



NEW RELEASES

Playground

Director Laura Wandel on 'Playground'

Playground, the debut feature by Belgian writer-director Laura Wandel, was one of the discoveries of 2021, winning the Fipresci Award for the Un Certain Regard section in Cannes and the Sutherland Trophy at the BFI London Film Festival. One of the most insightful and incisive films made about childhood, it is set entirely at a school. As suggested by the original French title, *Un monde* ('A World'), its playground is a self-enclosed universe, where children learn how to integrate into the sometimes brutal rituals of society. The story focuses on seven-year-old Nora (extraordinary discovery Maya Vanderbeque), an anxious newcomer plunged into the playground's hierarchies and rituals. Initially dependent on the protection of her older brother Abel (Günter Duret), she finds herself trying to protect him when he becomes a victim of bullying.

There's a very strong development in Nora's story. Was the film shot chronologically?

As chronologically as possible. We never gave the children a script, but they knew exactly what the film was about. We worked for three months before the shoot. We arranged them into different groups – brothers and sisters, friends, then all the children together. It was important that they should bring their own creativity to the film. I worked with a special education teacher who used a fantastic method, including all sorts of games, to get them used to the camera. We'd explain how a particular situation would begin and ask them what they thought the characters would do or say. Then we'd get them to improvise and, whenever they came up with something interesting, I'd rework the script. Finally, we got them to draw everything we'd done, so each child ended up with their own complete storyboard, created by themselves.

How did you get the children to convey particular emotions? For example, at the start, when Nora is really upset, scared to leave her father.

We talked a lot about what made them happy, sad, angry. We wanted them to try and identify emotions in relation to their own experiences, but in a way that wouldn't consume them entirely. For example, we got them to create puppets of their characters, to get them used to the distinction between themselves and the characters.

How did you find your leads?

We saw about 200 children. We found Maya very quickly. She was seven and the first thing she said to me was, 'I'm going to give this film all my strength.' That really impressed me – it was exactly what I needed for Nora. As soon as she was in front of the camera, she just set the screen alight.

Your film presents a very closed world – just the school, specifically the playground. Why did you decide not to show the children's home lives?

I wanted off-screen space to be really important – I wanted viewers to imagine what they needed, in regards to the children's families. I wanted to stay within that microcosm: it actually opens things up more than closes them in.

You shoot in a very consistent style with regard to camera position, keeping it at the children's height; that way the adults do or don't enter the frame.

That was all there right from the beginning in the writing. I felt it was the best way to have the viewer immersed so that they'd remember what it was like for them at school. I wanted to remind people how it feels to be small in a big space that you don't know.

You capture key rites of passage – like the first time Nora walks on a bar in gym class or learns to tie her shoelaces. Did you draw a lot on your own memories of childhood?

Oh yes. The shoelaces – I remember what a victory that was, and the shame of not being able to tie them. I wanted the film to remind people how incredibly important these small moments are. We often tend to forget that period of our lives, even try and hide it, but we're at school for 12 years of our lives, eight hours a day.

Did you have certain models in mind, in terms of films about childhood?

Jafar Panahi's *The White Balloon* [1995], which is wonderful. Jacques Doillon's *Ponette* [1996], of course, and Abbas Kiarostami's *Where is the Friend's House?* [1987].

What else has influenced your filmmaking?

When I went to film school at 18, I didn't know much about cinema, but certain films really affected me. Like Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman* [1975]. I came out of the cinema shaking. I thought: that's what I want to do. For me, cinema is all about the power of empathy – being in someone else's place for two hours. And it's about the collective experience – a lot of people feeling that same empathy all at once.

Interview by Jonathan Romney, *Sight and Sound*, May 2022

PLAYGROUND

Directed by: Laura Wandel
Production Company: Dragons Films
A co-production with: Lunanime
Produced with the support of the: Centre du Cinéma et de l'Audiovisuel de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles
With the support of the: Fonds Audiovisuel de Flandre (VAF)
With the participation of: Wallimage (La Wallonie)
In co-production with: VOO, Be TV
In association with: Indie Sales
With the support of: Tax Shelter du gouvernement fédéral de Belgique and the Tax Shelter investors
Presented by: Dragons Films
Produced by: Stéphane Lhoest
Co-produced by: Jacques de Clercq, Annemie Degryse
Associate Producer: Philippe Logie
Production Manager: Claudia Navarra
Location Manager: Vincent Bredael
1st Assistant Director: Jean-François Ravagnan
Script Supervisor: Elise Van Durme
Casting: Doriane Flamand
Screenplay by: Laura Wandel
Screenplay Consultant: Anneleen Masschelein
Director of Photography: Frédéric Noirhomme
Visual Effects: Benuts
Editor: Nicolas Rumpl
Art Director: Philippe Bertin
Costumes: Vanessa Evrard
Key Make-up and Hair: Katja Piepenstock
Title Design: Boris Görtz
Production Sound Mixer: Thomas Grimm-Landsberg
Sound Mixer: Mathieu Cox
Sound Editors: David Vranken, Corinne Dubien
Stunt Co-ordinator: Frédéric Lecointe

Cast

Maya Vanderbeque (*Nora*)
Günter Doret (*Abel*)
Karim Leklou (*father*)
Laura Verlinden (*Madame Agnès*)
Elsa Laforge (*Victoire*)
Lena Girard Voss (*Clémence*)
Simon Caudry (*Antoine*)
Thao Maerten (*David*)
James Seguy (*Malik*)
Naël Ammama (*Ismaël*)
Emile Salamone (*Matteo*)
Laurent Capelluto (*Antoine's father*)
Sandrine Blancke (*Madame Franck*)
Monia Douieb (*Abel's teacher*)
Michel Israël (*headteacher*)

Belgium/France 2021
72 mins

A New Wave release

The screening on Thu 21 Apr 18:10 will feature a Q&A with director Laura Wandel

BECOME A BFI MEMBER

Enjoy a great package of film benefits including priority booking at BFI Southbank and BFI Festivals. Join today at bfi.org.uk/join

BFI PLAYER

We are always open online on BFI Player where you can watch the best new, cult & classic cinema on demand.

See something different today on player.bfi.org.uk