting a 10-minute section of the film three years ago. They had no crew at all, no lights and no assistants. Nor was the financing in place. ‘We just started to do it.’ The sequence they worked on first was the most traumatic and violent in the movie – the slaughter in the cabin in the woods. As they continued to work on the film, the brothers decided to make it more subtle and impressionistic, and less violent.

It was a gruelling film to make. Dimitri reminisces about shooting the final scene on a freezing cold night. ‘Everybody was exhausted. We had four minutes of film roll. I needed an intense moment from the actors but they were so tired and so cold.’ He talks about the campfire sequence in which one of the actors, playing a priest had too much to drink and began to forget his lines. Nicolas, meanwhile, has grim tales about working in fast fading light without electricity and having to rely on battery-power.

*Small Gods* has had a long and complicated gestation. First, the brothers wrote it. Several months later, they shot the first sequences. Then, they re-wrote the screenplay. Then they started shooting again. The completed film is different in tone from the project the brothers first conceived over three years ago – more poetic and with less emphasis on violence.

The film already has some influential champions. A-Films’ Erik Engelen describes it as ‘extremely well shot and it is definitely a movie that can play worldwide in different festivals’.



### FLEMISH TASTE

The brothers come from a Greek-Belgian background. Their father is from Athens and their mother from Antwerp. 'They had the worst marriage ever. We came out. They divorced and we lived with our mother,' Dimitri explains. The brothers grew up in Brussels and Antwerp. Although both are passionate about cinema, their careers haven't always run in tandem. Dimitri, 31, started directing commercials after finishing film school. Meanwhile, Nicolas, 29, worked in post-production in Berlin.

Nicolas recalls that from the earliest age, he was drawn to visual arts – drawing, painting, photography. 'I never thought I would make a living out of filmmaking,' he recalls. 'I knew I liked to do it, but when I went to film school, I never thought I was going to be a director or a D.O.P.'

The idea that he would one day be able to make professional-looking movies with high production values seemed like nothing but a pipe dream when he first enrolled in film school. 'But three years later, you're doing those films.'

Nicolas originally studied directing but soon tried to switch to cinematography. 'I started having more fun with images,' he recalls. He left the school before he had the chance to refine his skills as a cameraman. Nonetheless, old students began to come to him to ask him to shoot their shorts. 'Apparently, people liked what I did. I was having fun so I thought I will just try to make a living out of it. I still don't see it as a job! It is still a hobby. I really like to do it.'

By then, Dimitri had begun to shoot commercials. 'We knew we didn't have this Flemish taste,' Dimitri says of the brothers' approach to moviemaking. He believes that too many Flemish movies don't pay enough attention to cinematography and that their stories are overly predictable.

Nicolas, meanwhile, lists his influences. *Small Gods*, he suggests, is as inspired by the work of Andrei Tarkovsky, Takeshi Kitano and Terrence Malick as it is by anything done recently by Flemish filmmakers. Most of the cast are amateurs. Ask Dimitri where he found his lead Steffi Peeters and he replies, deadpan:



All stills *Small Gods*

'she is my wife'. None of the actresses he auditioned seemed right. Either that, or they didn't like the script. Dimitri was initially apprehensive about approaching Steffi. 'I had her in mind from the beginning but I never dared ask because we have kids and everything. I thought it would be impossible to combine shooting with two little babies at home. But I asked her. And she said she was so happy.'

Other surprising faces include a craggy-faced elderly boxing coach, 75 years old, who has an impromptu bout with the kidnapper.

#### SIBLING RIVALRY

The Karakatsanis brothers recently collaborated with Pieter Van Hees on his debut feature, *Left Bank*. (Dimitri co-wrote the screenplay while Nicolas was recruited late on to shoot the supernatural thriller.) However, both remain determined to make movies with a strong personal stamp. Between times, they will continue to make commercials to pay their bills. 'There is a stigma to that. Some people think commercials are bad. But we're just trying to make a

living. What else can we do?' asks Dimitri. 'We are too young to teach.' Like most brothers, Dimitri and Nicolas occasionally bicker. There is a degree of sibling rivalry in their working relationship. 'Working with Dimitri often comes out in arguing and little fights,' says Nicolas. 'But we know those fights are necessary if we are going to get a certain result. Sometimes, I will have an idea but he will have another idea...'

'We don't take the middle way,' Dimitri declares. 'There is no middle way.'

They admit that the rest of the cast and crew are sometimes startled by how angry the brothers become on set. Dimitri and Nicolas take the rows in their stride. This is how they achieve their best results. They both work from the gut.

Now that *Small Gods* is in the can, the brothers are busy hatching fresh projects on which they can work together. Dimitri is planning a 'distorted love story... I wanted to make relationship movies, but in a way that is disturbing.' And, yes, he will be working again with the same cameraman.

