

SILENT STORYTELLERS

TEXT IAN MUNDELL PORTRAIT KRIS DEWITTE



*Benny Vandendriessche (l)
and Dirk Hendriks (r)*

DRIFT IS A TALE OF GRIEF AND LOST LOVE, IN WHICH A MAN TRIES TO ESCAPE A PAINFUL REALITY BY DISAPPEARING INTO THE LANDSCAPE. IT IS ALSO AN INSPIRED COMBINATION OF NARRATIVE CINEMA AND PERFORMANCE ART, TELLING A STORY THROUGH THE PHYSICAL PRESENCE OF ITS MAIN CHARACTER.

The film is a collaboration between director Benny Vandendriessche and artist Dirk Hendrikk. Since the early 1990s Hendrikk has been working in the area where installation, film and performance art overlap. Whether on stage, in a studio or outdoors, his ideas always involve some physical interaction between himself and his surroundings. 'I never saw myself as a performer, a dancer or an actor,' says Hendrikk. 'For me it was more like going into a trance, into a feeling or a situation. It was like I was making living sculptures, performances like poems.'

It was the physical side of Hendrikk's work that appealed to Vandendriessche, whose background is in music videos and advertising. 'We always had the same tastes,' he explains. 'Something very simple, something physically rough but at the same time very poetic and very beautiful.'

walking with grief

The starting point for *Drift* was simply a desire to collaborate. Vandendriessche chose to work on a recurring figure in Hendrikk's work, the wanderer creating rituals in a landscape. Along with cameraman Carl Rottiers, they set out to test the concept, shooting sequences in the forests of Poland, in Death Valley in the USA and on the shores of the Mediterranean in Spain.

'We explored many things and we learned a lot,' says Vandendriessche. 'For instance, you don't need big gestures to explain a character. So we started to take elements from these rituals, but instead of using the theatrical part of them we tried to look for an element of reality.'

This also laid the ground for the film's visual approach, not simply capturing the rituals as performances but using the camera to integrate Hendrikk's physical presence with the landscape, its animals and people. 'I aimed to create a reality that is strong, pure and simple. I wanted to offer a powerful tactile and contemplative experience. The audience of *Drift* has to feel, rather than to understand.'

At the same time, the experience had to be relatively accessible. 'We wanted to create a full-length feature film that had the potential to engage many people, not only those who have the patience to step into something that is maybe a bit more difficult.'

This meant finding a narrative that would drive their drifter onwards. 'This man needs a reason to do the things he does,' says Vandendriessche. 'It had to be something big, something strong. As a storyteller, I recognised the undefined emotions in Dirk's work and interpreted them as a story of a man walking with grief.'

tactile experience

An important stage in developing this idea was the discovery

of a filmed dance performance, rather like a fragment of silent film, in Hendrikk's archives. 'It's very beautiful, because everything about love, the pushing and pulling, is already there,' says Vandendriessche. They decided to cast the other dancer, Lieve Meeussen, as the drifter's lost love and to use the dance film as backstory. 'It is 13 years old, but it involves the same people. You see how their bodies have changed, but also the intimacy in the dance makes it very real.' This also gave Vandendriessche a strong core around which to build the script.

The first part of the narrative, appearing in flashback throughout the film, explores the days leading up to the drifter's traumatic loss. The man and his partner, who is suffering from a long illness, are waiting for something in a snowbound hospital. 'We try to show everything that you need to know about this couple in these few scenes from their final days,' says Vandendriessche.

After his partner's death and the involvement of the police, the man flees. 'When he escapes from the hospital he escapes

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into a parallel reality,' Vandendriessche explains. 'This gave us a lot of freedom. We could choose any kind of landscape. It didn't have to be a perfect description of a country. It could be very peculiar, but at the same time we didn't want it to be staged. It had to be something real. We were looking for the poetic, the exaggerated, maybe even the grotesque in reality.'

filming the rituals

This is where Hendrikk's rituals come in. He describes the process as going on a trip. The actions that emerge, such as trying to force his head into the ground or balancing a heavy stone over his eyes, are instinctive. But he does not like to talk about where these gestures come from or what they mean. 'We decided to go beyond the symbols into

nothingness, and not to explain,' he says. 'Whatever you see, it's up to you.'

Vandendriessche disagrees slightly: 'What he does is not easy. It's painful. It creates a tension in the body and scars the body, but at the same time it's very beautiful. It deals with the ambiguity between beauty and pain.' While the gestures are not explained, they still have to touch something inside the viewer. 'They seem to refer to something familiar to us, even if we don't know where it comes from. This is an exaggeration of a state of being that maybe we recognise.' Filming the rituals involved establishing a broad plan for each 'trip', for example for Hendrikk to enter his trance, walk into a village and turn down the main street. There would be two or three signals to tell him when to move from one place to another or one phase of the trip to another. Then he would begin. 'You don't know what's going to happen,' he says. 'You feel safe because you have a group around you, but it's strange to do.'

A trip could be relatively short or last several hours, and for Hendrikk the ritual plays out regardless of the camera. Sometimes the crew would be with him from the start, sometimes it would wait to intercept him along the way. In the case of the scene shot in the village, Vandendriessche spent hours on the spot where he wanted to capture Hendrikk's arrival so that the presence of a crew was no longer a novelty for the villagers. 'That way, when he arrives, it's not about the camera, it's about him.'

delivering an experience

Working in this way required a great deal of preparation and patience. 'We kept filming until we had the one take we were always looking for, until everything fitted: the timing of the character, the timing of the dogs and other animals, the camera, the landscape,' says Vandendriessche. 'Sometimes we only did one shot a day, sometimes we did three. We wanted every shot to have some kind of magic, to be a work in itself.' Even with all this planning, they were not entirely sure that the film was in the bag when the shooting was over. 'We had a very developed idea of how we wanted to treat physical actions, images, landscape and the presence of animals in the film, and we stuck to it,' recalls Vandendriessche. 'But still we were not sure that it was going to work. In the edit we discovered that it had worked.' In fact, the silent storytelling worked so well that they were able to remove some of the dialogue intended to explain explicitly what is going on. 'We've tried to create a film that delivers an experience, like a tactile experience, instead of a narrative tension,' Vandendriessche says. 'We tried to create a kind of intrigue, a reality that suggests much more than it explains.'

Hendrikk agrees. 'You feel time in this film. You immediately create another layer in what you see and what you feel,' he says. 'For me, the whole film is a fiction film made without telling the story. I'm very proud of that.' ⓘ



All pictures *Drift*





HOUND FOOTAGE

The decision to shoot *Drift* in Romania was partly about the landscapes the country had to offer. There are forests, mountains and arid plains. There are towns and villages, and vast abandoned factories. But most important of all, there are dogs. Millions of stray dogs.

'In one of the earlier versions of the script there was one dog, but not this presence we found in Romania,' says Vandendriessche. These stray dogs, rejected by people but unable to return to the wild, became an important element in the film, echoing the drifter's position caught between nature and human society.

Some of the dogs that can be seen in *Drift* are actual strays, others were provided by dog sanctuaries. 'The dogs stayed with us and it was clear to them immediately that this was now their group, their pack,' says Vandendriessche.

Incorporating the dogs into the film was not a problem. 'I was always told making a film with animals was the hardest thing, but we never had to tell these dogs what to do. They just knew where to go,' says Hendrikx. 'Everything these dogs do is instinctive, but so too are the actions of the main character.'

'We didn't demand anything of them, just their presence and their dog-like behaviour,' adds Vandendriessche. 'Sometimes they have perfect timing, perfect reactions to Dirk. You feel they are trying to comfort him. Then at other times they ignore him completely and don't give a damn. It's very ambiguous.'

