

# Willem Bosch & Sanaa Giwa about AFTERLIFE

## Do not pull that string

How many milkshakes did I drink during my life? How many people have ever been in love with me? Those are the kind of questions that 16-year-old (and just deceased) Sam asks the angel who welcomes her at heaven's gate. But her most important question remains unanswered...

Sam cannot decide: should she go to heaven and be reunited with her mother, or should she choose reincarnation? Sounds complicated... Dutch director Willem Bosch tells the story with great ease and a sense of surrealism.

**Nothing is as complex as the time-space continuum! Save me the trouble of checking the metaphysical details of your story and just tell me: is it all somehow scientifically correct?**

Willem Bosch: Yes. You can hammer a little hole into that story, but not a whole crater. You can get the concept to falter, but not to collapse. I have

an answer to all your objections, even if it might sound like total nonsense. In the excellent film LOOPER, Jeff Daniëls and Joseph Gordon-Levitt talk about the concept of time travel and Daniëls comes up with the perfect answer: "All that time travel shit fries your brain." Of course the story only works if you accept the possible inconsistencies. In my film, there are little strings sticking out here and there, and when you would pull them, the whole story starts to unravel.

**Are you interested in the concept of reincarnation?**

Bosch: I grew up in a Catholic tradition where the existence of a hereafter was much more concrete than reincarnation. But as a child I often fantasized about what I had been doing in my former lives. My mother had, as in the film, a soft spot for dramatic scenes, was totally convinced. She interviewed me and those recordings have been preserved. You can hear how I invented everything right on



Director Willem Bosch (left, with family) and Sanaa Giwa (right)

the spot: that I had been a sultan etc. My mother took it all very seriously. Sanaa Giwa: I doubt between two extreme ideas: either there is a huge hereafter where all the dead go, or there is nothing at all.

**Your father has been a pastor.**

Bosch: My father resigned from his duties when he met my mother in 1974. In those days there was a left wing catholic movement that was not very strict. In AFTERLIFE he recognised plenty of themes that were in line with his humanistic approach towards religion.

**Do you need to believe in heaven to direct a film like AFTERLIFE?**

Bosch: Ever since my mother died, I've been brooding about that. Maybe there isn't anything at all. That seems like a fairly manageable, nice situation. Or maybe there is some kind of afterlife, with all its unpleasant implications. When every day is the same, there is no evolution anymore, there is only a complete standstill. Imagine yourself sitting there all the time, surrounded by dead people... after a week you'd be bored to death. What else can heaven be but half a hell on earth?

**Your design of heaven is very straightforward and urban.**

Bosch: When I wrote the script, I was at a turning point in my life. With our

first child being born, my entire life revolved around taking care of children and being responsible. While in heaven you can smoke and drink every day, and be free. But for sure a huge bureaucracy must be involved. Everything in heaven will be handled by men putting stamps on documents. Typically Dutch: please bring the right forms, otherwise you will not get in. Giwa: Even the angels are officials!

**Like Martin, the angel who takes care of Sam.**

Bosch: Civil servants can by definition seek cover behind the back of their boss. *"I didn't make those rules. I only do what I was told."* But the Lord Almighty stays out of the picture completely. He is not there to justify himself, and those officials have to solve their own problems. All angels are some kind of second-rate magicians: they know how to perform some tricks, and that is all they know.

**According to the film, babies are the ones who know everything.**

Bosch: You wonder what's going on inside their little heads. Sometimes it gets really mysterious when they stare over your shoulder at the corner of a room and their face suddenly shivers with fear or pleasure. That's when you think: *"Those babies know*

*more than we do!"*

**Sam's mother is a pretty extreme character. I find her a bit frightening.**

Bosch: So is actress Romana Vrede in real life. She understood exactly what I was looking for: something theatrical, that I recognised in my mother.

**Sanaa is the exact opposite, acting rather restrained, neutral, as if we can fill in the emotions on her face ourselves.**

Bosch: With Sam, much more is going on on the inside than what can be seen on her face. "Not everyone needs to know how I feel." There was a bit of typecasting involved. You can expect an experienced actress to handle a wide range of emotions. But I think a rookie like Giwa, you should cast only for a role that stands close to her own personality.

Giwa: Sam's character is standing close to me as a person. When I read the scenario, I often thought: this is exactly how I would respond. Sometimes on set I was showered in compliments: "Wow, your acting was fantastic in that scene!" While I knew: that was no acting, that was just me being me.

**That you already noticed during the**



**casting?**

Bosch: Five remaining candidates had to play a scene together with Romana. She was all over the place – giving it all – and those young actresses had to respond. Out of those five girls, two were completely paralyzed, two others went along on Romana's crazy trip... and only one kept her cool. Sanaa was cool as ice!

**You didn't find acting difficult at all?**

Giwa: Only the practical details. In one scene 260 milkshakes were standing on the floor, all of them disappearing one moment later. That was such a hassle, with people almost performing magic to make that whole load of milkshakes disappear unnoticed, in a blink of an eye. Terribly complicated!

And guess what? No one in the audience even notices the result.

**I found an interesting quote from you: "Good children's films are about things that parents discuss while the children, at the top of the stairs, secretly listen in."**

Bosch: That is what defines Dutch youth films for me. That's a way to bring issues to young people's attention and to push boundaries.

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