



Pain, Sorrow, and Drunken Lunacy Felix van Groeningen's *The Misfortunates*

BY ANDREW FISH PHOTOGRAPHY BRIAN LOWE

Being raised by four drunken louts has its ups and downs, and Felix van Groeningen's *The Misfortunates* explores them both with equal precision. The Belgian production is concurrently one of the funniest portrayals of rambunctious, profanity-strewn mayhem in years, and an adeptly solemn commentary on the long-term effects of a chaotic childhood. Thirteen-year-old Gunther Strobbe's trajectory was set from the moment of his conception, during a booze-driven sexual encounter in an alleyway. Reared in his grandmother's house in the fictional village of Reetveerdegem, where his dad, Marcel (Koen De Graeve), and three uncles (Wouter Hendrickx, Johan Heldenbergh, Bert Haelvoet) have come home to roost, the teenager (Kenneth Vanbaeden) is immersed in their world of obscene drinking songs and profound irresponsibility, as well as intense loyalty, love, and pride in the family name. As an older Gunther (Valentijn Dhaenens) looks back, with his own unplanned child on the way, he narrates the fundamental conflict of his adolescence: to remain with his beloved clan of inebriated man-children, or to pull away toward greater possibilities.

The 31-year-old director based the screenplay for his third feature on Belgian author Dimitri Verhulst's literary sensation, *De Helasheid der Dingen* (*Unfortunately, the Nature of Things*). The filmmaker explains that it wasn't until he read the final chapters of the novel — where the adult Gunther expresses his brutal thoughts on impending fatherhood, and his heartfelt gratitude to his grandmother (Gilda De Bal), who stares silently in late-stage dementia — that he saw the book's cinematic potential. "Those were the scenes that really convinced me to make the movie," he says. "I like the fun parts, but it also seemed too anecdotal. I think that was the hard part of the adaptation, but also the fun part. Trying to make it more a story of this young guy who realizes that he has to leave. Although he loves his family, and in a way, it must be a cool place to grow up, on some days, when you're part of the gang, when you're only 13."

"The strange thing about this book," he continues, "is that it completely shifts in tone. In the first chapters, Gunther is really part of [the family], and he's proud to be. And suddenly he starts shifting, like, 'Things are hard, because I have to clean up the vomit of my dad.'" So on one hand there are the infantile antics of the pony-tailed Uncle Beefcake, who channels his shame over losing the naked bicycle race into a 12-day drinking game he calls the "Tour de France," which culminates in his goofy grin from a hospital bed. And on the other, there are three brothers physically restraining Gunther's normally jolly and affable father from beating the boy for his suspected alerting of Child Services.

Both on and off the screen, the cast was deeply committed to the NeoClassics-produced film's characters and tone. There was singing, drinking, and "going to eat lunch in their underpants," while maintaining focus on the film's contemplative nature. "It's good that we had fun," van Groeningen admits, "but the danger was that we could get stuck in just having fun. So we had to have that thing underneath, which would always relate to bigger issues, like the honor of the family, and the pain of the father, and to stay focused on the boy's point of view."

This work of raucous comedy and introspective melancholy is Belgium's official entry for the Motion Picture Academy's Best Foreign Language Film, and an official selection of the Palm Springs and Cannes Film Festivals, among others. With *Steve + Sky*, *Days Without Love*, and now *The Misfortunates* under his belt, van Groeningen is a leading force in the new crop of internationally recognized Belgian filmmakers, which includes Christophe van Rompaey, director of *Moscow, Belgium*, released earlier this year. Reflecting on his country's emerging cinema, van Groeningen declares, "I hope this is only the beginning!" ▼

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