



presents

# THE BRAND NEW TESTAMENT

A film by **Jaco Van Dormael**



116 min | Belgium | 2016 | No Rating | 2.35  
In French with English subtitles

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## **AWARDS AND FESTIVALS**

2016 Golden Globe – Best Foreign Language Film Nominee

2015 Magritte Awards (Belgian Academy Award) - Best Film, Best Director, Best Screenplay

2015 Fantastic Fest – Best Comedy

2015 Stiges Film Festival – Best European Fantastic Film

2015 European Film Awards – Best Production Design

## **SYNOPSIS**

God exists, and He's a jerk. He lives in a high-rise apartment in Brussels and never gets out of His pajamas. He takes sadistic delight in dreaming up new "laws" to torment humanity, and He's a petty tyrant to His wife and ten year-old daughter, Ea. Like her brother before her, Ea has had enough of her Father's abuse and when she spies the right opportunity, she hacks into His computer and leaks to the entire world—by text message—the only thing He has over them: their inevitable death date.

Ea, after escaping and with her Father in pursuit, gathers apostles and writes her own New Testament to try to fix the mess her Father has made of humanity. Her six apostles —a one-armed woman, a sex maniac, a killer, a woman who has been left by her husband, an office worker, and a gender dysphoric child—learn to celebrate life and love, and provide us with Jaco Van Dormael's dark, witty and eccentric answer to the loaded question: what would you do if you knew exactly how much time you had left to live?

## **LOG LINE**

God exists, but He's a bit of a jerk. His ten-year-old daughter Ea rebels against His tyranny and comes to Earth, gathers apostles and proposes a New Testament for how humanity should live.

## **INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR JACO VAN DORMAEL**

### **How did the project to make *The Brand New Testament* come about?**

My cowriter Thomas Gunzig and I started from the idea that God exists and lives in Brussels. And what if God were a bastard? Moreover, what if in addition to a son, He also had a daughter that nobody knew about? And what if she were 10 years old and God, her father, was so odious that she got her revenge on Him by disclosing his most fiercely guarded secret by SMS to everybody on the planet – that of their death dates? From then on, any reference to religion turned into a surrealist fairytale. I'm not a believer but I was brought up Catholic. I'm interested in religions as I'm interested in good stories. I remember wondering as a child why God didn't do anything when His son was crucified? Why doesn't He do anything when children are dying of leukemia? Why does Batman save people, but God doesn't?

**The God in *The Brand New Testament* is totally abject. He takes pleasure in starting fires, bringing down aircraft, and slaughtering orangutans, coming up with terrible daily tortures for the human race, all the while inciting them to kill each other in interminable wars fought in his name.**

He's not far off the description the Bible gives. After all, there's a lot of killing in that book! Villages get burned and razed to the ground. People are punished and betrayed. God is described as "jealous".

### **Is that why you wanted to change the rules?**

Ea, Jesus's sister, who calls him JC, makes the world a little better by transforming the lives of a handful of magnificent losers. She's only 10, and unlike her brother, she only knows how to perform tiny miracles, but she still manages to drum up six new apostles – a one-armed woman, a sex maniac, a killer, a woman who has been left by her husband, an office worker, and a child – making them fall in love with some very unlikely candidates. It's a comedic way of saying, "Heaven is here and now, it's not after death. We're not going to live for long. Enjoy and do what makes you happy."

**Why did you choose to add six new members to the list of the 12 apostles from the New Testament, who are supposed to represent the new people who will be brought together by God at the end of time; the number 12 evoking the 12 tribes of Israel, but also the whole of humanity?**

God likes ice hockey, which is 12-a-side sport; his wife likes baseball, which is played by teams of 18. Jesus thinks that 12 apostles aren't quite enough, so he tells his sister to find six more to make the number up to 18. That's JC and Ea's mother's favorite number. And we understand why at the end of the film.

### **Why did you use almost the exact same construction?**

The film is in the form of a fairytale. Someone who hasn't been raised in a particular faith could just as well relate to *The Brand New Testament* the same as they would to *Little Red Riding Hood* or *Alice in Wonderland*, because all these stories are inscribed in our collective memory. The tunnel that links the washing machine in God's apartment with the launderette, which Ea takes, followed by her father, seems to me to be typical of the genre.

**In *The Brand New Testament*, JC, who Victor the tramp immediately mistakes for JC Van Damme, has a fairly minor role. He is reduced to the state of a tiny statue at his parents' place and only has minimal powers.**

The idea is always "What if...?" What if Jesus accomplished things unbeknown to his father – and indeed, his father reproaches him for it. JC improvised everything, based it all on emotions, without really knowing where he was going with it. And what if it all ended up going badly for him? The New Testament

was rewritten more than 300 years after the death of Christ, and a quantity of apocryphal texts were removed. The official version of the life of Jesus is a lovely, beautifully written story, but one that the clergy totally reworked.

**What did those apocryphal texts say?**

They are pretty funny. They deal with other miracles accomplished by Christ, sometimes quite extravagant ones, with devils taking the shape of dragons and such. There are other apostles, women, too, whose presence has been erased. How many words in the New Testament do women speak? You can count them.

**You give a large space to women. Ea gets the upper hand over her father, and the character played by Yolande Moreau also ends up in a key position.**

In *The Brand New Testament*, God only has power because He forces His wife and daughter to keep quiet. What if God had been a woman? What would have happened then?

**It is kind of amazing to see how much chaos the world is thrown into when everyone can suddenly see their lives ticking down to death. And JC says to Ea that by making people aware of their death, God is going to lose all His credibility.**

Not knowing the date of one's death perhaps means that we have a tendency to forget about it, giving a feeling of immortality. Until, that is, the shadow of death revives our taste for life. That's what happens to my characters when they receive a text telling them when they are going to die. Some change everything, others don't want to know.

**War and crime stop immediately.**

There is no longer any point trying to eliminate an enemy because it won't change the date on which they are going to die. Any attempt to kill them will always fail. In *The Joke*, Milan Kundera uses a phrase that I particularly like: "*The role of redress will be taken over by oblivion.*"

**François, the killer, proves that.**

He understands that from now on, he can shoot people, and if they die, it won't be his fault.

**In the film, there is a light-hearted critique of new technologies and the media. Victor, the tramp, is the only one who remains indifferent to all the agitation: he has no cell phone, and as such, received no message.**

He doesn't give a damn – he doesn't have a phone and he doesn't want to know.

**And the service technician, who has 102 years ahead of him, becomes a superstar.**

This black guy to whom nobody paid any attention is suddenly a huge hit with the opposite sex.

**Marc, the sex maniac, finds the little girl with whom he fell in love as a boy in a porn dubbing studio, and writes an essay with her on Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*. Martine, the woman who has been left by her husband, becomes infatuated with a gorilla...**

In fact, the film only deals with love. Even little Ea finds love – an unlikely love in the shape of a little boy who wants to be a girl. Ea suggests a new way of seeing things. Love doesn't have to follow an existing model. It's even better when it's unlikely.

**Did you think about the films of Nagisa Oshima and Marco Ferreri – MAX MY LOVE and BYE BYE MONKEY – when you came up with Martine’s character?**

Thomas Gunzig and I were trying to work out how this woman could come through. The male prostitution network wasn’t making her very happy and she falls in love with a gorilla – a life-size model, designed and operated by two Spaniards. I was struck by Catherine Deneuve’s engagement during the debate about gay marriage in France. She talked about the obligations of freedom and tolerance with wonderful clarity. And she had that same simplicity and conviction on set. Nothing scares her. She gives everything. I told her:

“So you’re going to make love with this young man.”

“Fine.”

“The gorilla is going to squeeze your breasts.”

“Really? Fine.”

She’s someone who dives right in, and she’s spot on from start to finish.

**As always in your films, childhood is at the heart of the plot.**

Because it’s the age of first times, a time in life where sensations are at their peak. One is not yet civilized, not yet toeing the line. During childhood, there is a magical period when you’re not looking to conform to what other people expect of you. Then you become an adult and you bury the child you once were deep inside. Adults are just kids that have grown up. I like the slightly surrealist vision children have of the world. Moreover, is it any more surreal than our take on the world once we believe we have become rational?

**And, as always, the adults that the characters have grown into all had to survive painful childhoods.**

The six characters feel that their lives have passed them by. They each have a stone in their shoe that is nagging them and making them feel bad. Aurélie, the one-armed woman, is very beautiful, but she’s convinced she cannot be loved because she is missing a limb. Marc, the sex maniac, can only think about naked women. The killer has no feelings other than his fascination with death. The woman whose husband has left her feels responsible for her fate, and Jean-Claude has sold himself out to do a job that he hates. But if you scratch the surface a little, the children they once were are still there, hiding in the shadows.

**Tell us about Pili Groyne, who plays Ea.**

I met her through some friends a few years before making the film. She was improvising on the piano and was already a small girl with great power. From the first screen tests, she was clearly right for the role. It is emotional intelligence that makes an actor. You can have it at any age, whether you’re eight years old or whether you have Down’s syndrome.

**Thanks to the divine intervention of Ea, Jean-Claude, the first of the new apostles, chooses to follow a bird and to reach the Arctic Circle. He’s a magnificent character.**

This man, who as a child dreamed of becoming an adventurer, suddenly says to himself: “If the bird can leave this park and go where it pleases, so can I.” And he starts following its migration. The whole film is built around an epic tension – “and then... and then...” – which runs counter to the mainly dramatic structures used in current cinema. In the same way you forget that Don Quixote heads off on the road to find his sweetheart and you only remember the battle he has against the windmills, the film is not hanging on the question of whether Ea will succeed in finding her six apostles, and if this meeting will change anything. As in fairytales, each section works in an almost independent way; they are little moments which we go through, sometimes sad, sometimes funny, just like in life. The difficulty is making each episode attractive and interesting. Each character has to be fascinating, each piece of the puzzle must have its color.

**...And each character his or her music – Handel for Aurélie, Rameau for Jean-Claude, Purcell for Marc, and so on.**

Some of this music has been largely forgotten, or else is no longer in fashion, so not often listened to. Yet to me, it evokes some extremely powerful emotions, simple yet benevolent. It could be Trenet or Schubert, Baroque pieces or old standards. I wanted to make a musical film.

**Tell us about the original score composed by An Pierlé.**

This is the first time this Flemish composer and performer has done any film music. I like her music and I asked her to write some simple pieces – mainly piano – to create a contrast with the Baroque music and opera pieces, which her work in a way extends. An was an actress, so she knows about acting and knows exactly how to compose the character's inner music.

**Brussels plays an important part in the film.**

I wanted to show the city where I live, using the locations I pass through every day, hearing the mix of accents; Brussels, Walloon, Flemish, French and Luxembourgeois. I wanted the God in my film to exist in a tangible space, a city perpetually under construction where nothing works, a place so ugly it becomes beautiful.

**In *The Brand New Testament*, laughter is constantly grappling with powerful emotion.**

Laughter is an interesting register because it approaches that of pain and despair. We always laugh about things which we find a bit painful.

**There are some dazzling visual sequences: Aurélie's amputated hand, which we see dancing on the table and that she grasps in a dream that Ea sent her.**

That's an idea that comes from the show "Kiss & Cry", a form of ephemeral film I created in 2013 with my partner Michèle Anne De Mey and a collective of friends. In the show, the characters are played and danced by hands, and there was one avenue that we had not explored; that of a one-armed man looking for his hand. I have often dreamed the dreams that you see in the dream sequences. As I grow older, I'm working a lot with dreams. I go to bed thinking about a specific part of a film, or about a moment in the storyboard, and in the morning, I wake up with the scene in my head. It's a remarkable saving in terms of labor.

**You often work using the association of ideas. When Aurélie tells her story and she mentions a man's rasping voice, likening it to the sound of a nut being cracked, you then cut straight to a shot of 30 people crushing walnuts.**

Thought has the freedom to not be linear. I like it when cinema reproduces the mechanisms of thought, rather than trying to pretend it's reality. Like literature, cinema has the power to reproduce the mechanisms of thoughts, the associations, to deal with perception rather than the real. The real – that convention which consists of telling the spectator: "This is reality, trust me" – is of little interest to me. On the contrary, I'm fascinated by our brain's freedom to orchestrate our perceptions, by constructing a theater of life, by organizing a story based on what is around us. It's this complexity that I'm trying to explore by trying to make my films resonate with this mysterious experience that we all share, the strange experience of being alive. Literature does this all the time; silent cinema, and the films of the 1960s and 70s also took this complexity into account. The cinema of today has become more linear.

**Whether you're filming the first stirrings of creation in "Genesis", or the torment of little Marc, the sex maniac who's afraid of breaking down the walls of his parents' lounge with his thoughts, the whole film**

**converges on the internal thoughts which motivate each of the protagonists.**

That's where my pleasure as a filmmaker lies: exploring the language, when cinema reproduces the mechanisms of thought, when it has the same freedom.

**You express these thoughts in a very concrete manner; almost physically. For example, in the course of Marc's story, the chair on which he is sitting gradually moves out of the set to approach the camera. As if the little boy was consciously distancing himself from his fears.**

I really liked that look into the camera and that on-screen narration that allows the boy to tell his story directly to the spectator. I've never used so much talking-to-camera and off-screen voice-over as in this film. That's closely linked to the talent of Thomas Gunzig, who wrote these wonderful monologues.

**This is the first time you have worked with a screenwriter.**

Thomas is a terrific writer. We already worked together on "Kiss & Cry". While writing the film, we met up every afternoon and tried to make each other laugh. And even if we didn't have any good ideas, at least we spent a fun afternoon: that's the advantage of working as a pair. Writing this film only took six months, whereas usually, imagining a screenplay takes me three, four, or even five years, as with MR. NOBODY.

**Your filmmaking style is packed with visual inventiveness – objects, sets – that would more often be seen at the theater, a discipline that you practice assiduously.**

This film was inspired by the *arte povera* experience of "Kiss & Cry", the show I mentioned above. It's fascinating using sets which you don't believe in: the spectator sees that it's fake and wants to believe in it all the more since they know it's fake. Beyond the economic freedom this procedure offers, from a dramatic point of view, it is almost more interesting to provide a shot of Brussels seen from the sky using cardboard boxes. You're clearly in the narrative, no longer in the real.

**The same with the sound...**

These are very simple effects, which once again set out to heighten the spectator's perception. Although cinema only directly engages the hearing and sound, the aim is to give the spectator the impression that the other senses – touch, smell – are also enhanced. When a scene takes place in a park, he or she should be able to smell cut grass.

**Do you still work with the same crew?**

The only thing I can control when I direct a film is the pleasure I take in doing it. I never know if anyone will like the film, but the experience of the shoot surrounded by friends is already a reward in itself. I've known my technicians for a long time: Christophe Beaucarne, the director of photography, who was a student of mine; Kaatje Van Damme and Dominique Warner, the make-up artist and sound engineer, with whom I have worked for 35 years; and Sylvie Olivé, the set designer who also worked on MR. NOBODY and "Kiss and Cry". Then there's a new face, Hervé de Luze, who's the editor. Not forgetting Olivier Rausin, a friend and producer who I have known for many years.

**You also know most of the actors who appear in the film, but have not worked with most of them before.**

I've known Yolande Moreau since she was 20, but I'd never worked with her. It was a delight. Same goes for Benoît Poelvoorde, who I've known for a long time. He was hugely generous, he is great in the film, to which he brings a comic counterpoint. Benoît doesn't hold anything back, he has boundless energy. I also

knew François Damiens from before and it was great opportunity to have the pleasure of working with him in a dark, restrained register. Didier de Neck has been my clowning partner since forever. I've known Serge Larivière for ages. I deliberately wanted to mix up known and unknown faces, people from the stage who are not well known in cinema, or actors from Flanders like Laura Verlinden, Johan Heldenbergh and Johan Leysen, or from Luxembourg like Marco Lorenzini. All of them proved to be great and extremely generous.

**Tell us about the directing. Did you have any pictorial references in mind? Certain films?**

I had some portraits in mind, photographic portraits in which the subject is looking at the lens. Lots of shots in the film are built in this way; they are animated portraits in which one sees life passing by. The style of a film is often built around a mistake that is repeated. It's all a matter of picking the right mistake. In this case, I wanted it to be frontal, to give a certain theatricality, and symmetrical, like in churches. Nearly all the framing – everyday things from a passing car to the front door of a building – was built on this quest for symmetry and a frontal approach which recalls sacred imagery.

**Where you ever worried about upsetting the Catholic church?**

I didn't think about it much. I don't get any pleasure from trying to shock. But I didn't try to avoid being shocking, either. I merely told a story.



## **BIOGRAPHIES and FILMOGRAPHIES**

### **Jaco Van Dormael, Director**

After studying film at the INSAS (Brussels) and Louis-Lumiere Institute (Paris), Jaco Van Dormael started his career as a director of children's theater plays. He began directing short films in the early 1980s, and has been awarded in festivals on several occasions. His first feature film, *Toto the Hero* (1991) was awarded the Camera d'Or at Cannes. In parallel, Jaco Van Dormael is also a theater and opera director.

#### **FEATURE FILMS**

2015    **THE BRAND NEW TESTAMENT**  
2009    **MR. NOBODY**  
1996    **THE EIGHTH DAY**  
1991    **TOTO THE HERO**

#### **SHORT FILMS**

2010    **EOLE**  
1985    **DE BOOT**  
1984    **E PERICOLOSO SPORGERSI**  
1983    **SORTIE DE SECOURS**  
1982    **L'IMITATEUR**  
1981    **LES VOISINS**  
1981    **STADE 81**  
1980    **MAEDEL-LA-BRÈCHE**

### **Benoît Poelvoorde (God)**

2015    THE BRAND NEW TESTAMENT  
2015    THE PRICE OF FAME  
2014    3 HEARTS  
2013    A PLACE ON EARTH  
2012    THE BIG NIGHT  
2011    MY WORST NIGHTMARE  
2010    ROMANTICS ANONYMOUS  
2009    COCO BEFORE CHANEL  
2008    ASTERIX AT THE OLYMPIC GAMES  
2007    LES DEUX MONDES  
2006    CHARLIE SAYS...  
2005    IN HIS HANDS  
2004    THE SECRET ADVENTURES OF GUSTAVE KLOPP  
2002    BALL AND CHAIN  
2001    GHISLAIN LAMBERT'S BICYCLE  
2001    LES PORTES DE LA GLOIRE  
1999    LES CONVOYEURS ATTENDENT  
1997    HIKERS  
1992    MAN BITES DOGS

### **Yolande Moreau (God's wife)**

2015    THE BRAND NEW TESTAMENT  
2015    JOURNEY THROUGH CHINA  
2014    BREVES DE COMPTOIR

2013	HENRI
2012	CAMILLE REWINDS
2011	THE LONG FALLING
2010	MAMMUTH
2010	THE PACK
2009	MICMACS
2008	LOUISE MICHEL
2008	SÉRAPHINE
2004	A WONDERFULL SPELL
2004	WHEN THE SEA RISES...
2001	THE MILK OF HUMAN KINDNESS
2001	AMÉLIE
1995	HAPPINESS IS IN THE FIELD

### **Pili Groyne (Ea, God's daughter)**

2015	THE BRAND NEW TESTAMENT
2014	ALLÉLUIA
2013	TWO DAYS, ONE NIGHT

### **Catherine Deneuve (Martine)**

2015	THE BRAND NEW TESTAMENT
2014	3 HEARTS
2011	THE BELOVED
2010	POTICHE
2008	A CHRISTMAS TALE
2008	I WANT TO SEE
2007	APRES LUI
2004	CHANGING TIMES
2002	8 WOMEN
1998	PLACE VENDOME
1993	MY FAVOURITE SEASON
1992	INDOCHINA
1981	HOTEL AMERICA
1980	THE LAST METRO
1975	LE SAUVAGE
1970	DONKEY SKIN
1969	MISSISSIPI MERMAID
1967	THE YOUNG GIRLS OF ROCHEFORT
1967	BELLE DE JOUR
1966	A MATTER OF RESISTANCE

## **CAST**

Ea – Pili Groyne  
Dieu – Benoît Poelvoorde  
Martine – Catherine Deveuue  
François – François Damiens  
God's wife – Yolande Moreau  
Aurélié – Laura Verlinden  
Marc – Serge Larivière  
Jean-Claude – Didier De Neck  
Willy – Romaine Gelin  
Victor – Marco Lorenzini

## **CREW**

Director – Jaco Van Dormael  
Screenplay – Thomaas Gunzig, Jaco Van Dormael  
Music – An Pierlé  
Director of photography – Christophe Beaucarne  
Sound – Dominique Warnier, François Dumont  
Editing – Hervé De Luze  
Mixing – Michael Schillings  
Costumes – Caroline Koener  
Film set – Sylvie Olive  
Make-up – Kaatje Van Daame  
Producers – Jaco Van Dormael, Olivier Rausin, Daniel Marquet  
Co-producers – Juliette Films, Caviar, Orange Studio, VOO Et BeTv, RTBF (Télévision Belge), BNP Paribas  
Fortis Film Finance, Belga Productions

## **About Music Box Films**

Founded in 2007, Music Box Films is a North American distributor of acclaimed international, American independent and documentary features. Recent releases include Anne Fontaine's World War II drama **THE INNOCENTS** and the official Swedish Oscar submission for Best Foreign Language Film **A MAN CALLED OVE**, based on the international best selling novel. Upcoming releases include the nature documentary **SEASONS** from the directors of **WINGED MIGRATION**, Terence Davies' **A QUIET PASSION** starring Cynthia Nixon, and Francois Ozon's **FRANTZ**. Music Box Films is independently owned and operated the Southport Music Box Corporation, which also owns and operates the Music Box Theatre, Chicago's premiere venue for independent and foreign films. For more information, please visit [www.musicboxfilms.com](http://www.musicboxfilms.com).