



PREVIEW

Benedetta

Paul Verhoeven interviewed by Kleber Mendonça Filho

When I visited the Benedetta shoot almost four years ago in Italy, on a very hot day, the scene I saw being shot was part of the insurrection at the end of the film. And when I finally saw the film, it felt right to see that revolution, it feels timely. Benedetta also felt quite sharp in a number of ways.

Well, basically there is – let's say – a 6th of January kind of feeling in the revolution at the end, isn't there? But again, when we did it, we based it on certain things that had happened in the 17th century. Although the revolution at the end, that is really not part of the real historical Benedetta narrative. In the book by Judith C. Brown [*Immodest Acts*], there is no revolution. We added that because we felt we needed something that was really explosive at the end. The rest of the narrative in *Benedetta* is pretty close to what we know historically about her, which was all found by Judith Brown in the 80s in the archives of Florence. So we used the book really in an abundant way, but added a couple of things like the revolution to make it a movie.

With everything that's been happening, and so fast, that shoot in Bevagna feels like the distant past. How are you thinking about movies now?

It is a long time ago that I did this movie. It's like an alien project for me because it's been such a long time. At this moment, I would prefer to do a movie for a bigger audience.

I see. Benedetta is a third European film after a strong Hollywood run. To me, it feels you make films which are personal in style and points of view no matter how different the scale of each project is, or where you make them.

Well, of course, the movies I did in Holland, the budgets were from half a million to about 5 million for a film like *Soldier of Orange* [1977] – and that was guilders, not even euros. And then, in the United States, it went from 13 million for *RoboCop* [1987] to 45 million for *Total Recall* [1990]. And further on, *Basic Instinct* [1992] and then even more, with *Starship Troopers* [1997] and *Hollow Man* [2000] costing more than 100 million. But in *Starship Troopers* the budget for the special effects, the animals and the spaceships and all that stuff, was already 50 million. You needed this to create a world that is in some way at least believable.

It's more that the money basically is related to the content of the movie.

Turkish Delight [1973], which was less than 1 million to make at that time, that was, let's say, mostly a boy and a girl doing things to each other, but no big scenes. There were no battles; no special effects were necessary. Of course, you didn't need \$40 million to shoot that. But you could not do *Starship Troopers* or *Hollow Man* without the 100 million.

I'm still living in LA, but after *Hollow Man* I felt that I was on the wrong road. That I was really becoming, let's say, a studio director. Because the things I really wanted to do were not possible any more, the story was basically, 'It should not be too much of this and not too much of that,' and 'Be careful here,' and 'We want to see that, and this and that.' And ultimately I decided to abandon making these big movies and went back to Europe to make something that I liked. And so I did

Black Book [2006] and *Elle* [2016] and *Benedetta*. *Benedetta* was mostly filmed in a square in Bevagna and two monasteries in the south of France. There is one [revolution] scene with a lot of people, but that was shot in three days rather than 30 days. *Elle* cost 7.8 million [euros], I think. *Benedetta*, 17, 18 or so. Double, in fact. *Elle* was basically three, four, five characters rotating around each other, more in the direction of *Turkish Delight* than *Starship Troopers*.

There is a select group of filmmakers who have changed gears between two notable – and very different – film cultures: Hollywood and France. You are one of those very few.

Well, I do not feel that I'm alienated from Hollywood! There's a lot of talent here. Basically, there is an enormous amount of good writers that, let's say, in France I find more difficult. On the other hand, the quality of the actors and notably, lately, of the actresses is fantastic in France, and so are the crews. But when I was doing *Black Book* or *Elle* or *Benedetta*, you know that you are not talking to a very general audience. You are aware that you're making more of what you would call an 'art film' than a commercial film. And after doing [that] three times, I would like now to come back to a more, let's say, a *North by Northwest* [1959] kind of story, à la Hitchcock in the United States. 'Commercial' is a bad word for it... Something for a bigger audience. *Lawrence of Arabia* [1962] is for a bigger audience, as is *Doctor Zhivago* [1965], and *The Godfather* [1972]. You can be impressed by what the directors, the screenwriter, the actors have done but it is still something that everybody watches. They are very direct, these movies.

I know it's a big word to use, but *Elle* and *Benedetta* are, in some way, nearly Brechtian. The audience should not be identifying with the characters. You look at the characters but you cannot identify with them, you cannot go with them. A woman who is raped and who then starts a sadomasochistic relationship with the rapist, that's not normal. And Isabelle Huppert or Virginie Efira, you don't know exactly where they stand with their characters, what's there, because they don't act in a very normal way. So, that's difficult for the audience. Of course, if you look at *North by Northwest*, then you are going along with Cary Grant. You are, as an audience, Cary Grant. You live like him. And that is the opposite of Brecht. In fact, are you aware that *Benedetta* was originally written by Gerard Soeteman?

Yes, of course.

Gerard Soeteman wrote all my Dutch movies, including *Black Book*, *Flesh+Blood* [1985], *Turkish Delight*, *Keetje Tippel* [1975], *Soldier of Orange*. But I think we got into a problem because I felt that, in this case, you should not identify with the main character [played by] Virginie Efira. You should not know or understand or participate and go along with her. Gerard wanted much more that you go with Virginie. You would see it from her point of view. For him, it was really a woman who is gathering power. That is still true in the movie, but I felt that for me, it was more about these two women, Bartolomea and Benedetta. Benedetta wants power but she wants power to basically become the abbess. And as she becomes the abbess, she gets her own room. And if she gets her own room, she can lock it and have sex with Bartolomea.

So I said the lesbian factor was as important as the power factor. If you look at her visions where Jesus says, 'Be careful, don't do that, [don't have] sex with that girl.' And finally Jesus says basically, more or less, you can take your

clothes off because with me, there is no shame. And he advises her, or promotes even, the idea that she should finally have sex with Bartolomea... That's my line in the movie. Gerard's line was more in the way of her need for power: she wants power.

I felt the position of a lesbian woman in 1625 was more important than her looking for power, which she did anyhow. But I felt the sexual connotations were more relevant. And so we broke up after 50 years, and now we are not even friends any more because of this.

I'm sorry to hear that you and Gerard have parted ways, it was such a strong and long collaboration. So, there is still a lot of Gerard's work in the finished script?

Absolutely. My additions to the screenplay of *Benedetta* are perhaps ten or 15 per cent, basically, but Gerard's participation I think is 50 or 60 per cent. But he didn't want his name there. You can see his work in the smallest details, all kinds of stuff. For example, when Bartolomea makes the dildo, and then Virginie says, 'It's a bit sharp.' Bartolomea replies, 'I will fix it. You take your clothes over there,' that's Gerard. Even that kind of detail. I think it was really strange, and a pity. A pity, because I think his name should have been there [in the credits]. But yeah, that's life.

Sight and Sound, May 2022

BENEDETTA

Directed by: Paul Verhoeven
©: SBS Productions, Pathé Films, France 2 Cinéma, France 3 Cinéma
Production Companies: SBS Productions, Pathé
In co-production with: France 2 Cinéma, France 3 Cinéma, Topkapi Films, Belga Films
With the participation of: Canal+, Ciné+, France Télévisions
In association with: Cinéimage 13, Cofimage 30, Cofinova 15, Indéfilms 7, Palatine Etoile 16
With the support of: La région Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur
In partnership with the: CNC
With the support of: Le Centre National du Cinéma et de l'Image Animée
With the support of the: Netherlands Film Fund, Tax Shelter of the Federal Belgian Government
Via: Belga Films Fund
With the support of: Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, MiBACT, Regione Lazio
International Sales: Pathé International
Executive Producers (for Urania Pictures): Laurentina Guidotti, Conchita Airoidi
Produced by: Saïd Ben Saïd, Michel Merkt, Jérôme Seydoux
Production Manager: Olivier Hélie
Production Manager (Italian Crew): Claudio Vecchio
Production Co-ordinator: Clémence Nevot
Location Manager: Karine Petite
Post-production Supervisor: Clara Vincienne
1st Assistant Director: Brieuc Vanderswalm
Script Supervisor: Bénédicte Darblay
CASTING: Stéphane Batut
Screenplay by: David Birke, Paul Verhoeven
Screenplay Collaboration: Pascal Bonitzer
Based on the book Immodest Acts by: Judith C. Brown
Translation of the Screenplay into French: Marc Amfreville
Director of Photography: Jeanne Lapoirie
B Camera Operator: Antoine Struyf
Visual Effects: Compagnie Générale des Effets Visuels
Special Effects (Italian Crew): Paolo Galiano, Bruno Falconi
Editing: Job ter Burg

Additional Editor: Peter Alderliesten
Production Designer: Katia Wyszokop
Storyboard Artist: Marie Eynard
Property Master: Hervé Guignot
Costume Designer: Jean-Pierre Larroque
Key Make-up: Laura Ozier
Make-up Artist for V. Efira: Odile Fourquin
Key Hairstylist: Virginie Duranteau
Hairstylist for V. Efira: Fabienne Bressan
Original Music: Anne Dudley
Performed by: The Chamber Orchestra of London
Conducted by: Anne Dudley
Orchestrated by: Anne Dudley
Recorded by: Mat Bartram
Mixed by: Roger Dudley
Sound: Jean-Paul Mugel, Alexis Place, Katia Boutin
Sound Mixing: Cyril Holtz, Damien Lazzerini
Stunt Co-ordinator: Manu Lanzi
Stunt Co-ordinator (Italian Crew): Marco Stefanelli

Cast

Virginie Efira (*Sister Benedetta Carlini*)
Charlotte Rampling (*Sister Felicità, abbess*)
Daphné Patakia (*Bartolomea*)
Lambert Wilson (*nuncio*)
Olivier Rabourdin (*Alfonso Cecchi*)
Louise Chevillotte (*Christina*)
Hervé Pierre (*Paolo Ricordati*)
Guilaine Londez (*Sister Jacopa*)
David Clavel (*Giuliano Carlini*)
Clotilde Courau (*Midea Carlini*)

France/Netherlands/Belgium 2020©
131 mins

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