

By not being able to find a home for those cats, Emilia is made partly responsible for their death. How can a child cope with such responsibility?

Laizane: The story is inspired by my own childhood. When we had kittens, we had to go around to find them a home, asking classmates and neighbours. It was a huge pressure on our shoulders but somehow we always managed. Both children and parents still connect to that story. In one festival screening a kid started to cry, and I felt so sorry. But in Germany adults came telling me how much the film reminded them of their youth. This film shares a small individual experience with many people.

Actress Emilia Mevedeva has this earnest look on her face.

Laizane: At first sight I liked the maturity that she carries inside her. I had not worked with children before, and it was challenging. They don't have any acting experience, they get tired and impatient, and you need them to deliver what is needed for the story. But Emilia was wonderful!

You had kids and cats on the set!

Laizane: I had a tough day, filming those kittens. They were so small and looked so lost in space when in front of the camera. I felt sorry for those

poor creatures feeling unsafe and insecure.

Even if we all understand what has happened to the cats, you leave room for interpretation.

Laizane: From the questions I get in Q&A's I can tell how much children are looking for a 'yes or no' answer. Should I say it or not? That was my main dilemma throughout the entire writing process. I decided not to show the cats from too close, I didn't want the audience to get attached to them. It's not a cat film anyway.

The main question is not if grandpa killed the cats, but if Emilia will forgive him some day and return.

Laizane: It can also be a lesson for grandpa to maybe rethink his usual habits and try to do things differently next time. Stop being so stubbornly sure about things – "this is how we do it and this is how it should be done forever". This is one of the many layers underneath the story's surface.

—
Gert Hermans
© Film'on

Eva Cools about CLEO

"There is beauty in human failure"

The Russian composer Sergei Rachmaninov was a versatile man, he adored not only the splendour of nature, but also fast cars. Fortunately, Cleo is not aware of this trivial fact. Rachmaninov's music is one of the few things still offering her comfort, since she lost both her parents in a traffic accident. Now the 17 year old is terrified of cars. In her own, somewhat stiff way her grandmother Bobonne offers Cleo a warm home, but ends up bearing the brunt of a rebellious teenager. Then Cleo crosses paths with Leos. He is a bit older, not unattractive, and a warm bond grows between the two.

Cleo describes how it feels to be among others after her parents have died: "Everyone is just weird around you".

Eva Cools: People feel uncomfortable and don't know how to react to the death of Cleo's parents. Her best friend hasn't given a sign of life for six months. Her aunt reacts equally clumsily: *"You can always call me."*



I suppose you did some research with next of kin?

Cools: First and foremost, the story is personally inspired - I lost a niece in a hit-and-run accident at a young age - so I could draw on my own memories. And I conducted interviews with both victims and perpetrators. I was famil-

iar with the victims' perspective, but then I discovered the perpetrators' side of the story, how they often suffer from tremendous guilt, post-traumatic stress and grief. This spurred me to tell a nuanced story with respect for both perspectives.

How did you want the city of Brussels to come across?

Cools: Brussels is super attractive for filmmakers, art deco architectural grandeur versus raw repulsiveness. I searched for beauty in the ugliness. I prefer cities that aren't too neat. Brussels is a perfect location for characters that have lost themselves.

It is not a very bicycle friendly city. Were there any consequences to shooting those bicycle scenes?

Cools: Traffic in its most chaotic, noisy and dangerous form, is an important element of the film. From scene one, Cleo feels in danger. Because cars scare her, Cleo is on her bicycle, facing the danger that surrounds her, making her even more vulnerable. This is how it feels for people suffering from a post-traumatic stress disorder caused by a traffic accident, constantly confronted with all those sounds and stimuli. I wanted Cleo to face her fears, pushing her to a limit. Main actress Anna Franziska Jäger



threw herself into Brussels traffic, but we always had a motorcycle riding behind her for safety reasons.

One more character that stole my heart is 'Bobonne', who comes across as an old fashioned relic, until you realise she is a warm hearted person in a very demanding situation.

Cools: Bobonne is most adorable. She is suddenly responsible for raising a 7 year old child and a difficult teenager! The beauty lies in her scramble, she has trouble finding the balance between being strict and meanwhile showing understanding for their difficult situation. However, when Cleo finds herself in trouble, she stands up like a lioness. I love characters in a process of search, there is a lot of beauty in human failure with the best intentions. And Yolande Moreau is a

first class actress.

Then there is Cleo's charming little brother, who comes across as a very credible actor.

Cools: Ishaq El Akel is a natural talent, intelligent and intuitive. We filmed his scenes as if we were playing. The scenes with Cleo and him on the bed are all improvised, often filmed in one shot, as they felt so authentic.

Even pianos are like characters in your film.

Cools: Pianos are a common thread throughout the story. Piano music reflects Cleo's memory of her father, is the catalyst of her grief and the hopeful element that she clings to.

What is so special about Rachmaninov?

Cools: The music of Rachmaninov, a

fantastic composer from the Romantic era, is extremely cinematic and dramatic, but also sensitive and moving. Those two extremes I also found in Cleo: hard, but also very vulnerable. When Cleo listens to Rachmaninov's 2nd Piano Concerto during a concert, this is the apotheosis of the movie, with all pieces of her puzzle coming together, while the audience is overwhelmed by the romantic music. Tears came to my eyes when we shot the scene.

In CLEO school doesn't exactly stand out as a safe haven for people in need.

Cools: Many teenagers feel misunderstood at school, especially when fighting traumas like Cleo does at a young age. A young woman I interviewed about losing both her parents in an accident told me that on average, you're allowed six months to mourn, and then people expect you to get your life back together. But you can't measure mourning in time, can you? (GH)

–
Gert Hermans
© Zlin Film Festival