

'Before We Go': Marseille Review

7/9/2014 by Neil Young



Courtesy of FIDMarseille

The Bottom Line

Offbeat, seductively light-footed wanderings through the valleys of the shadows of death.

Venue

FIDMarseille (International Competition), 7 July 2014

Director

Jorge Leon

Dance, documentary and dreams interweave in Jorge Leon's debut feature-length work, world-premiering in competition at the Mediterranean port-city's festival.

Memento mori meets *carpe diem* in *Before We Go*, **Jorge Leon's** unclassifiable, gently audacious, multidisciplinary rumination on human frailty, death, resilience and the life-affirming possibilities of communal artistic activity. Traversing the hazardous meridian between profundity and absurdity with graceful aplomb, this exquisite charmer from Belgium could strike chords with older audiences in upscale theatrical settings and has potentially wide film-festival appeal.

Leon (2010's mid-length *You Are Served*) immediately demands attention with his brief, bold prologue in an empty, opulent theater: a young woman (**Simone Aughterlony**) clad in a black skeleton-effect outfit reclines across the seats; the camera shares her perspective as she stares upward; a chandelier descends like a colossal golden snowflake. The bulk of the running time unfolds backstage in the same building — Brussels' Royal Theatre of the Mint — after a trio of seniors (**Michel Vassart**, **Noel Mineo** and **Hanna Schygulla** look-alike **Lidia Schoue**) wander separately in and start interacting with the performers and staff. These include **Benoit Lachambre**, a Montreal-based choreographer whose HIV-positive health status allows him to place one foot on both 'sides' of the picture's *dramatis personae*.

While the Mint's front of house is spectacular, its labyrinthine back-spaces are ostensibly mundane zones dedicated to work and practicality — but here rendered sufficiently strange to suggest a cross between **Lisandro Alonso's** *Fantasma* (2006) and **Denis Cote's** current *Joy of Man's Desiring* rather than, say, those verite explorations of performance venues perfected over recent decades by **Frederick Wiseman**. Scenes generally unfold in enigmatic fashion, what dialogue there is casting little light on exactly what may be going on and why; context remains elusive. But as impromptu exercises and dance pieces alternate with conversations, songs and

other creative endeavors, recurring references to death — not to mention their own, frankly presented physical infirmities, plus the film's title — hint that the protagonists' remaining time is severely limited.

A stripped-down rendition of **Nick Cave's** "The Mercy Seat" — delivered by three musicians and a bygone-uniformed vocalist (**Thomas Wodianka**) in an oblong service elevator — is the most memorable of several unlikely moving set-pieces as Leon and his collaborators, including members of U.S.-born **Meg Stuart's** Brussels-based troupe Damaged Goods, construct their stately but accessible "dance of death." Materials include examples of almost every conceivable art form, including opera and even cinema itself via a projected extract from **Pier Paolo Pasolini's** *Oedipus Rex* (1967).

While inescapably and unapologetically an artificial construct from the start, *Before We Go* provides ample rewards to those willing to suspend disbelief and go with its gnomic flow. The film operates at the extremities of life and emotion, places where anything goes and there's nothing to lose but pain and inhibition. Leon and company have obviously given themselves certain parameters but have also allowed considerable room for improvisation and spontaneity within these boundaries. Their clear-eyed, direct, sometimes humorous and always transparently generous approach defuses the obvious pitfalls of pretentiousness and morbidity, with results that transcend being merely some elaborate form of therapy for the tragic, lucky participants.

Production company: Derives

Cast: Lidia Schoue, Michel Vassart, Noel Mineo, Benoit Lachambre, Meg Stuart, Simone Aughterlony, Thomas Wodianka

Director/Screenwriter: Jorge Leon

Producer: Julie Freres

Executive producers: Veronique Marit, Sabine Raskin

Cinematographers: Remon Fromont, Jorge Leon, Thomas Schira

Editor: Marie-Helene Mora

Music: George Van Dam, Walter Hus, Alex Verster

Sales: Derives, Liege, Belgium

No Rating, 82 minutes

Links:

[1] <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/list/100-greatest-films-all-time-713215>